

Second chance 921

Chapter 921:

Seraphina's laugh on the other end of the line was like the chipping of ice. "Your money is worthless to me, Isadora. And by the way, I've already shared my... findings... with Mr. Holloway and Mr. Aguirre." She hung up.

Isadora felt a cold knot of dread tighten in her stomach. For the first time, she felt the situation slipping from her grasp. She ordered Giselle not to leave the estate under any circumstances. Then she made another call, arranging for the "rescued" Tiffany Reed to be moved from a holding facility to a more secure, off-the-books private clinic. She needed to keep all her pieces, even the compromised ones, on the board.

Night fell over the Adirondacks, blanketing the Vance estate in darkness. In the dense woods bordering the property, a different kind of darkness was gathering.

Hilliard and Kegan's joint team was in position. They were ghosts in the night, dressed in black tactical gear, their faces smeared with camouflage paint.

From a mobile command van hidden a mile away, Hilliard monitored a thermal drone feed, mapping the estate's security patrols. He pinpointed the location of the west wing medical facility. Dr. Finch's quarters.

Beside him, Kegan's top cyber-warfare specialist was hunched over a bank of laptops, his fingers flying across the keyboard. "I'm in," the hacker murmured. "Suppressing alarms and looping surveillance feeds. You have a three-minute window. Starting now."

The assault began.

Hilliard's team, a small group of ex-SEALs, moved with a silent, deadly grace. They scaled the perimeter wall like shadows, melting into the manicured gardens of the estate. They flowed between statues and hedges, their movements economical and precise.

A guard with a Doberman rounded a corner. The dog let out a low growl. Before the sound could fully form, a dart hissed through the air, and the dog collapsed in a silent heap. The guard had a split second to register surprise before a black-gloved hand clamped over his mouth and dragged him into the bushes.

The team reached the base of the medical wing. Using grappling hooks and ascension lines, they scaled the stone facade, moving up the wall like spiders.

Inside his third-floor study, Dr. Alistair Finch was engrossed in a rare botanical text, a glass of brandy at his elbow. He was completely oblivious to the silent predators clinging to the wall outside his window.

Hilliard, hanging from his line, gave a hand signal. One of his men produced a circular glass cutter. A moment later, a perfect circle of glass was lifted from the windowpane with a suction cup.

Hilliard was the first one through. He landed on the plush carpet without a sound. The muzzle of his suppressed pistol was pressed to Dr. Finch's temple before the old man could even register his presence.

Dr. Finch's book tumbled to the floor. His eyes were wide with terror.

"Dr. Finch," Hilliard's voice was a low, menacing whisper in the silent room. "You're coming with us. Make a sound, and you'll be reading your next book in hell."

The doctor, staring into Hilliard's cold, dead eyes, could only nod, his body trembling uncontrollably.

Chapter 922:

They were in and out in less than a minute. They rappelled back down the wall, dragging their terrified quarry with them. They retraced their steps through the gardens and were over the wall before the three-minute window closed.

Five minutes after their exfiltration, Kegan's hacker restored the estate's security systems. In the main guardhouse, the monitors flickered back to their normal, peaceful loops. No one was the wiser. The heart of their defense had been surgically removed, and they didn't even know it.

In the back of a blacked-out SUV speeding away from the estate, a hood was thrown over Dr. Finch's head. He sat shivering between Hilliard and Kegan. The air in the vehicle was thick with a cold, violent tension.

They were on their way back to the hospital. They had their prize. They had their hope.

The hood was ripped from Dr. Finch's head. He blinked, disoriented by the harsh, sterile light of the windowless conference room they had commandeered at the hospital.

He looked up and saw the faces of Hilliard Holloway and Kegan Aguirre staring down at him. The two most powerful and dangerous men on the Eastern Seaboard. A wave of pure terror washed over him.

Hilliard slid a medical file across the table. Cailin's file. "Read this," he said, his voice flat, devoid of any emotion. "Then you will save her."

Dr. Finch's hands trembled as he opened the folder. He scanned the blood analysis, his eyes widening with each data point. When he saw the molecular structure of the neurotoxin, a low gasp escaped his lips. He knew this formula. It was a ghost from the Vance family's darkest closet, a poison known only as "Regent's Kiss," designed to be undetectable and absolute.

He dropped the papers as if they were on fire. "I... I can't," he stammered, his voice cracking. "No one can. It's irreversible."

