

Second chance 131

Chapter 131:

Ashely dropped to her knees in front of them. "Where is Elia?"

"A lady took her," Aron said, tears running freely down his face. "She said Mommy was dying."

"She had a badge," Davy added, his voice trembling. "We thought she was from the hospital. She said she was taking Elia to see Mommy."

Ashely pulled them both into her arms and held them hard. "Oh God."

She had to call Cailin. But Cailin had a raging fever. The doctor had been clear — severe stress could push her over the edge.

She dialed anyway. Her hands were shaking so badly she nearly dropped the phone a second time.

Cailin answered on the first ring. "Ash? Did you get them?"

Ashely couldn't find her breath. The sob broke out of her before she could stop it. "Cailin... Elia is gone."

The line went silent.

In the hospital room, the phone slipped from Cailin's fingers and struck the floor with a sharp crack. The world around her went utterly still.

30 minutes ago.

Elia stood by the school gate, clutching her pink backpack, scanning the street for Ashely's van.

A woman in a nurse's uniform approached. She had a kind face, though her eyes were hidden behind sunglasses. "Elia Trevino?"

Elia nodded. "Yes?"

"Your mommy Cailin is very sick. She is asking for you," the woman — Gretchen — said softly, crouching down to Elia's level. "She needs a hug."

Elia remembered. Mommy had been hot and sweaty that morning, barely able to lift her head. "Mommy is in the hospital," she said.

“Yes. I am Nurse Gretchen, and I am here to take you to her.” The smile was warm and practiced.
“Auntie Ash is stuck in traffic. She called me and said to come find you. She said to tell you the code word — Firefly.”

Elia hesitated. Firefly was their secret game word. If this lady knew it, Auntie Ash must have told her herself.

“Okay,” Elia said, and took Gretchen’s hand.

They walked around the corner to a nondescript gray van parked along the curb. Elia climbed in. The door slid shut behind her.

The moment it did, the smile dropped from Gretchen’s face like a curtain falling.

She seized Elia’s wrists.

“Hey!” Elia cried. “That hurts!”

“Quiet, brat,” Gretchen hissed. She cinched a plastic zip tie around Elia’s small wrists with a sharp sound — zzzzt — then pressed a strip of duct tape firmly over her mouth.

The van’s engine roared to life. It pulled away from the curb and disappeared into the flow of traffic.

Present.

Elia sat on the floor of the moving van, crying silently. Tears soaked into the tape across her mouth. She understood now. She had been tricked. The lady was not a nurse. She was a Bad Lady.

Gretchen was on the phone in the front seat, her voice flat and businesslike. "Package secured. Heading to the drop point."

Chapter 132:

"Good. Make sure she is never found." The voice that crackled through the speaker was tinny with distance, but Elia recognized it instantly — the high, sharp pitch of it. The voice of the lady who had thrown the glass. The lady who had aimed the car at Mommy.

Charla.

Elia understood, with a child's sudden and terrible clarity, that this was not about money. It was about hate.

Gretchen hung up and glanced at Elia in the rearview mirror. Her eyes were flat and cold.

"Don't worry, kid. It'll be quick." She lit a cigarette. Smoke began to fill the cabin.

Elia looked around the van. She was Cailin Morton's daughter. She was Hilliard Holloway's daughter. She did not give up.

Her eyes found a loose screw on the metal frame of the floor-bolted seat. It was sharp and flecked with rust.

She shifted carefully backward and began working the zip tie against the edge of it.

Scrape. Scrape. Scrape.

In the hospital, Cailin tore the IV needle from her arm.

Blood bloomed across the white floor. She didn't feel it. A wave of dizziness crashed over her and she grabbed the bed rail, white-knuckled, fighting to stay upright. The fever was a fire behind her eyes, but the cold running through her veins was fiercer than any fever. The world narrowed to a gray tunnel. Every step was a deliberate, agonizing act of will against the burning in her lungs. She wasn't running — she was lurching, stumbling, driven forward by a maternal fury that was consuming her from the inside out.

