

Second chance 141

Chapter 141:

Ashely's car screeched to a halt behind the Aston Martin. Cailin was out before it fully stopped, stumbling as her feet hit the ground and catching herself against the hood. Ashely stayed behind the wheel, one hand on her phone with Aron still on the line, the other gripping the steering wheel — ready to move the car as a weapon or an escape route at a moment's notice.

Cailin looked up.

She saw Elia, dangling over the dark, churning water.

She saw Hilliard, standing in the open with his hands raised, making himself a target.

"Don't you touch her!" Cailin screamed, running forward.

"Stay back!" Gretchen swung the gun in a wide, erratic arc between Hilliard and Cailin, then back to Elia. Her grip was shaking. Her eyes darted everywhere at once.

A standoff at the edge of the world.

"I said back off!" Gretchen pressed the barrel of the gun against Elia's temple.

Cailin froze. Her breath came in short, ragged bursts. Every instinct screamed at her to lunge forward, but the gun was too close.

Hilliard moved slowly, stepping sideways to place his body between Gretchen and Cailin.

“You want money? I can wire you five million right now,” he said, his eyes locked on Gretchen, never wavering. “Five million. Instant transfer. You walk away and disappear.”

Gretchen’s eyes widened. The gun wavered.

Five million.

“Phone,” she said. “Now.”

Hilliard reached into his pocket with deliberate care.

A roar erupted from beneath the pier — a speedboat engine, idling and waiting.

“Too late, rich boy,” Gretchen sneered.

She didn't shoot. She shoved.

"No!" Cailin lunged, hands grasping at empty air.

Gretchen pushed Elia off the edge. Cailin screamed.

There was no splash.

Thud.

Elia hit the deck of the waiting boat below and crumpled, groaning, curling into herself.

Gretchen dropped after her, landing in a fluid crouch on the boat's seats. "Go! Go!"

The engine exploded to full throttle. The boat tore away, churning the water into a boiling white wake.

Cailin reached the edge of the pier and seized a wooden piling, splinters biting into her palms as she stared helplessly at the shrinking vessel.

“They have a boat!” She spun toward Hilliard, grabbing his arm. “Hilliard — they have a boat!”

Hilliard scanned the marina. Yachts filled every slip, but they were locked down and moored tight.

“There!” He pointed.

Three slips down, a sleek black powerboat idled quietly while a mechanic in grease-stained coveralls wiped down its dashboard.

Hilliard ran. He didn’t ask.

He grabbed the mechanic by the collar and moved him firmly onto the dock.

“Hey!” The mechanic stumbled back, arms windmilling.

“I’m commandeering this vessel! Holloway Group will compensate you in full!” Hilliard dropped into the captain’s seat.

Cailin landed in the boat right behind him, hitting awkwardly, her injured hip flaring white-hot with pain. She ignored it completely.

“You stay here!” Hilliard ordered, pushing the ignition.

“Drive the boat!” Cailin screamed, already tearing the mooring rope free with frantic hands. “I am not leaving her!”

Hilliard slammed the throttle forward.

The bow reared up. The engine bellowed. They shot out of the slip like a bullet, chasing the white wake across the darkening water.

Kegan’s voice crackled through Cailin’s phone, which she still held pressed to her ear like a lifeline.

“I see them. They are heading for international waters. My fleet is moving to intercept.”

Chapter 142:

“Don’t let them cross the line,” Cailin said, wiping sea spray from her face with the back of her hand. “If they reach the ship, she is gone forever.”

The wind whipped Cailin’s hair across her face, stinging her eyes. She gripped the metal railing with both hands, her knuckles bone-white.

The ocean was rough. The boat slammed against each wave, the impact jarring through her body like a hammer blow.

Hilliard navigated the water as though he had been born to it, reading the swells before they arrived and cutting through them at angles that shed precious seconds off the distance. They were closing the gap. The kidnapper's boat was smaller and weighed down by fuel and three people.