Kegan exploded. In a single, fluid motion, he drew his sidearm and pressed the cold, steel muzzle firmly against Dr. Finch's temple. The click of the hammer being cocked was deafening in the silent room.

"Say that again," Kegan snarled, his eyes burning with a homicidal fire.

Dr. Finch squeezed his eyes shut, a warm wetness spreading down his leg. "It's the truth!" he shrieked, his voice high-pitched with terror. "The cellular bonding is permanent! There is no cure!"

Hilliard placed a heavy hand on Kegan's arm, his grip like a vise. His eyes were just as cold as Kegan's, but his rage was a frozen, controlled glacier.

"I don't care if it's reversible," Hilliard said, his voice a low, dangerous growl aimed at Finch. "I care if she lives. You will use every bit of knowledge you have. You will slow it down. You will stop it. You will keep her alive."

He leaned in, his face inches from the doctor's. "Or I will personally ensure that every luxury the Vance family has ever given you becomes a part of your funeral pyre."

Caught between the explosive rage of one man and the icy certainty of the other, Dr. Finch's carefully constructed world shattered. He broke down, sobbing.

Chapter 923:

"There is... there is an experimental protocol," he blubbered. "A cellular regeneration therapy. It's high-risk. It won't cure her. But it might... it might buy her time. It might delay the final stages."

"That's all I needed to hear," Hilliard said coldly.

They marched the shaking doctor down the corridor to Cailin's secured room.

Seraphina was waiting outside, her arms crossed, her expression grim. She saw Dr. Finch, and a look of understanding passed through her eyes. Finch, in turn, recognized the famed toxicologist from the Morrow family and seemed to shrink even further.

Hilliard and Kegan were about to escort the doctor inside when the door to Cailin's room opened from within.

Cailin stood there, leaning heavily on the doorframe. She was deathly pale, a sheen of cold sweat on her forehead, but her eyes were clear and steady. She had heard the commotion.

She looked at Hilliard, then at Kegan, her expression unreadable. "Both of you, out," she said, her voice weak but infused with an unshakable authority.

The two men froze, stunned.

Her gaze shifted to the terrified Dr. Finch and the composed Seraphina. "You two, and the doctor, come in. Everyone else, leave this floor."

She took a ragged breath. "I want to discuss my condition with my physicians. In private. That is my right."

Hilliard started to object, to argue that he needed to be there. But he looked into her eyes and saw a will of iron that he could not break. He thought she was simply trying to maintain a shred of dignity, of privacy, in the face of her illness.

Kegan hesitated, but a subtle, almost imperceptible nod from Seraphina reassured him.

With a shared look of frustration and concern, Hilliard and Kegan stepped back. They watched as Cailin, Seraphina, and Dr. Finch entered the room.

The heavy door swung shut, leaving the two most powerful men in the city standing helpless in an empty hallway, locked out of the one room in the world that mattered.

The heavy door clicked shut, sealing the three of them in a pocket of terrifying silence. Cailin looked at Dr. Finch, who was trembling so badly he could barely stand. Her own calm was a stark, unnerving contrast to his terror.

"Please, sit down, Doctor," she said, her voice quiet but firm. "I'm not going to hurt you."

Seraphina helped her to a small sofa, her movements gentle and supportive. Cailin sank into the cushions, every muscle in her body screaming in protest.

She looked directly at Finch. "I know I've been poisoned," she began, her voice steady. "I know that the two men outside that door, one the father of my children, the other a man who wants to be my husband, would do anything to save me."

She leaned forward slightly, her gaze pinning him in place. "But I don't need hope right now, Doctor. I need the truth. The complete, unvarnished, one-hundred-percent truth."

Under the weight of her gaze, Dr. Finch's terror began to subside, replaced by a reluctant professionalism. He was no longer looking at a victim, but at a woman of incredible, almost frightening, strength.

Chapter 924:

He took a deep breath. "The toxin has bonded with your central nervous system at a molecular level," he began, his voice taking on the detached tone of a lecturer. "Think of it as concrete being poured into a complex circuit board. The damage is permanent. And it is catastrophic."

He described the progression. The numbness in her limbs would spread, leading to full paralysis. Then it would attack her autonomic nervous system. The muscles that controlled her breathing would fail. Finally, her heart.

Seraphina stood silently by the window, her presence a quiet confirmation of his every word.

Cailin listened with a focused, almost academic intensity, as if he were describing a case study that had nothing to do with her. When he finished, she asked the final question.

