

Second chance 121

Chapter 121:

“Hilliard! How dare you defend that woman over your own fiancée?” She spoke to him as though he were a wayward child. “She has bewitched you. She is violent. She is unstable.”

“I am defending the truth,” Hilliard said evenly. He walked to the water pitcher and poured himself a glass, his hand entirely steady. “The police report supports Cailin. Witnesses saw the car accelerate.”

“Police?” Jeraldine’s hand flew to her pearl necklace. “You allowed the police to investigate us? The scandal, Hilliard — the press!”

“I suppressed it,” he said, taking a measured sip. “I compensated the witnesses and buried the report. Not for Charla’s sake. For the company’s stock price.”

He turned back to Charla, his gaze unwavering. “But I have seen the footage. If you ever use a vehicle as a weapon again, I will not bury it. I will deliver the evidence to the District Attorney myself.”

Charla shrank back against the pillows. Real fear moved behind her eyes this time — not the performed kind. She had never seen him like this. He wasn’t simply angry. He was detached, and detachment was far more dangerous.

“If she has a child, Hilliard,” Jeraldine stepped between them, physically blocking his line of sight to Charla, “that child is a threat to the family trust. If there is an heir walking around with Holloway blood, we need to know. We need to secure the assets.”

Hilliard looked at his mother. He saw the greed behind her eyes, the obsession with lineage that displaced every other human consideration. He thought of Elia — the little girl with the green eyes and the fierce spirit. He thought of the small sneaker he had found on the restaurant floor.

“There is no child,” Hilliard said.

Jeraldine seized his arm. Her grip was surprisingly strong. “If you won’t deal with her, I will. I will not allow a ghost from the past to destroy this family’s future.”

Hilliard looked down at her hand on his sleeve. He didn’t raise his voice. He didn’t pull away sharply. He simply removed her hand, peeling her fingers back one by one with quiet deliberateness.

“Touch her,” he said softly, “and you answer to me. Not as your son. As the CEO of the company that finances your life.”

He walked out. The heavy door clicked shut behind him.

Silence reclaimed the room.

Charla watched Jeraldine standing at the window, chest heaving beneath the tweed, the calculation behind her eyes working steadily behind the fury.

“He is bewitched,” Jeraldine hissed at her own reflection in the glass. “He is lying to protect her.”

Charla said nothing. She pressed the manufactured tear from her cheek with one fingertip. The rift was open now. Hilliard had chosen a side — and by doing so, he had forced Jeraldine’s hand far more effectively than Charla ever could have managed alone.

“We need to find proof,” Jeraldine murmured to the window, her reflection cold and resolute. “If he won’t give us the truth, we will take it.”

Chapter 122:

The penthouse was dark, save for the glow of the city bleeding through the floor-to-ceiling windows. Hilliard stood at the glass, a tumbler of scotch in his hand. The amber liquid caught the light, swirling gently as he tilted the glass. He wasn’t drinking it. He was simply holding it, grounding himself against its cold, smooth surface.

On the coffee table behind him, his tablet sat paused on a grainy dashcam image. The sequence of events was unmistakable — the red sports car, the sudden acceleration, the figure in the hoodie hurling herself onto the concrete. It wasn’t an accident. It was an execution attempt.

The private elevator chimed. The sound was soft and polite, but in the silence of the apartment, it landed like a gunshot.

Hilliard didn’t turn around. He already knew who it was. Only three people had the code to the penthouse elevator: his mother, his head of security, and Charla.

Charla stepped into the room wearing a beige trench coat belted tightly at the waist, her hair loose and cascading over her shoulders in soft waves. The bandage was gone from her forehead.

“Hilliard?” Her voice was a practiced coo, carefully calibrated to disarm. “Are you still mad?”

Hilliard took a sip of the scotch. It burned on the way down. “You should be resting. You checked yourself out against medical advice.”

“I couldn’t sleep,” Charla said, moving toward him. Her heels disappeared into the plush carpet, silencing her steps. “I missed you. I hate it when we fight.”