Gretchen looked back. She saw them gaining.

She raised the gun.

Ping.

A bullet sparked off the metal rail inches from Cailin's hand.

"Get down!" Hilliard threw one arm out and shoved her toward the deck without taking his eyes off the water.

"I'm going to ram them," he announced, his face carved from stone.

"Elia is on that boat!" Cailin screamed.

“I’ll clip the engine. Trust me.”

He steered hard to the right, riding the crest of a swell, then cut sharply left. The bow of their boat angled for the stern of the fleeing vessel.

Crunch.

Wood and fiberglass shattered with a sickening, hollow sound. The kidnapper’s engine belched smoke and died. Their boat spun wildly on the surface, completely dead in the water.

Gretchen lost her footing. She stumbled, arms wheeling for balance.

The gun flew from her hand, skidded across the wet deck, and disappeared into the dark water below.

“Yes!” Cailin hauled herself upright.

But Gretchen wasn’t finished. She reached into her boot and drew a knife. In the same motion she seized Elia, pulling the child hard against her chest.

Hilliard circled the dead boat slowly, deliberately, his wake rocking it in violent lurches. He grabbed a megaphone from the dashboard.

“Give us the child!” His voice boomed across the open water.

“Back off or I cut her!” Gretchen pressed the blade against Elia’s throat.

Elia was crying — high, terrified sobs that carried clearly over the sound of the waves.

“Mommy!”

Cailin stood up, ignoring Hilliard’s sharp command to stay down.

“Look at me, Gretchen!” she shouted across the water. “I am the one you want! Let her go — take me instead!”

“You are nobody!” Gretchen spat back. “Charla wants you dead!”

Hilliard went perfectly still.

Charla.

He had heard it. Clear as a bell, cutting straight through the sound of the ocean and the wind. Every remaining doubt dissolved in that instant.

Then shadows fell across the water.

Three black tactical boats materialized from the mist, moving in silent formation like sharks rising to the surface. They bore no markings. They moved like something military.

Kegan's fleet.

They closed in from three directions, forming a perfect ring around the dead boat.

"Surrender." The voice that came from the lead vessel was amplified and distorted — enormous, almost inhuman — filling the air above the water like the voice of something inevitable.

The circle was complete.

Chapter 143:

While the drama unfolded at sea, Charla sat in the living room of the English Estate watching a live news feed on her tablet. A local station's helicopter circled high above the marina, broadcasting grainy aerial footage of the chase.

The chyron across the bottom of the screen read: CHAOS AT CITY MARINA — POLICE INVESTIGATING POSSIBLE GANG ACTIVITY.

Vague. Perfect.

Jeraldine Holloway sat in the armchair across from her, watching with the composed satisfaction of someone reviewing a board meeting that was going as planned. “No one knows who is on those boats. As long as it stays that way, you have plausible deniability.”

“It’s not enough,” Charla said, her voice unsteady. She picked up a burner phone and dialed the tip line for a notorious online tabloid. When the line connected, she pitched her voice high and breathless, barely recognizable. “I have an anonymous tip. The woman in that boat with Hilliard Holloway — she’s his stalker. Cailin Morton. She kidnapped that little girl. Hilliard is trying to save her.”

Out on the water, Kegan’s mercenaries were closing the ring.

Gretchen saw the black boats. She saw the red laser sights dancing across her chest like something inevitable.

She understood what it meant.

“I am not going to jail!” she screamed.

She looked at Hilliard. She looked at the boats. She made her calculation.

She dragged Elia to the railing. "If I go down, she goes down with me!"

"Drop the knife!" a mercenary shouted from the lead boat.

Gretchen pressed Elia against herself, using the child as a human shield. Her eyes were everywhere at once.

Hilliard maneuvered his boat carefully alongside, the two hulls grinding together.

"Gretchen! Look at me!" His voice broke open — the authority stripped away, nothing underneath but raw desperation. "I will get you a lawyer. I will pay you whatever you name. Just give me the girl. Please."