"How much time do I have?"

Dr. Finch flinched. He couldn't meet her eyes. He stared at his hands, twisting in his lap.

"Doctor," Cailin's voice was sharp now, a blade of command. "The truth."

He closed his eyes, as if the words were too painful to see. "The rate of cellular degradation is... faster than I would have predicted," he said, his voice barely a whisper. "Best case scenario, with the experimental treatment, perhaps two weeks. Worst case... three or four days."

The only sound in the room was the soft, rhythmic beep of the medical monitor, each pulse a tick of a clock counting down to zero.

Cailin was silent for a long time. She didn't cry. She didn't scream. She simply sat there, absorbing the finality of it.

Then she let out a long, slow breath, a sound of profound release, as if a great weight had finally been lifted from her shoulders.

She looked up, first at Seraphina, then at Dr. Finch. Her eyes were not filled with despair. They were luminous with a heartbreaking clarity and a fierce, unwavering resolve.

"I need you to do something for me," she said, her voice infused with a strength that seemed impossible. "I need you both to lie to them."

They stared at her, utterly stunned.

"Tell them you have a cure," she said, her words slow and deliberate. "Tell them the treatment will be long and difficult. That my condition will fluctuate, that there will be good days and bad days. But in the end... tell them I will recover."

“But why?” Dr. Finch stammered. “They deserve to know the truth!”

For the first time, tears welled in Cailin’s eyes, shimmering but not falling. “Because I love them,” she whispered, her voice thick with a pain that was deeper than any poison. “And I will not let them spend my last days on this earth living in the same hell that I am. I will not let their last memories of me be of watching me die.”

She took a ragged breath, her resolve hardening again. “They need hope. It’s the only thing that will keep them going, the only thing that will fuel them to get the justice we all deserve. And I am going to give it to them.”

She looked at Seraphina. “You, as the expert, will confirm that Dr. Finch’s protocol is viable.” Then she turned back to the doctor. “And you... you will play the part of the miracle worker.”

Chapter 925:

She was asking them to help her build a beautiful, elaborate lie. A sanctuary of false hope for the men she loved, while she alone walked through the valley of the shadow of death.

Seraphina looked at this woman, burning so brightly at the very edge of extinction, and felt a profound, aching respect. She gave a slow, solemn nod, her own eyes glistening.

Dr. Finch, a man who had spent his life in the service of amoral masters, was humbled and shattered by this act of selfless love. He, too, agreed.

The tragic, sacred alliance was forged.

Cailin reached for the call button to summon Hilliard and Kegan back into the room. She took one last, deep breath, preparing to deliver the greatest performance of her life. They would see her smile. They would hear her hope. They would never, ever see the goodbye in her eyes.

The soft chime of the call button still hung in the heavy air, a starting gun for the final, most painful performance of her life.

Before the men could answer the summons, Cailin threw one last, piercing look at her co-conspirators. "Remember," she whispered, a new, hard edge to her voice cutting through the silence. "I need to push them away. I will not spend my last days as a spectacle of their grief. And to do that, they need to believe there is a future for me to choose without them. Do not break character."

Seraphina barely had time to swallow the lump in her throat and offer a defeated nod before the heavy door burst open almost instantly, as if the men had been pressed against it, waiting. Hilliard and Kegan surged into the room, their faces masks of tightly controlled panic.

Before either man could speak, Seraphina moved with an unassailable professional grace, placing herself between them and the bed. A human shield made of white Chanel and cold authority.

"Dr. Finch has brought us a potential course of action," she announced, her voice calm and steady, cutting through the thick tension in the room. "It's experimental, but promising."

Seeing the raw, volatile emotion in their eyes, she took a slight step to the side, allowing them a clear view of Cailin but still maintaining a protective stance.

Dr. Finch, looking less like a kidnappee and more like a nervous understudy, picked up his cue perfectly. “It’s a new cellular regeneration therapy,” he explained, his tone carefully rehearsed to sound hopeful. “Designed to counteract and reverse certain types of targeted nerve damage.”

The words hit Hilliard like a physical blow of relief. His entire body swayed, and he had to grip the doorframe to steady himself. The rigid control he’d maintained for days shattered, and a look of pure, unadulterated joy broke across his face. His eyes, bloodshot and exhausted, blazed with a sudden, brilliant light.

Kegan closed his eyes, his broad shoulders slumping as if a thousand-pound weight had been lifted from them. He let out a long, shuddering breath.