She stopped just behind him, close enough that her perfume — something floral, expensive, and overpowering — displaced the subtle scent of the scotch. “I need to feel you,” she whispered. “To know that we are okay.”

She reached out and touched his back. Her hand slid down his spine. With her other hand, she undid the belt of the trench coat. The fabric fell open. Beneath it, she was wearing nothing but black lace lingerie. The gesture was provocative and, beneath the surface, deeply desperate.

Hilliard didn’t move. He didn’t turn to look at her. He studied his own reflection in the darkened glass, her ghostly image hovering behind him.

“Put your clothes on, Charla,” he said. His voice was weary.

Charla's hand stilled against his lower back. "Why? You used to want me. You used to tear my clothes off in this very room."

Hilliard turned around slowly. He looked at her — at the lace, at the skin she was offering him. He felt nothing. No desire. No warmth. Only a deep and settled exhaustion.

"That was before you tried to kill my wife," he said quietly.

Charla flinched as though he had struck her. She drew the coat shut around herself. "Ex-wife. She is your ex-wife."

"Legally, she is still my wife," Hilliard corrected. He walked past her to the bar and set his glass down. "I never signed the papers. And you — you are becoming a liability."

Charla's face twisted. The mask of seduction cracked, and what surfaced beneath it was raw and ugly.

"You are sleeping with her!" she screamed, the sound ricocheting off the high ceilings. "That's why you defend her! That's why you won't touch me! You're choosing that trash over me!"

Chapter 123:

"I am not," Hilliard said. He leaned against the bar and crossed his arms. "But I am done with this arrangement. The engagement was a business merger, Charla. It was never about love. And now you are bad for business."

“You can’t do this to me,” Charla hissed, stepping forward. “My father will pull his investments. The board will revolt.”

“Let them,” Hilliard said. “I own fifty-one percent. I am the board.”

He met her gaze without warmth. “Go home. We will discuss the dissolution of the engagement tomorrow with the lawyers.”

Charla stared at him, trembling with humiliation. She had offered him everything — her body, her loyalty, her carefully constructed devotion — and he had looked at her as though she were a problem to be managed.

“You will regret this,” she whispered. “You will regret choosing her over me.”

She turned and crossed to the elevator, stabbing the call button. The doors opened at once, and she stepped inside. As they slid shut, she held his gaze one final time. There was no love left in her eyes. Only hatred.

Hilliard watched the floor numbers descend. He exhaled slowly and pressed his fingers to his temples. He needed sleep. He knew he wouldn’t find any.

In the parking garage below, Charla sat behind the wheel of her car, shaking so badly she couldn’t fit the key into the ignition. She pulled out her phone and dialed.

"He rejected me, Mother Jeraldine," she sobbed when the line connected. "He kicked me out. Because of her."

A pause. Then Jeraldine's voice came through — cold and precise.

"He is lost. We have to save him from himself."

"She definitely has the child," Charla said, the lie forming quickly, her need to remain useful sharpening her desperation. "I saw a toy in her bag yesterday. A boy's toy. She is hiding an heir."

"A boy?" Jeraldine's voice sharpened. "Are you certain?"

"Yes," Charla said, dragging a hand across her wet cheeks. "We need to expose her. Tomorrow. If Hilliard sees the child — sees the full extent of her deceit — he will hate her. He will come back to us."

"We need to be certain," Jeraldine said. "We need to catch her off guard."

"We go in before she can prepare," Charla pressed. "Use Hilliard's override security clearance for the building. You have access. Go in at dawn — an emergency wellness check."

Silence stretched along the line. Charla held her breath.

“Prepare the lawyers,” Jeraldine said finally. “We go at dawn.”

The call ended.

Charla sat alone in the dark of the garage, staring at her reflection in the rearview mirror. Her mascara was smeared in dark streaks down her face. She wiped them away slowly with the back of her hand.

“If I can’t have him,” she whispered to the empty car, “I will burn her world to the ground.”