She burst through the room door barefoot, her hospital gown whipping around her legs, and ignored the nurses calling after her. She hit the elevator button with her palm.

She was going to find her daughter.

Or she was going to burn the city down trying.

Cailin burst into the apartment looking like a revenant — skin translucent, sweat matting her hair to her forehead, her hospital gown still clinging to her body.

Ashely was on the sofa with Aron and Davy pressed against her on either side. Two police officers stood in the living room, their expressions professional but strained.

“Ma’am, we’ve issued a BOLO and are checking traffic cameras,” the older officer said, his tone measured but firm. “The vehicle had stolen plates and the woman wore a mask. The kidnapper was a professional — they wiped the school’s external camera footage for the ten minutes surrounding the abduction. We’re working on it, but it takes time.”

“She is five years old! Issue an Amber Alert!” Cailin’s voice was raw, stripped bare. “My sons saw the whole thing!”

“We need a confirmed license plate or a clear suspect description before we can trigger a statewide alert,” the officer explained carefully. “Right now we don’t have enough to justify it without causing a city-wide panic. We are doing everything we can.”

“Get out.” Cailin pointed to the door. Her whole body was trembling, but her finger was perfectly steady. “If you can’t find her right now, get out.”

“Ma’am, we’re on your side —”

“Get out!”

The officers exchanged a look, left their contact information, and filed out quietly. The door clicked shut.

Cailin locked it and turned to the boys.

Chapter 133:

Aron and Davy were still huddled against Ashely on the sofa. Despite their remarkable intellects, they were five years old — they had never faced anything like this. Their sister had been taken from right in front of them, and the shock had hollowed them out completely. They sat crying silently, too stunned to even reach for their tablets.

Cailin crossed the room and dropped to her knees in front of them, gripping their small, trembling shoulders. She needed them back. She needed her team.

“Aron. Davy. Look at me.” Her voice was fierce, cutting through the fog of their panic. “I know you are scared. This is your first real emergency. But I need you to be brave right now. Code Black.”

The words broke through like a key turning a lock. Both boys blinked, drew shaky breaths, and something shifted behind their eyes. They wiped their faces. They got up and went to their computers.

“Mommy, I can track her smartwatch!” Davy’s fingers flew across the keyboard. “It’s still active!”

“Do it. Aron — get into the school’s system. The external cameras are wiped, but check the internal feeds. Find a reflection, a shadow, anything,” Cailin ordered, pacing the room, shivering uncontrollably.

Ashely appeared at her shoulder with a blanket and a glass of water. “Drink. You need to focus. You’re going to pass out again.”

Cailin pushed the water aside. “I can’t lose her, Ash. She is my heart. She is the only good thing I have ever made.”

“Got it!” Aron shouted.

A video feed filled his screen — grainy footage showing the woman in the nurse’s uniform taking Elia’s hand near the gate.

“The main camera was wiped, but they missed the server backup from the library’s security feed,” Aron said quickly. “I installed a backdoor last month when I was bored. It gives me access to the raw data.”

“Freeze it. Zoom in on the window behind them,” Cailin said, leaning over his shoulder. She smelled of sickness and fear.

The badge was clearly fake. But caught in the reflection of the library window, just visible at the edge of the frame, was the gray van.

“Run the plate,” Cailin said.

“It’s stolen. Dead end,” Aron groaned.

“Wait — the smartwatch!” Davy shouted. “Elia did what we practiced! She must have hidden it on herself. The kidnapper never found it!”

A red dot appeared on the map of New York City, moving steadily westward.

“They’re heading to the docks,” Cailin said. “Pier 4.”

“Or they’re dumping her in the river,” Ashely whispered, her hand flying to her mouth.

Cailin snatched her car keys from the counter. “I’m going.”

“You cannot drive — you’re running a 103 fever and you were hallucinating an hour ago!” Ashely grabbed her arm. “You can barely stand!”

“Then drive me. Or I walk.” Cailin pulled free and stumbled, catching herself against the wall.