Chapter 926:

From the bed, Cailin watched them. She watched their hope ignite, their terror recede. And she felt a cold, invisible hand clench around her heart, squeezing until she could barely breathe. Their relief was her torment. Their hope was her most profound lie.

Hilliard crossed the room in three long strides, his voice raw and hoarse with emotion. “I knew it. I knew we could save you.”

He reached out, his hand trembling, wanting to cup her cheek, to feel the warmth of her skin and reassure himself she was real, that she would stay.

Cailin turned her head.

Just enough.

His fingers brushed against the ends of her hair, finding only empty air.

Hilliard's hand froze, suspended in the space between them. The ecstatic joy on his face curdled, solidifying into confusion.

Cailin's eyes, when she finally looked at him, were no longer soft or weary. They were chips of ice, filled with a chilling, mocking light. She had to use the past to poison the present. It was the only weapon sharp enough.

"Save me?" she asked, her voice quiet but carrying the sharp edge of a razor. "Hilliard, have you forgotten? All of this pain, all of it... the root of it is you."

Kegan's head snapped up, his own relief instantly forgotten as he stared at Cailin in shock.

The color drained from Hilliard's face, leaving it a stark, bloodless white. "Cailin, what are you saying? We just got... we have a chance."

"I'm tired, Hilliard," she cut him off, her voice flat and final. "I'm so tired of this. Of you. Of us."

She turned her head to stare out the window at the indifferent city skyline. Her next words were delivered with the detached finality of a judge passing sentence.

"I don't want to see you again. Please leave."

The words didn't make sense. They were a chaotic jumble of sounds that his brain refused to assemble into meaning. A cure. Hope. And now... this. He was certain it was the illness, the pain, making her irrational.

"Cailin, listen to me," he started, his voice pleading. "You're not thinking clearly..."

She didn't even grant him a response. She simply closed her eyes, shutting him out completely, erasing his existence.

Seraphina stepped forward, her voice polite but unyielding. "The patient needs to rest. Your presence is agitating her."

Hilliard looked from Seraphina's implacable face to Cailin's resolute profile. The hope that had soared through him moments ago was gone, extinguished by a flood of ice water. All that remained was a gnawing, bone-deep cold and a profound, disorienting confusion.

He took a step back. Then another. He felt like a ghost, banished from the world of the living. He finally turned and walked out of the room, his footsteps heavy and lost.

Kegan stood frozen in the middle of the room, his mind reeling, utterly unable to comprehend what he had just witnessed.

Cailin remained perfectly still, her eyes shut tight. But a single tear escaped from the corner of her eye, a silent, hot traitor. It slid down her temple and disappeared into the white pillowcase, unseen by anyone.

Chapter 927:

Out in the hallway, Hilliard leaned his back against the cool wall, his legs threatening to give out. He replayed the scene in his mind, trying to find the logic, the reason. There was none.

She's just sick, he told himself, the thought a desperate mantra. She's in pain. She's not herself. She doesn't mean it.

He couldn't give up. He wouldn't.

He pulled out his phone, his fingers moving stiffly. He sent a text to Jackson Reynolds.

Double the resources on the Vance family investigation. I want to know everything. Every call, every transaction, every secret they've ever had.

He needed an enemy to fight, a problem to solve. Because the alternative, that she truly, genuinely hated him, was a truth he could not survive.

Inside the room, Kegan finally found his voice. He took a hesitant step toward the bed. "Cailin," he asked softly, "are you alright?"

She didn't open her eyes. She just gave a faint, almost imperceptible shake of her head.

Seraphina caught Kegan's eye and gave him a sharp, warning look. Don't push.

Kegan clamped his jaw shut, swallowing the thousand questions burning in his throat. He pulled a chair to the corner of the room and sat down, a silent, bewildered sentinel.

Outside the door, Hilliard straightened up. The pain and confusion in his eyes slowly hardened into something else. Something cold and determined.

He would find out what was happening. He would uncover the secret she was hiding behind that wall of ice. He swore it.

An hour felt like a lifetime. Hilliard stood in the sterile white hallway, an unmoving statue of grief and confusion. His phone buzzed incessantly with calls from his office, from his father, from a world that had ceased to matter. He ignored them all.

His mind was a broken record, replaying her words, her cold eyes, the way she had turned her head away from his touch.

She's sick. It's the pain talking. He had to believe that. If he didn't, the foundation of his world would crack. Patience. That's what she needed. More patience than he had ever shown her before.