Chapter 124:

The morning sun filtered through the blinds of the Brooklyn apartment, casting striped shadows across the floor. It was seven in the morning. The smell of pancakes and maple syrup filled the air. Cailin stood at the stove, spatula in hand, her hip still aching from the fall and her hand wrapped in a light bandage — but she was smiling. The kids were laughing at the table.

The intercom buzzed. Hard. Twice. It wasn’t the tentative buzz of a visitor. It was a demand.

Cailin went still. She lowered the heat on the stove, crossed to the monitor by the door, and pressed the video button.

The grainy black-and-white screen showed the lobby. Jeraldine Holloway stood at the entrance looking like a general preparing for battle. Beside her was Charla, smirking. Behind them, two men in dark suits carried briefcases.

“Oh no,” Cailin breathed. The color drained from her face. “The Witch is here.”

She spun toward the room. “Code Red! Boys, hide!”

She clapped her hands sharply. The laughter at the table cut off instantly. Aron and Davy didn’t ask questions, didn’t whine. They had practiced this drill. They grabbed their tablets from the table, snatched up their sneakers, and sprinted to the master bedroom closet.

Behind the rows of Cailin’s coats, a false panel waited. Kegan had installed it months ago — a panic room the size of a small wardrobe, built into the dead space between the apartment walls. Cailin followed them, sliding the panel open.

“Quiet as mice. Not a single sound. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mommy,” Aron whispered. He pulled Davy inside with him.

Cailin slid the panel shut and arranged the coats carefully over the seam. Then she ran back to the living room.

Elia was still at the table, a forkful of pancake suspended halfway to her mouth, looking confused.

“Elia, listen to me,” Cailin said, keeping her voice steady despite the urgency behind it. “You are Ashely’s daughter today. Remember the game? Who is your mommy?”

Elia blinked, a smear of syrup on her chin. “Mommy Ash.”

“Good girl.”

Ashely appeared from the hallway, still toweling her hair dry. One look at Cailin’s face told her everything she needed to know. Without a word, she grabbed a napkin, wiped Elia’s chin, and sat down beside the girl, pulling her close.

The banging on the door started — loud, rhythmic, and deliberate.

“Security! We have an emergency report!” a man’s voice called from the hall.

It was a lie. Private lawyers didn’t file emergency reports. But they had other things.

Cailin smoothed her hair. She drew a slow breath, unlocked the deadbolt, and opened the door.

Jeraldine pushed past her before she could speak. “Where is it?”

“Where is what?” Cailin stepped into her path, holding firm despite her shaking knees. “My dignity? You won’t find it here.”

“The child! The bastard heir!” Jeraldine’s voice rose sharply as her eyes swept the living room.

Charla followed, stepping inside with an expression of quiet triumph. “Just confess, Cailin. We know you’re hiding him.”

The two lawyers entered behind her and began opening doors without invitation.

“You can’t search my home!” Cailin grabbed one of them by the arm. “This is trespassing!”

Chapter 125:

“This building falls under the protection of Holloway Group security,” Jeraldine announced, turning to face her. “I have exercised my son’s executive authority to conduct an emergency safety inspection. We received a report of an unauthorized occupant.”

Cailin cursed inwardly. She had accounted for nearly everything — but not for Jeraldine turning Hilliard’s own power against her.

“Clear,” one lawyer called from the bedroom doorway.

“Clear,” said the other from the bathroom.

Jeraldine moved into the living room. Her eyes swept methodically across the space — the toys scattered on the floor, the three plates on the table.

Then she saw Elia.

Elia sat swinging her legs at the table, watching Jeraldine with wide, curious green eyes.

Jeraldine’s gaze sharpened. “Just the one child,” she muttered, glancing once at the three plates before fixing her full attention on the girl.

She extended one manicured finger toward Elia — the nail lacquered blood red. “I knew it,” she hissed. “When you brought her to the estate, I saw the resemblance. The chin. The eyes. You expect me to believe she belongs to Ashely? She looks exactly the way Hilliard did at that age.”