She stared at the map. The dot was moving fast. Traffic would swallow them whole — they would never reach the pier in time.

“We need more power,” Cailin said, going very still. “We need a blockade.”

She looked down at her phone. She scrolled to a contact she had sworn, on every instinct she possessed, she would never call for help.

Hilliard.

“We need the King,” she whispered.

She pressed call.

Chapter 134:

The boardroom was silent except for Hilliard’s voice. He was dismantling a competitor’s acquisition proposal with surgical precision.

“Your valuation is based on projected earnings that don’t exist,” he said, tossing the file onto the table.
“It’s garbage.”

His private phone sat face down on the mahogany surface. It buzzed.

He ignored it.

It buzzed again. And again — persistent, urgent, refusing to stop.

He frowned. He flipped it over.

Caller ID: Cali.

He held up one hand. “Pause.”

The room froze. Hilliard Holloway never paused a negotiation.

He answered. “Cailin? I’m in a meeting.”

“Hilliard...” Her voice came through the speaker broken and terrified — a sound he had never heard from her before. “Help me.”

Hilliard was on his feet before the words had fully landed. His chair scraped hard against the floor.
“What happened?”

“They took her. They took Elia.” She sobbed, and the sound tore straight through him.

“Who? When?” He turned and swept his hand at the room. “Out. Everyone out. Now.”

The executives gathered their papers and filed out, bewildered.

“A woman from the school,” Cailin gasped. “They are heading to the docks. She used a code word — only people close to us knew it.”

“Is it a ransom?” Hilliard was already moving toward the elevator, pulling his tie loose as he walked.

“No. I think... I think it’s Charla,” Cailin said.

Hilliard stopped dead in the hallway. “Charla.”

“She threatened to remove the obstacle. Hilliard, please. Save her.”

The confession hung between them in the silence. He had already known it somewhere beneath the surface — but hearing the desperation in her voice broke something open in him.

“Where are you?” he demanded.

“I’m tracking her GPS. I’m sending you the coordinates now.”

A ping landed on his phone. A live map. The red dot hovered near the Hudson River, still moving.

“I see it. I’m closer to the docks than you are.” He checked his watch. He could make it. “I’m going. Stay on the line.”

He called his security chief on his second line as he ran. “Code Red. Kidnapping in progress. Target is moving toward Pier 4 — gray van, stolen plates.”

“Sir, who is the target?” the chief asked. “Is it a company asset?”

The elevator doors opened to the garage. Hilliard bypassed the Maybach without breaking stride. Too slow. He needed the Aston Martin — the one he kept for the rare moments when raw speed was the only answer. He sprinted toward it.

“A child,” Hilliard said.

He pulled the door open and dropped into the seat.

“My family,” he finished.

He turned the key. The engine erupted — a roar of pure, barely contained aggression. He reversed out hard, tires screaming against the concrete, leaving black streaks across the garage floor.

“I’m coming, Cailin,” he said into the phone. “I’m coming.”

On the other end of the line, Cailin sagged against Ashely, the phone still pressed to her ear.

“He’s going,” she breathed.

Chapter 135:

A wave of desperate relief moved through her, so overwhelming it nearly took her legs out from under her. He had answered. The King was coming.

But as the echo of his promise faded, the cold arithmetic of the situation crashed back down — the distance, the traffic, the red dot moving steadily away from them on the screen.

Twenty minutes.

Twenty minutes was an eternity when her daughter's life hung in the balance.

Cailin grabbed her keys from the counter. The metal bit into her palm.

Ashely stepped in front of the door, her face pale, her eyes wide with a terror she was working hard to conceal for the boys' sake.

"You are burning up," she said, reaching for Cailin's arm. "You cannot drive. You will kill yourself before you get there."

Cailin shoved her aside — not a gentle nudge, but a push fueled by adrenaline and pure, animalistic desperation.

"Get out of my way," Cailin snarled.

"Signal lost!" Aron shouted from across the room.