His resolve hardened. He pushed himself off the wall, his movements stiff, and turned back toward her room. He pushed the door open without knocking.

The scene inside sent a fresh jolt through him. Kegan was leaning over the bed, holding a glass of water with a straw to Cailin's lips. She was taking small, weak sips, her expression one of quiet cooperation. It was a picture of domestic, gentle intimacy.

Kegan's body went rigid the moment he saw Hilliard. His posture shifted, becoming a wall of muscle and pure, undisguised hostility.

Hilliard ignored him. His focus was entirely on Cailin. He walked to the side of the bed, his voice deliberately soft, stripped of all its usual command. "Cailin. We need to talk."

Chapter 928:

She looked up at him, at the raw pain and exhaustion etched onto his face, at the bloodshot eyes that hadn't slept. She knew then that a gentle dismissal would never work. He was a fortress, and to make him retreat, she had to use a cannonball. She had to wound him so deeply he would have no choice but to flee.

She took a shallow, preparatory breath. Then she turned her gaze to Kegan and summoned a smile. It was a fragile, tremulous thing, but it was aimed at Kegan, and it was tender.

With her left hand, the one that still obeyed her, she slowly, deliberately, covered the back of Kegan's hand where it rested on the bed rail.

Hilliard's gaze locked onto their joined hands. The air in his lungs turned to ice.

"There's nothing left to talk about, Hilliard," Cailin said, her voice still weak, but now carrying a note of finality. Her eyes never left Kegan's. "I've made my choice."

Hilliard's own voice was a strangled whisper. "What choice?"

Cailin's gaze on Kegan softened, filled with a carefully constructed illusion of adoration and gratitude. "I'm in love with Kegan," she said, the words dropping like stones into the silent room. "I'm going to marry him."

The declaration was a bomb. It detonated in the quiet, sterile space, and the shockwave hit both men at once.

Kegan stared at her, his jaw slack. He was utterly bewildered. This was not part of any plan. But some deep, primal instinct screamed at him not to break her cover, not to question her in front of this man.

Hilliard let out a choked, incredulous laugh. It was a terrible sound, like tearing metal. He shook his head, a wild, desperate motion. "No. I don't believe you. You're lying. You're just trying to make me leave."

"I don't have the energy to play games anymore," Cailin said, her voice turning as cold as a winter grave. "Five years ago, you abandoned me, Hilliard. Now I'm choosing the man who has always been by my side."

Every word was a perfectly sharpened dart, dipped in the poison of past truths to make the present lie more believable. She was using his own failures as the foundation for her betrayal.

His control finally snapped. He lunged forward, his hands gripping her shoulders, his face a mask of desperate fury. "Look me in the eye and say it again!"

His grip was too tight. The movement jarred her body, sending a spike of agony through her injured abdomen. A low moan of pain escaped her lips, and her face went even whiter.

"Get your hands off her!" Kegan roared, shoving Hilliard back with the force of a battering ram.

Cailin seized the opportunity. This was her moment to make the scene irreparable. She began to cough, a wracking, violent sound, playing up the fragility, the agitation.

With a final, desperate burst of strength, she swept her arm across the bedside table. The glass of water Kegan had given her flew through the air and shattered against the floor. The sound was as sharp and violent as a gunshot.

"Get out!" she shrieked, the word tearing from her throat with all the strength she had left. "I don't want to see you again! Get out!"

Chapter 929:

The door flew open. Seraphina and two nurses rushed in, their eyes wide at the scene of chaos. The shattered glass, the two men poised for violence, Cailin gasping and coughing in the bed.

“What are you doing?” Seraphina’s voice was accusatory, aimed directly at Hilliard. “Are you trying to kill her?”

As if on cue, the cardiac monitor, agitated by Cailin’s manufactured distress, began to blare its shrill, rhythmic alarm. The sound added a terrifying layer of authenticity to the crisis.

The nurses swarmed the bed, checking Cailin’s vitals. Seraphina, her face a mask of cold fury, physically pushed both Hilliard and Kegan out of the room.

“She needs medical attention, and you are both making it worse! Out!”

The door slammed shut in Hilliard’s face. He stood there, staring at the blank wood, listening to the muffled sounds of Cailin’s choked coughs and the insistent, panicked beeping of the machines.

The ground had crumbled beneath his feet, leaving him in a state of freefall.