Elia studied the woman for a moment. Then she pointed her fork at her. “Who is the loud grandma?”

Charla gasped and clapped her hands together. “You see! I told you, Mother Jeraldine! She’s been hiding Hilliard’s child right here under our noses!”

Jeraldine took a step toward the table, moving with the quiet confidence of a predator that has spotted its prey. “I am not a fool, Cailin. I know my own blood when I see it. Are you truly going to stand there and deny that this is Hilliard’s biological daughter?”

The front door crashed open against the wall.

Hilliard. Breathless. He had driven from the tower the moment his security system flagged that his executive override had been used at the address.

He took in the scene in a single instant — his mother looming over the breakfast table, Charla’s smug expression, Cailin standing against the wall as pale as a ghost, and Elia sitting small and vulnerable at the center of it all.

“Mother!” The word came out like a thunderclap, filling every corner of the small apartment. “Get away from her!”

Hilliard crossed the room in two strides and stepped between Jeraldine and the table, placing his body as a shield in front of Elia. His chest was heaving.

“Get out of my home,” Cailin said. Her hand shot to the table and snatched her phone. Her thumb moved with lightning speed, waking the screen. “You have five seconds before this illegal search is livestreamed to every news outlet in this city. Try me.”

“Not until we DNA test that child!” Jeraldine craned to see around Hilliard. “Look at her, Hilliard! She has the Holloway chin! She is yours!”

“She is not your grandchild — she is mine!” Ashely stepped forward and wrapped her arm around Elia, drawing the girl’s head gently against her stomach. “Tell them, Elia. Who is your mommy?”

The room went silent. Even Jeraldine seemed to forget to breathe.

Chapter 126:

Elia looked at Cailin. Cailin gave the smallest possible nod. Elia looked at Ashely, and in that moment remembered the game — the Mommy Ash game.

“Mommy Ash,” Elia said clearly, pointing one sticky finger at Ashely.

Charla stamped her foot against the hardwood floor. “She is lying! Look at her eyes — they are Holloway green!”

“Lots of people have green eyes, you idiot,” Ashely snapped. “My ex-husband had green eyes. Are you going to claim every green-eyed child in New York is a Holloway?”

Hilliard looked down at Elia — at the curls, the shape of her face. Every instinct he had was screaming that this was his daughter. He had seen the birthmark. He knew.

But then he looked at Cailin. He saw the terror behind her eyes. He saw the phone trembling in her hand, a desperate bluff that could detonate everything but was the only weapon she had left. And he saw the way his mother was looking at Elia — not as a child to be loved, but as a specimen, an asset to be acquired and controlled.

If he spoke the truth now, Jeraldine would file for custody within the hour. She would tear Elia away. She would send her to boarding schools. She would mold her into another cold, hollowed-out Holloway.

He made his choice.

“I already tested her, Mother,” Hilliard said quietly.

The lawyers stopped rummaging. Cailin’s thumb hovered motionless over the Go Live button.

“What?” Jeraldine stared at him. “When?”

“Weeks ago.” His mind moved quickly. He knew Cailin had likely tampered with the results, but that fabricated failure was now his greatest shield. The sting of reading that cold, clinical report came back to him — but the document that had wounded him was now a weapon he could use to protect this little girl from the very woman claiming to be her grandmother. “I had my doubts. I took a sample and ran it through the lab.”

“And?” Charla leaned forward, her eyes sharp with hunger.

“Negative,” Hilliard said. He looked directly at Cailin as he said it. “Zero percent match. She is not my daughter.”

Cailin exhaled. The air left her lungs so fast the room tilted. He was using the fabricated results to save them. He was choosing to hold the lie in place, to protect them with it.

“You tested her behind my back?” Cailin shifted into outrage, playing her part. “You took genetic material from a child without consent?”

“I had to know,” Hilliard said, dropping his gaze to the floor. He managed to look genuinely ashamed of it.