Cailin went rigid. Her hand hovered over the doorknob. "What?"

“They entered a tunnel!” His fingers were a blur on the keyboard. “Midtown. We lost the lock on the watch.”

“Which tunnel?” Cailin spun around.

“Midtown Tunnel,” Davy said, typing furiously on his tablet. “The GPS just died. We don’t know which exit they’ll take.”

The room seemed to tilt. The fever simmering in Cailin’s blood roared back to life, turning the edges of her vision gray. If they lost the signal now, in the labyrinth of New York’s underground corridors, Elia was gone. Standard GPS wasn’t enough. Hilliard was fast, but he was blind. She needed eyes that could see through concrete.

She needed military-grade oversight.

She dialed the number.

It rang once.

“Cali?”

Kegan's voice was smooth and unhurried — the voice of a man who controlled everything within his reach.

"Kegan. I need the Eye. Now."

Cailin coughed — a wet, tearing sound that ripped through her lungs. She tasted copper.

The silence on the other end lasted less than a second. When Kegan spoke again, the warmth had left his voice entirely, replaced by the cold precision of a weapon being readied.

"What happened?"

"Someone took Elia. Midtown Tunnel. Gray van. Stolen plates."

Cailin pressed her shoulder against the doorframe, fighting to stay upright.

"Accessing. Hold on."

She heard rapid electronic clicking in the background — faster than any ordinary keyboard. Kegan wasn't just typing. He was executing commands on a secure terminal that bypassed public infrastructure entirely.

Cailin ran to the elevator. Ashely followed, snatching a coat and pulling the keys from Cailin's hand in a single motion.

"I'm driving," Ashely said. Her voice left no room for argument. "You navigate."

Cailin didn't fight her. She slumped into the passenger seat as the elevator doors slid shut.

"Got them," Kegan said. "They switched lanes inside the tunnel. They are exiting at 34th Street."

"Send the live feed to my phone," Cailin ordered.

"Done. Deploying resources." His voice dropped an octave, turning dark and deliberate. "Who took her?"

Cailin watched the floor numbers tick downward.

"Charla English."

Chapter 136:

She spat the name out like poison.

A pause followed. Heavy. Absolute.

“She is a dead woman walking,” Kegan said. “I’m launching the birds.”

The line went dead.

A second later, Cailin’s phone pinged. A map appeared — a red target box moving along 34th Street, tracked by a satellite feed refreshing in real time.

The garage doors opened. Ashely floored the accelerator and the car surged out into the sunlight, tires shrieking against the polished concrete.

Cailin pressed a hand to her chest. Her lungs felt packed with broken glass. Every breath was a deliberate act of will.

She fixed her eyes on the screen.

A blue dot was Hilliard. A green dot was them. The red box was the van.

The dots were converging.

“Faster, Ash,” Cailin whispered. “They’re heading for the industrial district.”

Ashely ran a red light, cutting hard around a taxi. “I’m trying!”

Cailin pressed her thumb lightly against the red box on the screen, as though she could reach through the glass.

“Don’t stop, baby,” she whispered. “Mommy is coming.”

The Aston Martin was a silver blur cutting through the sluggish arteries of Manhattan traffic.

Hilliard didn’t feel the steering wheel beneath his hands or the leather seat beneath him. He was a machine — an extension of the engine — driven by a single, terrifying directive.

Save her.

His phone, mounted on the dashboard, buzzed. A link from Ashely appeared on the screen.

He kept his eyes on the road. “Activate link. Project to HUD.”

The satellite feed filled the lower third of his windshield, a translucent map overlaid on the chaos of the city streets below.

“Good girl,” Hilliard muttered.

The red box was six blocks ahead. A wave of primal fury rolled through him. He had denied it, lied about it, buried it under legal technicalities and cold logic — but watching that small, vulnerable target move through his city ignited something in his gut that had nothing to do with logic. That child was his. His to protect.

He pressed a button on the steering wheel. “Gavin.”

“Sir, I have security teams mobilizing toward the docks.” Gavin’s voice was tight and breathless.