He knew, with a sickening certainty, that if he tried to force his way back in, if he caused her any more of this agitation, he might actually be the death of her.

The fight went out of him. He felt hollowed out, defeated.

He turned, his movements slow and robotic, and walked away from the door. Each step was like walking on broken glass. He had been utterly and completely vanquished.

The moment Hilliard's heavy footsteps faded down the hallway, Cailin's body went limp. The fierce, theatrical tension drained out of her, leaving a hollow shell. The coughing, however, did not stop. It intensified, becoming a genuine, racking spasm that bent her double.

Kegan and Seraphina rushed back to her side. Kegan reached out to steady her, but his hands hovered uncertainly, his mind still reeling from the lie she had told. The words "I'm in love with Kegan" echoed in his head, a confusing, painful phantom.

Cailin gasped for air, pushing his hand away. With a weak gesture, she pointed toward the small trash can by the bed. Kegan quickly moved it closer.

As Kegan watched in horror, Cailin coughed again, a deep, wet sound. A small splash of dark, crimson blood spattered onto the tissue she held to her mouth.

Her eyes, wide with her own silent terror, met his. She quickly crumpled the tissue and dropped it into the can, her gaze flicking to Seraphina. It was a silent, desperate command: Get rid of it. He can't know.

Kegan's voice was a raw, trembling whisper. "Cailin... what you said before... it wasn't true, was it?"

She couldn't look at him. She couldn't bear to see the hope in his eyes that she would have to extinguish later. She turned her face away, the movement costing her a monumental effort. "Please," she rasped. "Just... let me be alone for a minute."

Seraphina understood. She placed a firm hand on Kegan's arm. "Let's go. She needs to rest." She guided the stunned and heartbroken man out of the room, discreetly taking the small trash can with her.

The door clicked shut again. Cailin was finally, blessedly alone.

Chapter 930:

She stared at the blank white ceiling, her eyes empty, seeing nothing. The performance had drained her of everything. The lies had scraped her soul raw.

With a slow, agonizing movement, she reached for the drawer of her bedside table. Her fingers fumbled inside until they closed around the small, dark vial Dr. Finch had left for her. The palliative medicine. Her companion for the short road ahead.

She poured a glass of water with a shaking hand, her left hand, the only one that still felt like her own. She unscrewed the cap and let three drops of the viscous, dark brown liquid fall into the glass. The water instantly clouded, turning a murky, uninviting brown.

She raised the glass. The smell was intensely bitter, an earthy, medicinal odor that spoke of roots and decay. Wrinkling her nose, she drank it all in one go, the bitter liquid coating her tongue and throat. It hit her stomach with a cold shock, but was followed almost immediately by a creeping, welcome

numbness. The sharp, fizzing pain in her nerves began to recede, muffled under a blanket of chemical quiet.

She leaned back against the pillows, her body a dead weight. For the first time, her mind was clear enough to confront the numbers.

Fifteen days. That's what Finch had said. Best case.

Maybe less.

A strange, cold clarity settled over her. She began to make a mental list, a final ledger.

First: the children. She had to ensure their future was secure, legally and financially, outside the grasp of the Holloways. She needed to leave them... something. A part of her they could hold onto.

Second: the Vances. Isadora. Giselle. They would not get away with this. Her death would not be a quiet fading. It would be an explosion, and they would be at its epicenter.

Her body felt like an hourglass, the fine grains of her life slipping away, one by one, impossible to stop.

Downstairs, in the temporary office that had become his command center, Hilliard stared at a blank wall. He hadn't left. He couldn't. He was a wounded animal, unable to abandon its territory. The air was thick with the smell of stale coffee and his own quiet desperation.

He couldn't accept it. His gut, the same instinct that had guided him through a thousand hostile takeovers, screamed that something was fundamentally wrong. Cailin, even a Cailin who hated him, would not do this. Not like this.

His private line, the one only his core staff had, buzzed softly. He picked it up, his voice a low rasp. "What?"

It was one of the senior nurses from the VIP floor, her voice hushed and nervous. "Mr. Holloway, sir... I know I'm not supposed to call, but I... I thought you should know."

Hilliard sat bolt upright, his entire body tensing. "Know what?"

"It's about your wife," the nurse said, her voice barely a whisper. "Since the... incident... she's just been lying there. Staring at the ceiling. She hasn't said a word. Hasn't moved."

Hilliard's knuckles were white where he gripped the phone. "How does she look? Relieved? Happy?"