Gretchen wavered. The offer was real. She could see it in his face.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. She glanced down at the screen.

A text from Charla.

Kill her or I kill your family. I know where your son goes to school.

Gretchen read it twice. The color drained from her face. She looked at Elia — and for just a moment, something human flickered behind her eyes. Pity. Brief and genuine.

“Sorry, kid,” Gretchen whispered. “It’s you or my son.”

She lifted Elia up over the railing.

“No!” Cailin scrambled onto the bow, her vision already breaking apart at the edges from the fever and the exertion, her legs barely beneath her.

Gretchen let go.

The splash was swallowed by the waves before it finished.

Cailin didn’t think. She didn’t pause. Her burning lungs screamed in protest as she threw herself from the bow — a final, absolute act of will from a body that was already beginning to shut down.

She hit the water.

Hilliard was in the air a second behind her.

The ocean took them all.

Cold.

A bone-crushing, lung-freezing cold that slammed the air from Cailin's body the instant she hit the water.

Chapter 144:

She forced her eyes open in the murky green dark. Salt burned her vision. Below her, sinking steadily, was a pink shape — Elia's jacket.

She kicked downward. Her lungs, already ravaged by pneumonia, ignited with pain. The single powerful movement was everything her body had left to give.

She reached out. Her fingers brushed nylon.

She closed her hand around Elia's arm just as the edges of the world began to go black.

Elia was unconscious, her mouth open, her eyes closed, utterly still.

Cailin pulled her close — but she had nothing left to kick with. The cold had seized her muscles completely. She wasn't swimming anymore. She was sinking, and she was taking Elia with her.

A strong arm closed around her waist.

Hilliard.

He pulled them both toward the surface with powerful, deliberate strokes, fighting the current the entire way.

They broke through.

Cailin sucked in one raw, ragged breath — and then her head fell back and the darkness took her.

"I've got you! I've got you!" Hilliard shouted, treading water hard, keeping both of them above the surface with his body alone.

A black boat pulled alongside. Hands reached down. Mercenaries hauled them onto the deck.

Cailin crumpled onto the wet fiberglass and lay completely still. Hilliard didn't pause. He laid Elia flat on the deck and dropped to his knees over her, his hands finding her chest, his rhythm immediate and precise.

"Come on. Breathe!"

He pumped her small chest. His hands were shaking, but the rhythm held. A medic rushed to Cailin's side, pressing two fingers to her neck.

"She's breathing, but it's shallow — hypothermic shock!" the medic shouted.

Hilliard didn't hear him. There was nothing in his world but the small, still form beneath his hands.

He tilted Elia's head back and breathed for her. Once. Again.

A cough. A retch.

Elia vomited seawater and gasped — a beautiful, ragged, terrified cry that filled the deck and kept going.

Hilliard sat back on his heels. The relief that moved through him was so complete and so sudden that he nearly went down with it, his whole body dropping its weight at once.

He reached forward and brushed the wet hair from her face. A medic was already there, gently cutting away Elia's soaked jacket and wrapping her in a thermal blanket. As the wet fabric was peeled away, the back of her shirt rode up with it.

Hilliard went still.

There, on the right side of her lower back just above her hip — revealed fully now, unmistakably, under the harsh swinging light of the deck lamp — was a birthmark.

A perfect crescent moon.

The Holloway Moon.

He stared at it. This was no glimpse stolen through shadows, no trick of poor light or wishful thinking. It was stark and absolute — the same mark he had seen on his father, on himself, on every photograph of every Holloway going back three generations.

The biological brand that declared exactly who she was.

Chapter 145:

The noise around him — the helicopter overhead, the slap of waves against the hull, Elia's fading cries — receded to nothing.

He looked over at Cailin's unconscious form lying a few feet away on the deck.

The sound of boots hitting fiberglass broke through. Kegan landed on the deck from his boat, moving fast. He straightened and scanned the scene.

His eyes found Hilliard.