“Get the chopper ready. Now.” Hilliard swung into the oncoming lane to get around a bus. Horns erupted around him. He didn’t blink. “Airspace is restricted over the city because of the UN summit,” Gavin warned. “We can’t fly low.”

“Buy the airspace. I don’t care what it costs. Just fly.” Hilliard’s voice dropped to a controlled roar. “If you have to bribe the FAA, do it. Get eyes on that van.”

He hung up.

Across the city, in a darkened surveillance van parked one block from the English Estate, Gavin Thorne adjusted his headset. The Code Red protocol was fully active — Hilliard had stationed him here to monitor all communications in and out of the property, hunting for the thread of a conspiracy.

Chapter 137:

On his thermal feed, Charla paced her bedroom in a silk robe, a glass of wine in her hand, liquid sloshing over the rim and staining the white carpet red.

Her phone rang. Gavin patched the audio through instantly.

“Gretchen?” Charla answered, her nails digging into the phone case.

“We have a tail,” Gretchen’s voice was clipped. “A black SUV. Not police — they’re driving aggressive.”

Charla stopped pacing. Her reflection in the vanity stared back at her — pale, wide-eyed, unraveling.

“Lose them! Do not get caught!” she shrieked. “If they catch you with her, it’s over for both of us!”

“The kid is waking up,” Gretchen said flatly. “She’s making noise.” A muffled thump came through the line.

Charla's heart slammed against her ribs. If Hilliard found the girl — if he put it all together —

"Dispose of the package early," Charla said. The words tasted like bile. She forced them out anyway. "Don't wait for the boat."

"Here? In the city?" Gretchen hesitated. "That's messy."

"Just do it!" Charla's voice cracked. "Dump her in a dumpster! Burn the van! I don't care — just make her disappear!"

Gavin didn't freeze. His training engaged instantly. His fingers flew across a secondary console, isolating the audio clip and flagging it with a lethal-force marker. He opened a direct encrypted channel to Hilliard's car.

"Sir, I have confirmation. The order was just given to dispose of the package early. Charla's exact words — 'Just do it. Dump her in a dumpster.'"

Static crackled as Hilliard's car passed through a dead zone. "Gavin? Repeat — you're breaking up!"

"Kill order!" Gavin shouted into the mic. "She gave the kill order!"

The line dropped. Gavin slammed his fist on the console. The message had been sent. Whether it had been fully received, he didn't know.

On the thermal feed, he watched Charla catch a glimpse of a groundskeeper passing her open bedroom door. She startled — then recovered instantly.

"Ordering new shoes," Charla said into the phone, her voice lifting into a bright, airy performance. "The old ones are completely worn out. Throw them away."

The groundskeeper, oblivious, kept walking.

Charla kicked the door shut and leaned against it, gasping.

"Close call," she whispered.

She raised the phone back to her lips.

"Do it now," she hissed. "Kill her."

In the back of the gray van, Elia was still working the zip tie against the rusted screw.

Gretchen turned to look at the driver. “Pull over in the alley up ahead.”

“We’re doing it here?” the driver asked, eyes flicking to the rearview mirror.

“Boss says now.” Gretchen reached beneath her seat and drew out a heavy black pistol.

Elia saw the gun.

She stopped struggling. The tears dried on her cheeks in an instant.

She heard Cailin’s voice in her memory — calm and deliberate during their drills. If you see a gun, make yourself small. Hide.

Elia folded herself into a tight ball and pressed her body behind the spare tire well, making herself as invisible as she could.

The van slowed, banking sharply into a dark, trash-strewn alley.

Chapter 138:

Ashely swung the sedan hard into the alley entrance, tires smoking as they clawed for grip on the wet pavement.

The alley was empty.

Just overflowing trash cans, sodden cardboard, and the skittering of rats in the shadows.

“The dot said they were here!” Cailin didn’t wait for the car to stop. She threw her door open and stumbled out, her legs barely holding her as she hit the ground.