“Get out!” Ashely swept her hand toward the door. “All of you! You are out of your minds! Get out before I call the real police!”

Jeraldine looked deflated. Her eyes moved from Hilliard to Elia and back again, searching for a foothold. “Negative? The lab was certain?”

“I reviewed the report myself. It is conclusive,” Hilliard said. He walked to the door and held it open. “Now leave. You are trespassing.”

Chapter 127:

Charla was trembling. Her plan had collapsed around her. “He faked it! Cailin tampered with the test — I know she did!”

“Enough, Charla.” Hilliard closed his hand around her arm, his grip firm. “You have humiliated yourself enough for one lifetime.”

He steered her toward the door. Jeraldine followed, her expression a knot of confusion and suppressed fury, throwing one last suspicious look at Elia over her shoulder. The lawyers filed out quickly behind them.

Hilliard paused at the threshold. He looked back at Cailin.

Their eyes met. Something passed between them — wordless, fragile, and temporary. A truce.

He pulled the door shut behind him.

Cailin locked it. Threw the deadbolt. Engaged the chain.

Then she slid down the wall to the floor, her phone slipping from her fingers and clattering against the wood.

“Okay,” she whispered. “Okay.”

The closet panel slid open. Aron and Davy crawled out, pale-faced and wide-eyed.

“That was close,” Aron said in a hushed voice, still clutching his tablet like a shield.

“The Loud Grandma is scary,” Davy added.

Cailin moved to them on her hands and knees and gathered all three children into her arms at once, pressing her face into the warmth of their necks. She breathed them in — their shampoo, their sweat, their fear.

“We are not safe here anymore,” she said quietly into their hair. “We have to move.”

In the hallway outside, Charla wrenched her arm free from Hilliard’s grip and rubbed her wrist.

“You are wrong,” she hissed. “I know I am right. I can feel it.”

Hilliard said nothing. He pressed the elevator button and stared straight ahead, his jaw set, his silence absolute.

The interior of Hilliard’s car was silent as a tomb. The leather seats creaked as Jeraldine shifted her weight. Hilliard drove with both hands on the wheel, his knuckles white against the leather.

“You humiliated me,” he said, breaking the silence. His voice was low and tight with suppressed anger.

“I was protecting the family!” Jeraldine argued from the passenger seat. “If that child was yours —”

“By terrorizing a single woman and a little girl?” Hilliard scoffed. He took a corner sharply. “You acted like a mobster. An emergency inspection? Really, Mother?”

“She is hiding something. I felt it,” Charla muttered from the back seat, picking at the hem of her trench coat. “The way she looked at me. The panic in her eyes.”

Hilliard hit the brakes at a red light. The car lurched to a halt.

He turned in his seat and looked directly at Charla. “If you mention Cailin’s name again, the engagement is over. Officially. Publicly. I will issue a press release citing your instability as the cause.”

Charla’s mouth snapped shut. Tears welled in her eyes, but she didn’t speak.

Hilliard drove the rest of the way in silence. He pulled up to the English Estate gates and stopped.

“Get out,” he said.

Jeraldine and Charla stepped onto the drive. Hilliard didn't wait. He pressed the accelerator and the Maybach pulled away, taillights shrinking into the distance.

Chapter 128:

Jeraldine watched until they disappeared. Then she turned to Charla, her face cold and composed.

"You made me look like a fool," she said.

"The test was fake — I know it was," Charla insisted. "Cailin is clever. She has connections. She swapped the sample."

"It doesn't matter," Jeraldine sighed, adjusting her pearls. "Hilliard believes it. Or he chooses to. Either way, we have no leverage. Without proof, that child is just a child."

"Unless..." Charla's voice dropped. A shadow moved across her face.

"Unless what?" Jeraldine asked.

"Unless the child disappears," Charla whispered. "If the child is gone, the problem is solved permanently. Cailin leaves. Hilliard forgets."

Jeraldine looked at her for a long moment. Her expression was not shocked. It was not horrified. It was contemplative.