Then they dropped to the birthmark.

Then back to Hilliard.

He understood immediately what he was seeing.

Medics swarmed the deck, moving with practiced efficiency. Cailin was wrapped in thermal blankets immediately, an oxygen mask fitted over her face. Hilliard ignored the medic trying to examine him and stumbled toward Elia, who was coughing up seawater, her small body shaking violently.

Cailin, barely conscious, fought against the hands trying to hold her still. "Elia," she rasped — a ghost of a sound through the oxygen mask. She dragged herself across the wet deck on her hands and knees, ignoring the screaming pain in her hip and the fire tearing through her lungs, until she reached the child's side.

She shoved her own soaked coat aside and pulled the thermal foil tighter around Elia's shoulders. Her hands moved over the girl with a frantic, practiced knowledge — checking pulse, breathing, pupils — that made Hilliard's blood run cold.

"Mommy... cold..." Elia's teeth chattered, the sound sharp and relentless.

"I know, baby. I know. I'm here." Cailin pressed her lips to Elia's forehead again and again, her wet hair plastering against the child's skin. "You're safe. I've got you."

A shadow fell across them.

Hilliard stood over them, dripping, his bespoke suit ruined and clinging to a frame that had gone rigid with a terrible, dawning clarity. He watched the way Cailin's hands moved over Elia — the way she curved her own shaking body around the child like a shell. It wasn't merely protective. It was possessive. Primal.

"Is she okay?" His voice came out rough, as though it had been dragged over gravel.

Cailin didn't acknowledge him. Her entire world had contracted to the shivering child in front of her. "I need more blankets! Now!" she screamed at one of Kegan's men, her voice cracking at the edges.

"Cailin." Hilliard stepped closer. His hand closed around her upper arm — warm, shockingly warm against her ice-cold skin.

She flinched and tore her arm away as if burned. “Don’t touch me,” she hissed, her eyes never leaving Elia.

He didn’t retreat. He shifted, planting himself in her path as she reached for the medical kit. “You jumped into the ocean. You have pneumonia. You could have died.”

“I didn’t think,” Cailin said, her focus absolute, her fingers tucking a wet strand of hair gently behind Elia’s ear.

“Exactly,” Hilliard said, his voice dropping to a low and dangerous register. “You didn’t think. You just reacted.” He crouched, bringing his face level with hers. Water dripped from his hair and landed on her cheek, mixing with the salt spray already there. “Why? Why risk your life like that for Ashely’s daughter?”

Chapter 146:

The lie hung between them — thin, tattered, barely holding its shape.

Cailin went still. Her heart slammed against her ribs like something caged. She had moved too fast, too desperately. The dive had said everything that five years of careful silence had worked to conceal.

“She is a child, Hilliard!” Cailin snapped, forcing herself to hold his gaze. “Anyone would have done it. You did it.”

"I did it because I felt responsible," Hilliard said, his eyes moving across her face with the slow, methodical precision of someone reading a document for hidden meaning. "But you? You moved before she even hit the water. You moved like you were tethered to her."

He reached out again, this time closing his fingers around her chin, tilting her face upward. His grip was firm. Deliberate.

"Your eyes," he said quietly, studying them from inches away. "They are the same. The shape. The color. It isn't just a resemblance, Cailin. It's a mirror."

Cailin's breath caught. She drove her palm against his wet chest, pushing his hand away. "You are delusional. The cold is affecting your judgment. You're seeing things that aren't there because you feel guilty."

Hilliard didn't move. He was a wall of muscle and certainty. "Tell me the truth," he said, his voice dropping to a low growl. "Right now."

Elia coughed — a deep, wet, wrenching sound that brought up a final stream of seawater onto the deck.

The spell broke instantly. Cailin turned away from him and gathered Elia close, her hand moving in slow circles across the girl's back. Hilliard watched. He couldn't stop watching.