She forced them to move. She scanned the pavement — muddy from the morning rain.

Tire tracks. Fresh. Deep.

“Elia!” Her voice cracked off the brick walls and came back to her, unanswered.

She ran deeper into the alley.

Something glittered near a green dumpster. A flash of pink.

Cailin slowed. She moved toward it, her breath catching in her throat, and crouched down.

She picked it up.

A small pink sneaker. Light-up soles. Velcro straps.

Covered in something dark.

She touched it. Sticky. Red.

Blood.

“No,” Cailin whispered.

The sound that came out of her next wasn't a word. It was a scream — pure, animal grief that tore her throat raw. She dropped to her knees in the mud, pressing the shoe against her chest with both hands.

“No. No!”

Ashely reached her in seconds. She saw the shoe. She saw the blood. “Don't look,” she sobbed, trying to ease it away. “Cailin, don't look.”

"I'm too late." Cailin was hyperventilating, the world spinning and tilting around her. "They killed her. They killed my baby."

Police sirens wailed somewhere in the distance, drawing closer.

Cailin's phone buzzed in her pocket. She ignored it. She couldn't feel anything beyond the wet mud soaking through her knees and the shoe clutched in her hands.

It buzzed again. And again.

Ashely reached into her pocket and pulled it out. "It's Aron." She put it on speaker.

"Mom! The watch signal moved! It's not in the alley!" Aron's voice was pitched high, frantic.

Cailin's head snapped up. The sobbing stopped. "What?"

"The signal is moving again — and it's fast!" Aron shouted. "It's back on the main road!"

"She must have dropped the shoe to trick them, or she kicked it off!" Davy shouted from somewhere in the background.

Cailin looked at the shoe again. The blood was fresh, but there wasn't much of it — just a smear.

"Is the heart rate monitor active?" she demanded. Her voice had changed entirely. The grief was gone, burned away and replaced by something cold and lethal.

"Yes — 140 beats per minute," Aron confirmed. "She's scared, but she is alive, Mom. She's alive."

Cailin stood up. She wiped the mud from her knees, then wiped the blood from the sneaker against the rough fabric of the coat Ashely had thrown over her shoulders on the way out of the apartment.

"She left me a sign," Cailin said softly. "My smart girl."

A nosebleed. Elia always got nosebleeds when she was frightened or bumped. It wasn't a wound. It was a message.

"Where are they now?" Cailin got back into the car and pulled the door shut.

"Highway 95. Heading south," Aron directed.

Chapter 139:

Ashely floored the accelerator. "We can catch them."

As they peeled out of the alley, a silver blur roared past the entrance.

Hilliard.

He caught a glimpse of Cailin's car pulling out — and through the window, her face. Pale, fierce, and terrifying.

He threw a U-turn in the middle of the street, tires screaming, smoke billowing from the wheel wells, and came up alongside them.

"Follow me!" he called through his open window.

Cailin met his eyes and gave a single, sharp nod.

The convoy formed. The hunt was on.

Inside the trunk, it was pitch black.

The van jolted violently, throwing Elia against the metal wall. Her nose was still bleeding — a slow trickle that tasted of copper and salt. She sniffled and wiped it against her shoulder.

Her hands were zip-tied behind her back. But the bad lady had been in a hurry, and the tie wasn't pulled tight enough.

Elia worked her left hand. The sweat and the blood made her skin slippery. It hurt — a raw, scraping burn that made her eyes water. She gritted her teeth and kept pulling.

Pop.

Her hand came free.

She gasped, clutching her wrist and rubbing the feeling back into it. Then she tapped the face of her pink smartwatch. The screen glowed like a small star in the darkness.

"SOS mode," she whispered.

It auto-dialed Cailin.

In Ashely's car, the phone rang. Cailin snatched it up before the first ring had finished.

"Elia?" She put it on speaker immediately. "Elia, baby?"

Static. Then a tiny, trembling voice.

“Mommy?”

Cailin pressed her hand over her mouth. Tears ran hot and fast down her face.