“Do what you must,” Jeraldine said, turning toward the house. “Just don’t link it to me.”

The heavy doors closed behind her.

Charla stood alone in the driveway. A slow, deliberate smile spread across her face. She had her permission.

Back in the Brooklyn apartment, Cailin was moving like a whirlwind. Suitcases lay open on the floor again.

“We leave for Europe tonight,” she said, throwing clothes into a bag with both hands. “I’ll call Kegan. He can have the jet ready in three hours.”

“You can’t run, Cailin. They will find you,” Ashely said, trying to slow her down. “Running makes you look guilty. Hilliard just defended you — use that.”

“I can’t stay here. They raided my home. They were in my children’s rooms.” Cailin’s hands were trembling so badly she couldn’t close the zipper.

Then the room tilted.

She grabbed the edge of the table. Her vision blurred, black spots blooming across her field of sight.

“Whoa — are you okay?” Ashely rushed forward and caught her by the arm.

“Just stress,” Cailin mumbled. Cold sweat broke out across her forehead.

She tried to take a step and her legs gave out entirely. She went down onto the sofa.

Ashely pressed the back of her hand to Cailin’s forehead and pulled it away quickly. “You’re burning up. Cailin, you’re on fire.”

It had all arrived at once — the adrenaline crash, the sleepless days, the injury from the car, the relentless and grinding terror of the morning’s raid. Her body had held itself together through sheer will, and now the will was gone.

“My lungs,” Cailin slurred, her eyes losing focus. “It hurts to breathe.”

The last of the adrenaline drained away, leaving a bone-deep exhaustion in its place. Her immune system, battered past its limit, finally surrendered.

“No Europe tonight,” Ashely said firmly, reaching for her phone. “You need a doctor.” She dialed 911.

“No — no hospitals,” Cailin rasped, clutching weakly at Ashely’s sleeve. “They’ll take the kids...”

“I’ve got the kids,” Ashely said. “You need to breathe.”

Cailin’s head fell back against the cushion. The darkness closed in around her, and she stopped fighting it.

Chapter 129:

The garden of the English Estate was a masterpiece of manicured nature. Roses bloomed in perfect rows, not a single petal out of place. Victoria English sat at a wrought-iron table, sipping tea from a bone china cup — a woman built of steel and hairspray in equal measure.

Charla sat opposite her, crying again.

“Hilliard hates me. He chose that trash over me,” she said, stirring her tea with agitated strokes. “He threatened to end the engagement.”

Victoria sipped her tea without offering any comfort. “Stop crying. It ruins your face. Puffy eyes are not a good look.”

“What do I do? He believes the child isn’t his,” Charla asked. “Or he pretends to.”

“If the child is not his, she is merely a nuisance,” Victoria said, her tone as measured as if she were analyzing a stock portfolio. “If she is his, she is a rival. In either case, the child is the anchor keeping Cailin here. She is a reason to keep fighting.”

“Remove the anchor, and the ship sails away.” Victoria smiled — a thin, cruel expression that didn’t reach her eyes.

“You mean... send the child away?” Charla asked, dabbing her face.

“I mean remove the problem. Permanently.” Victoria turned her gaze to the roses. “Or at minimum, remove it from the equation.”

Charla stiffened. “Murder?”

“Accidents happen. Kidnappings happen. The world is a dangerous place,” Victoria said with a slight shrug. She reached into her purse and produced a small, plain white card. No name. Only a number. She slid it across the table.

“I know a man. A cleaner. He owes your father a favor.” She rose from her chair. “Do it. Secure your future. Or step aside and let Cailin win. The choice is yours — but don’t come crying to me when you lose the Holloway fortune.”

Charla stared at the card. The number seemed to pulse against the white surface. Something in her chest shifted — desperation hardening into resolve. She picked it up.

She dialed.

“I have a job,” she said when the line connected. Her voice was perfectly steady now. “A package needs to be lost.”