Then he noticed her other hand — the way her thumb moved automatically across the bare skin of her ring finger. A ghost of a gesture, unconscious and unguarded. She had done the same thing years ago when she was nervous, when she was lost in thought, when she was his.

The birthmark. The eyes. The dive.

Logic and instinct were at war inside him, but his instinct was winning — screaming the truth so loudly now that it was drowning out everything else.

“We are going to have a long talk,” Hilliard said quietly, rising to his feet.

He didn’t go anywhere. He stood over them like a sentinel, watching a woman he was slowly, irreversibly realizing he had never truly known at all.

As the medics moved Elia to a more sheltered part of the deck, Hilliard pulled Cailin into the narrow gangway between the cabin and the rail. The space was intimate, claustrophobic, with nowhere to retreat.

“Is she mine?”

The question hung in the salt air, heavy and absolute.

A wave of nausea moved through Cailin that had nothing to do with the sea. She looked at Hilliard — really looked at him. He was a wreck. His eyes were red-rimmed, his lips edged with blue from the cold, but the intensity behind his gaze was a fire capable of burning everything down to get an answer.

Chapter 147:

She remembered Jeraldine Holloway's words from five years ago. You are an incubator, Cailin. Nothing more. She remembered Hilliard's cold indifference, his immediate assumption that she had been after his money. She could not let him have Elia. Not now. Not ever.

"No," Cailin said. She pressed every ounce of remaining steel she possessed into that single word. "She is not yours."

"Don't lie to me, Cailin," Hilliard warned, closing the distance between them. His body heat was a palpable force against the cold air surrounding them.

"You saw the DNA test — you ran it yourself!" Cailin's voice shook but didn't break. "Zero percent match. Do you trust your own science or not?"

Hilliard faltered. The lab report had been conclusive. Horizon Medical was his facility. The chain of custody had been entirely within his control. The certainty in his eyes wavered for just a fraction of a second.

"Tests can be faked," he said, his mind reaching for the loophole — some way to make his gut and the hard data align.

"By who?" Cailin threw her hands up. "You control everything. You hired the lab. You set the timeline. You supervised every step. Who in the world has the power to trick Hilliard Holloway inside his own kingdom?"

He fell silent.

Logic told him she was right. And that was the thing that frightened him most.

“Why do you even care?” Cailin pressed her advantage, deflecting the heat. “You have Charla. You have your perfect fiancée waiting for you at home.”

“This isn’t about Charla,” Hilliard snapped, raking a hand through his wet hair.

“It is entirely about Charla!” Cailin thrust a trembling finger toward the wreckage of Gretchen’s boat drifting in the distance. “Her name was on the rental agreement. Her employee tried to murder a child. And you — you have stood by that woman for years.”

“Charla didn’t know,” Hilliard said. The words landed flat — the reflexive defense of a man reciting a line he no longer believed himself.

“It was a rogue employee,” he added.

Cailin laughed — a bitter, hollow sound that collapsed almost immediately into a hacking cough. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “You are blind,” she said. “You always were.”

“Someone could have stolen her identity to frame her,” Hilliard insisted. Even as he said it, the words felt like tissue paper held against a fire — a flimsy barrier against the chasm of betrayal cracking open beneath his feet.

Cailin looked at him, and the disappointment settling in her chest was heavier than the ocean water she had swallowed. Even now. Even here, with a child barely breathing on the deck behind them, he was constructing excuses for that woman.

“You deserve her, Hilliard,” Cailin whispered, turning away. “You really do.”

“Cailin, wait.” He reached for her, something that looked almost like guilt crossing his face.

A loud horn cut through the air.

Chapter 148:

A sleek white luxury yacht was carving through the waves toward their position, moving fast. The name painted along its stern in gold script was unmistakable: The English Rose. Kegan’s men on the tactical boat raised their weapons instantly — then stood down just as fast at a sharp word from Kegan over their comms. He was letting the snake into the pit.

Cailin followed Hilliard’s gaze.