“I’m here. I’m coming, baby. I’m right behind you.”

“I’m in the dark box,” Elia whispered. “It smells like fish.”

“Fish?” Cailin looked sharply at Ashely.

“The Marina,” Ashely said, tightening her grip on the wheel. “The old fish market near the docks.”

“Are you hurt?” Cailin leaned closer to the phone as though she could reach through it.

“My nose,” Elia sniffled. “And I lost my shoe. I kicked it at the bad lady.”

“That’s okay. You did so good,” Cailin said, keeping her voice steady with everything she had. “Keep the watch on. Don’t let them see it.”

Elia screamed.

“No!”

The call cut off.

“No!” Cailin screamed back at the dead phone.

“They’re at the docks!” Ashely shouted.

Cailin looked up through the windshield. Ahead, the gray van was exiting the highway, taking the sharp curve that dropped toward the waterfront. Hilliard’s Aston Martin cut across three lanes of traffic in a single fluid move, tailing it without hesitation.

“Ram them, Hilliard — don’t let them reach the water!” Cailin shouted, though she knew he couldn’t hear her.

Ashely pushed the sedan to its limit. The engine whined in protest, the chassis shuddering beneath them.

Cailin gripped the dashboard, her knuckles white.

“Don’t you dare fall asleep, Elia,” she whispered. “Stay awake for me.”

Chapter 140:

The maternal instinct driving her had stopped feeling like an emotion. It was a physical force now — a burning pressure behind her sternum that made every breath feel too small.

She reached down and unclipped her seatbelt.

“What are you doing?” Ashely’s eyes cut to her, sharp with alarm.

“Get me close,” Cailin said. Her hand found the door handle. “If we hit traffic, I run.”

The gray van smashed through the wooden security arm of the marina gate, sending splinters spinning into the air.

Hilliard was right behind it.

He watched the back doors of the van, the dented bumper, the distance closing between them. He could ram them. He could end this right now.

But Elia was inside.

He hesitated — just a fraction of a second.

It was enough. The van drifted hard around a corner, tires screaming, and tore straight toward the piers.

Something sharp and foreign twisted in Hilliard's chest. Not a physical injury. Panic. Pure, unfiltered terror unlike anything he had ever felt — not when his stock crashed, not when his parents threatened to strip him of everything, not even the night Cailin walked out. This was different. This was primal.

"Hold on, kid," he said through clenched teeth.

The van skidded to a stop at the far end of the pier.

Gretchen jumped out and hauled Elia from the back doors. Elia came out fighting — a whirlwind of kicking legs and snapping teeth.

"Let me go!"

Gretchen slapped her. The crack carried cleanly over the water.

“Shut up!”

Hilliard saw it through his windshield.

The world narrowed to a single point. He saw red.

He swung the Aston Martin sideways in a controlled drift, blocking the only exit from the pier. Gretchen spun around. She understood immediately that she was trapped.

She raised the gun and aimed it directly at Hilliard’s windshield.

Hilliard didn’t duck. He didn’t swerve.

He accelerated.

Bang.

The ballistic windshield erupted into a spiderweb of opaque white cracks from the point of impact, the pane holding together but turning the view ahead into something like trying to see through a frozen waterfall.

He kept coming. He was a tank.

Gretchen broke. The car wasn't stopping. She grabbed Elia by the hair and dragged her backward to the very edge of the dock, the black water churning below them.

"Back off or she goes in!" Gretchen screamed.

Hilliard hit the brakes.

The car skidded and smoked to a stop ten feet away. He kicked the door open and stepped out. Shards of tempered glass from the shattered side window cascaded from his suit like scattered diamonds. Blood traced a thin line down his face.

He raised both hands, open and empty.

"Let her go," he said. His voice was calm — terrifyingly, impossibly calm. "Take the car. Take my wallet. Every card in it. Take all of it."

“I want your life!” Gretchen laughed — a high, brittle sound. Her eyes were blown wide, swimming with adrenaline and fear.