In the hospital emergency room, Cailin lay hooked up to an IV, the steady rhythm of the monitor the only sound inside the curtained cubicle.

“Severe exhaustion and pneumonia,” the doctor said, scribbling on a clipboard. “She needs rest — absolute bed rest for a minimum of forty-eight hours. Her immune system has crashed.”

“You are staying here,” Ashely said, planting herself with her arms crossed.

“I can’t. My kids —” Cailin tried to push herself upright, but the IV line pulled taut and her arms gave way beneath her. She was too weak to fight it.

“I have them. They are at school — I dropped them off an hour ago. It’s safer there than the apartment right now.” Ashely’s voice softened. “I’ll pick them up at three.”

“Promise me you won’t let them out of your sight,” Cailin said. Her eyes were glassy with fever, her grip on Ashely’s wrist feather-light.

“I promise. Rest.” Ashely pressed her lips briefly to Cailin’s forehead. “I’ll go get them now.”

She grabbed her keys and left the room.

Chapter 130:

A block from the school, parked along the curb in a rented sedan, Charla sat watching a dot move across her phone screen. She had managed to plant a tracker on Ashely’s van after the confrontation in the park, though Kegan’s security system had made the audio feed nearly useless — mostly static, with only fragments cutting through. Yesterday she had gotten lucky. One word had broken through the interference, clear as glass.

Firefly.

She didn’t know what it meant. But it sounded like a password.

The dot on the screen was stalled on Fifth Avenue. A red line. Traffic.

Charla typed quickly. “The guardian is delayed. She’ll call the school. The pickup code is Firefly. Use it.”

The reply came instantly. "Proceed."

Charla set her phone on the seat beside her. The trap was set.

The dream was vivid. Cailin stood in a field of snow while Hilliard walked away from her, carrying three small bundles in his arms. She tried to run after him, but her feet were frozen to the ground. She opened her mouth to scream, and no sound came out.

"Elia!"

Cailin woke gasping. She shot upright in the hospital bed, her heart slamming against her ribs. Her gown was soaked through with sweat.

"Mrs. Morton, please calm down," a nurse rushed in. "Your fever is at 103. You need to lie back down."

"Where is my phone?" Cailin ignored her, tearing through the bed sheets with frantic hands until she found it beneath the pillow. She pressed the button.

3:30 PM.

Pickup time had been 3:00.

There were no texts from Ashely.

“No,” Cailin whispered. Cold, sharp panic cut straight through the fog of the fever.

Out on the city streets, Ashely slammed her palm against the steering wheel.

“Move!”

She leaned on the horn. It was useless. Construction had eaten two lanes of the avenue, and a fender bender ahead had turned the block into a parking lot. She was completely gridlocked.

She grabbed her phone and dialed the school.

“I’m running late — this is Ashely Trevino. Please keep Elia inside until I arrive,” she said breathlessly.

“Oh, Mrs. Trevino?” The receptionist’s voice was bright and unhurried. “Someone already picked her up.”

The noise of the street faded to nothing. The blood in Ashely’s veins turned to ice. “What? Who?”

“A woman. She said she was your assistant and showed us the emergency authorization QR code you sent. She was very professional — wearing scrubs. She even had the code word.”

“I don’t have an assistant! What code word?” Ashely’s voice cracked.

“Firefly,” the receptionist said.

Ashely dropped the phone. It disappeared into the footwell with a clatter.

Firefly.

It was their new code — a word they had created just last week, known only to her, Cailin, and the children. It wasn’t an old password someone might have stumbled across. It was a fresh breach. Someone had been listening.

Ashely didn’t stop to think. She pushed open the car door and abandoned the van in the middle of traffic.

She ran.

She sprinted down the sidewalk, weaving through pedestrians, her lungs burning. Three blocks felt like three miles. When she finally pushed through the school gate, she was breathless and wild-eyed.

The playground was nearly empty.

Nearly.

Two small boys sat on a bench near the far wall, holding hands. Aron and Davy. Their faces were pale and frightened.