Standing at the bow, gripping the railing and wearing an expression of perfectly staged devastation beneath a white cashmere wrap, was Charla English.

“Hilliard! Hilliard!” she screamed, waving both arms as though she were the cavalry arriving to save the day.

Cailin’s hands curled into fists at her sides. The audacity. The sheer, breathtaking evil of it.

“Speak of the devil,” she said.

The English Rose pulled alongside the tactical boat, its crew hastily deploying a gangway. Before it was even fully secured, Charla rushed across it, her heels clicking precariously on the wet metal.

“Oh my God! Hilliard, are you okay? Is the child okay?” she sobbed, her face arranged into an expression of practiced terror.

She threw her arms around Hilliard’s wet, shivering frame. “I was so worried! Gretchen’s boat had a silent alarm linked to my phone. I saw the alert and came as fast as I could!”

Hilliard stood rigid, his arms at his sides. He let her cling to him, his eyes cold and analytical, watching the performance with a chilling stillness. He was reconciling the woman in his arms with the kill order Gavin had confirmed.

Cailin watched from beneath her blanket, shivering, a fresh wave of nausea rising in her throat.

“How could this happen?” Charla pulled back and dabbed a perfectly formed tear from her cheek. “I will sue the rental company. They let a maniac take our boat!”

She turned her gaze to Cailin, her expression shifting seamlessly into one of deep, theatrical sympathy. “Cali, I am so sorry. I can’t imagine how frightened you must have been.” Charla took a step toward her, extending a manicured hand as if to offer comfort.

Cailin snapped.

Five years of rage — every lonely night, every lie, every moment of fear compressed into a single instant — detonated.

Smack.

She slapped Charla’s hand away, the sound cutting across the water sharper than the wind. The motion cost her; a wave of dizziness crashed through her and she stumbled backward, catching herself against the cabin wall.

“Don’t touch me, you murderer,” Cailin said. Her voice was deadly calm but thin, barely holding its shape.

Charla gasped. She stumbled back, eyes wide with mock horror. Then, with the grace of a trained performer, she glanced down, located a rope cleat bolted to the deck, and stepped deliberately into it.

She went down with a cry, clutching her leg. “Ah! My ankle!”

“Charla!” Hilliard was already moving toward her, his face tight with concern.

“She pushed me! Hilliard, she pushed me!” Charla wept. “I was only trying to help!”

Hilliard looked up at Cailin, his brow drawing into a hard, accusing line. “What is wrong with you? She came here to help.”

“She fell on her own,” Cailin said, her voice flat with exhaustion. “It’s an act, Hilliard. It has always been an act.”

Chapter 149:

“You are hysterical.” He knelt and ran his hands carefully along Charla’s ankle. “Look at her — she’s hurt.”

Charla winced with exquisite precision. “It hurts so much, Hilly.”

Hilliard rose and turned to Cailin, his shadow falling over her like a shroud. “Apologize to her,” he said, his voice dropping to something cold and final.

Cailin looked at him. She looked at the man defending the woman who had ordered their child thrown into the ocean, and felt something inside her chest go out — quietly, completely, like a flame starved of air.

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“Apologize?” A broken laugh escaped her. “To the woman who tried to kill my —” She cut herself off, her breath catching hard in her throat.

“Stop making baseless accusations and apologize!” Hilliard thundered.

The air began to vibrate.

A rhythmic thumping descended from above, growing louder by the second, close enough now to churn the water around the boat into a churning white circle. A black military helicopter — sleek and utterly without markings — hovered directly overhead, its downdraft whipping Charla’s hair across her face and tearing at everyone’s clothes.

A rope ladder dropped from the open side door and struck the deck with a heavy, deliberate thud.

Kegan Aguirre descended. He moved with the contained efficiency of someone who had done this many times, landing on the deck like a man arriving precisely where he intended to be. He wore full tactical gear, his face a mask of cold, absolute fury. He unclipped from the line and walked directly toward them.

