

Secret triplets: The billionaire's second chance

Chapter 1:

She wasn't just a wife anymore. She was an obstacle. And tonight, she was done being in the way.

It had started with the rain.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

The priest's voice was a low drone, barely audible over the relentless drumming of rain against black umbrellas. It was a cold rain, the kind that seeped through layers of wool and settled into the marrow of your bones.

Cailin Morton stood at the edge of the open grave, her heels sinking into the mud that threatened to swallow her whole. Her black dress, soaked through within minutes of arriving at Trinity Church Cemetery, clung to her skin like a second, freezing layer.

She didn't shiver. She couldn't. Her body had moved past the point of cold into a strange, numb paralysis.

She stared at the mahogany casket being lowered into the wet earth. It looked too small. Her mother had been a force of nature, a woman who filled every room she entered with laughter and warmth. Now she was just a box in the ground.

A clap of thunder rattled the sky, shaking the ground beneath Cailin's feet. It felt like the earth was cracking open, mirroring the fissure that had been widening in her chest for days.

She turned her head slightly to the left. The space beside her was empty.

Raindrops struck the empty patch of grass where her husband should have been standing. Hilliard Holloway. The man who had promised, in front of this very same priest three years ago, to cherish her in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad.

This was the bad. This was the worst. And he wasn't here.

"He's probably stuck in traffic, dear," a cousin whispered from behind her, pressing a dry tissue into Cailin's wet hand. The tissue dissolved instantly against her damp skin, becoming a useless ball of pulp. "You know how the city gets when it storms."

Cailin didn't answer. She knew exactly how the city got. She also knew that Hilliard had a driver who knew every shortcut from Wall Street to the cemetery.

She pulled her phone from her clutch. The screen lit up, harsh and bright against the gloom of the afternoon. No missed calls. No texts. Just a single news alert from The Daily Mail.

Her thumb hovered over it. She shouldn't look. She knew she shouldn't look.

She tapped it.

The screen filled with a live stream video. The banner at the bottom read: Metropolitan Charity Gala: The Night of Gold. The camera panned across a ballroom draped in crystal chandeliers and golden drapery, the audio a blend of classical strings and the murmur of the elite. And there, right in the center of the frame, was Hilliard.

He was wearing his tuxedo — the custom-fit Tom Ford she had picked out for him last month. He looked impeccable. Dry. Warm.

And he wasn't alone.

Charla English was clinging to his arm, wearing a gold sequined gown that dipped low in the back, her head thrown back in laughter, her teeth white and perfect beneath the camera flash.

The headline updated in real time: Holloway & English: A Power Couple Reunited? Rumors Swirl as Wife is Absent.

Absent.

Cailin felt a sharp, twisting cramp in her lower abdomen. It was a physical blow, a reminder of the secret she was carrying. She dropped the phone back into her bag and wrapped both arms around her stomach, pressing hard.

Not now, she pleaded silently to the life growing inside her. Please, not now. I can't fall apart yet.

The service ended. The mourners filed past her, offering condolences that felt like stones being dropped into a well. They touched her shoulder, their eyes darting to the empty space beside her, their pity sharp and judging.

"So tragic," someone murmured. "To be alone at a time like this."

Cailin walked to her car. The mud sucked at her shoes, pulling her down, making every step a battle. She got into the driver's seat of her modest sedan — Hilliard had taken the Maybach — and slammed the door, shutting out the sound of the rain.

She was shivering now. Uncontrollable tremors that started in her hands and worked their way up to her jaw, her teeth chattering.

She dialed Hilliard's number.

It rang. Once. Twice.

Please pick up. Tell me the video is old. Tell me you're on your way.

"You have reached the voicemail of Hilliard Holloway. Please leave a message."

She hung up and dialed Gavin, his Chief of Staff.

Gavin answered on the second ring. "Mrs. Holloway?" He sounded breathless, flustered.

"Where is he, Gavin?" Cailin asked. Her voice was raspy, unrecognizable to her own ears.

"The... the board meeting ran late, ma'am," Gavin stammered. "It's a high-level crisis. He can't step out. He feels terrible about missing the service."

In the background, Cailin heard it clearly — the swelling crescendo of a violin concerto, the clinking of champagne flutes, the high-pitched laughter of a woman.

“A board meeting,” Cailin repeated, deadpan. “With an orchestra?”

“I... Mrs. Holloway, the reception is bad here in the conference room, I have to—” The line went dead.

The lie didn’t just cut; it eviscerated. It wasn’t that he wasn’t there. It was that he thought so little of her intelligence, so little of her grief, that he couldn’t even be bothered to craft a decent one.

A memory flashed — her mother’s hand in hers, frail and paper-thin, just two days ago. Don’t let him dim your light, Cailin. You were the sun before you met him.

Cailin looked in the rearview mirror. The woman staring back was a ghost. Pale, wet hair plastered to her skull, eyes rimmed red, lips blue from the cold.

She started the car.

The drive back to the Upper East Side was a blur of red taillights and smeared rain on the windshield. She didn’t feel the road or the steering wheel beneath her hands. She was running on autopilot, the kind of dissociation that protects the mind from snapping completely.

She entered the penthouse. It was massive, spanning the entire top floor, decorated in cool greys and stark whites. Beautiful. Freezing.

Cailin kicked off her muddy shoes at the door and walked into the living room. The silence of the apartment pressed against her ears like a weight.

On the glass coffee table, sitting innocently beside a stack of architectural digests, was a gift bag. Small, robin's egg blue. Tiffany's.

Cailin stopped. Her birthday wasn't for another six months. Their anniversary had passed two weeks ago, marked only by a text from his assistant.

She reached out, her fingers trembling, and pulled the tissue paper aside. A diamond necklace — a limited edition piece, delicate and insanely expensive.

But it wasn't for her.

Lying next to the box was a card, the envelope unsealed. She pulled it out. Hilliard's sharp, angular handwriting.

For C. To replace the one you lost. Happy Birthday.

Charla's birthday was today.

Cailin stared at the necklace. It glittered under the recessed lighting, cold and hard. He had remembered the ex-girlfriend's birthday. He had bought a gift. And then it had been left here. A cold dread washed over her. This wasn't Hilliard's brand of careless cruelty — he was too calculated for such a clumsy mistake. This was a deliberate act of war. Charla's work.

The television on the wall flickered to life, set on a timer for the evening news. The screen filled with Gala coverage again. There was Charla, blowing out candles on a massive cake carried out by waiters. Hilliard stood right behind her, leaning in close to whisper something in her ear. Charla blushed, a pretty pink flush rising in her cheeks.

Hilliard was smiling.

Cailin didn't scream. The sound that ripped from her throat was guttural, ugly. She grabbed a heavy crystal vase from the console table — a wedding gift from his aunt — and hurled it across the room.

Crash.

Glass shattered against the wall, shards exploding outward like shrapnel. The noise echoed through the empty penthouse, a violent punctuation mark to three years of silence.

Cailin collapsed onto the sofa. The adrenaline drained out of her as quickly as it had come, leaving her hollowed out. She curled into a ball, pulling her knees to her chest.

Her hand went to her stomach.

“I can’t do this,” she whispered to the darkness. “I can’t let you grow up in this cold house. I can’t let you see me like this.”

She closed her eyes, but the image of Hilliard whispering to Charla was burned into her retinas.

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