"I suggest," Kegan said, his voice amplified through a speaker system that cut cleanly through the roar of the rotors overhead, "that you step away from her, Holloway."

Kegan didn't stop until he was standing between Cailin and Hilliard — a physical barrier of muscle and barely contained menace. His mercenaries, who had been holding the perimeter, tightened their circle, weapons low but ready.

Hilliard didn't move to shield Charla. He stood frozen for half a second, his mind a battlefield of conflicting data: the kill order Gavin had confirmed versus the frantic woman who had just arrived on a private yacht. He was a CEO, and this was an unacceptable variable in a hostile situation.

"This is a private matter, Aguirre. You have no jurisdiction here."

"And that is my woman you were just shouting at," Kegan said, his voice dropping to a low growl as he pointed a gloved finger at Cailin.

Cailin didn't look at Hilliard. She walked past him as though he were a ghost — limping slightly, her chin up — and went directly to Kegan's side. He immediately wrapped his heavy tactical coat around her trembling shoulders.

"Are you hurt?" Kegan asked, his voice dropping to something quiet and only for her.

"Just get me out of here," Cailin whispered, pressing her face into his vest.

Hilliard felt a sharp, acidic stab of jealousy — visceral and ugly — twist through his gut.

“She is my wife, Aguirre.”

Chapter 150:

“Ex-wife,” Kegan corrected, his eyes cold as bare metal. “And soon to be nothing to you at all.”

“She assaulted Charla!” Hilliard announced, his voice pitched as a public accusation — the only narrative he had left to stand on.

Kegan laughed. It was a dark, humorless sound that somehow managed to be more threatening than silence.

“You think Cali pushed her?” He looked down at Charla, who was still on the deck, nursing her ankle with a carefully maintained expression of suffering.

Charla shrank back. Kegan’s presence alone had a weight to it that made the space around him feel smaller. “She did! She’s completely out of her mind!”

Kegan reached into his vest and produced a ruggedized tablet. He tapped the screen and turned it toward Hilliard.

“My bird sees everything,” he said simply. “Show him the thermal feed.”

The screen displayed high-contrast footage from the helicopter’s thermal camera — crisp, unambiguous, ruthlessly clear. Three heat signatures on the deck. Cailin standing still. Charla stepping backward, glancing deliberately down at the rope cleat, and then throwing herself to the fiberglass with practiced precision. There was no push. There was barely any contact at all.

Hilliard watched the footage to the end. He didn’t freeze. His expression didn’t crumble. It simply hardened — glacially, absolutely — into the face he wore when a situation had been definitively resolved. It was math. It was physics. It was the truth laid flat.

He looked down at Charla.

“You lied.” Not a question. A verdict.

“I — I tripped! It was an accident! The deck is slippery and I was frightened!” Charla stammered, the color draining from her face as she realized precisely how deep the trap had closed around her.

Hilliard looked at Cailin. He saw the contempt in her eyes. He saw the exhaustion behind it. And he saw, with a clarity that arrived too late to be useful, the finality of a woman who had already turned away from him long before this moment.

He took a deliberate step away from Charla, opening a chasm of space between them. “I am done with your games.”

He turned back to Cailin and reached out. "Cailin, I —"

Before his fingers could brush her coat, Kegan stepped into the space between them and shoved Hilliard back with a force that sent him stumbling across the wet fiberglass.

"You don't get to talk to her," Kegan said, his eyes carrying a lethal quiet that was somehow more dangerous than shouting.

The adrenaline, the betrayal, the jealousy, and five years of unresolved fury all ignited at once in Hilliard's chest. He could not be manhandled by a mercenary in front of his wife. His pride would not allow it.

"Stay out of this, Aguirre!" Hilliard roared, and lunged forward.

Kegan didn't step back.

His right fist came around in a brutal, precise arc and connected squarely with Hilliard's jaw.

Hilliard tasted blood. He wiped his lip with the back of his hand and charged, tackling Kegan around the waist like a linebacker.