

Second chance 151

Chapter 151:

They crashed into a stack of supply crates, sending plastic containers skittering across the deck. It was not a clean, disciplined fight — it was a messy, furious brawl between two powerful men driven by years of rivalry and something far older than reason.

Hilliard drove his fist into Kegan's ribs, fueled by a white-hot jealousy that was eating him from the inside out. Kegan was holding her. Kegan was protecting her. Kegan knew her secrets.

Cailin stood back, clutching Elia — whom a medic had brought out wrapped in a thick blanket — against her chest.

"Stop it! Both of you!" she screamed, but her voice dissolved into the wind and the roar of the helicopter overhead.

Kegan drove a sharp knee into Hilliard's stomach, folding him in half. Hilliard, enraged, grabbed Kegan's collar and slammed him back against the boat's railing. Kegan's mercenaries raised their rifles — and froze at a single sharp, almost imperceptible shake of his head. He wanted to finish this man-to-man.

"She doesn't love you," Kegan said, spitting blood onto the deck. "She fears you."

"She is my wife!" Hilliard roared, and swung again.

“She is the mother of my children!” Kegan’s voice boomed across the water — a verbal grenade, perfectly placed, designed to detonate everything.

Hilliard’s fist stopped in mid-air.

My children. The words wouldn’t process. The DNA test. Kegan. The numbers refused to add up.

Kegan used the half-second of paralysis to sweep Hilliard’s legs. Hilliard hit the deck hard, the impact driving the air from his lungs and sending a white flash of pain through his ribs.

Kegan stood over him, chest heaving, wiping blood from his nose with the back of a gloved hand.

“Look at her, Holloway,” he said, and pointed.

Hilliard pushed himself up on one elbow, his ribs screaming. He looked.

Cailin was not looking at him. She had buried her face in Elia’s hair and was leaning against one of Kegan’s mercenaries for support, her body curved around the child, her eyes closed. She looked hollowed out — worn down by his accusations, by his blind and relentless defense of Charla, by all of it.

Her posture said defeat. Her choice of where to stand said something far more permanent.

“Take them to the chopper,” Kegan ordered his men.

“Cailin!” Hilliard tried to rise. The pain stopped him.

Cailin paused at the edge of the deck, near the rescue basket waiting to hoist them up. She turned and looked back at him — sprawled on the wet fiberglass, bleeding, surrounded by the wreckage of everything he had chosen.

Her eyes were still. No anger. No love. No hate. Only a vast, quiet distance that no amount of money or power could cross.

“Goodbye, Hilliard.”

She climbed into the basket with Elia and did not look back again.

Hilliard lay on the deck and watched them ascend, the cable retracting steadily into the belly of the black machine until they disappeared. He was left behind with the liar he had chosen over her, the wind, and the sound of the water.

His heart didn’t simply break. It shattered.

The helicopter disappeared into the night sky, its lights fading like dying stars.

Chapter 152:

Hilliard wiped the blood from his lip and rose slowly, his body a catalogue of pain. But the physical ache was a dull echo compared to the wound that had opened in his chest.

He turned to Charla.

She had scrambled away from the fight and was back on the deck, nursing her supposedly injured ankle with a practiced expression of suffering. She watched him approach with wide, fearful eyes. She had seen the fight. She had seen the thermal footage. She had seen him reach for Cailin — too late.

“Hilliard, baby, let me explain,” she began, her voice carefully unsteady.

“Get up,” he said quietly.

“I can’t — my ankle! It’s genuinely hurt!” she whimpered, reaching for him.

“The video showed you taking a dive worthy of an Oscar.” His voice rose, the sound filling the open air like a thunderclap. “You are fine. Get up.”

Charla scrambled to her feet, her limp miraculously absent. She backed away, both hands raised.

“See?” Hilliard said. “A miracle.” The laugh that came out of him was hollow and bitter and humorless.

Kegan walked over from where he had been waiting for a second transport, flanked by two of his guards. His expression was the studied indifference of a man closing out a transaction.

“You want to know who gave the final order?” he asked Hilliard. He nudged a bound figure lying near the cabin with the toe of his boot — Gretchen, gagged and zip-tied, her eyes tracking them from the deck.

One of Kegan’s men pulled the gag free.

“Tell him,” Kegan said.

“It was Charla!” Gretchen’s voice came out raw and immediate, desperation stripping away any attempt at composure. “She paid me fifty thousand. She said to kill the kid. She said ‘make her disappear’ — those were her exact words!”

“She’s lying!” Charla shrieked. “She’s a criminal trying to bargain her way out! Don’t listen to her!”

Kegan didn’t argue. He didn’t respond at all. He simply reached back, closed his hand around the collar of Charla’s expensive white dress, and began walking her toward the railing.

Charla's heels scraped uselessly against the fiberglass. "No! Hilliard, help me! He's going to kill me! Hilliard!"

Hilliard stepped forward. It was muscle memory — an impulse written into him over years of protecting her without question.

Then he stopped.

He saw Cailin's dead eyes looking back at him from the rescue basket. He felt the weight of Elia's small body sinking in the dark water. He heard Gavin's voice reading back the kill order, word for word.

He said nothing. He stayed where he was. He watched.

Kegan lifted Charla without apparent effort and threw her over the rail.

The shriek was cut short the instant she hit the water.

Kegan turned back to Hilliard, brushing his gloved hands together with an air of finality. "She can swim. Or not. My business here is done."

Hilliard walked to the railing and looked down. Charla was thrashing in the wake below, screaming, her white dress blooming around her in the dark water like a drowning flower. He watched her for a long, silent moment.

Chapter 153:

He turned to his security detail, which had just pulled alongside on a secondary vessel.

“Pull her out,” he told his captain, his voice completely stripped of feeling. “Then call the police. I want her charged with conspiracy to commit murder.”

He turned his back on the railing, on the screaming, on everything behind him.

He didn’t look back.

Inside the helicopter, the rotor noise was a deafening, unrelenting thrum that vibrated deep in Cailin’s bones.

She shivered uncontrollably beneath three thick wool blankets. The heater was blasting at full strength, but the cold wasn’t on her skin anymore — it had settled somewhere deeper, a cellular chill that no external warmth could reach.

On the stretcher beside her, Elia slept, sedated by the medic. Her small chest rose and fell in a slow, steady rhythm.

Safe.

Kegan sat across from Cailin, her hand locked in both of his. His grip was firm and grounding against the vibrating chaos surrounding them.

“We are safe,” he mouthed over the noise.

“He knows,” Cailin managed, her teeth chattering so hard the words barely formed. She leaned forward, needing him to hear her. “He suspects. He asked about the DNA test again. He saw the birthmark. I don’t know how long I can hold him off.”

Kegan leaned in close, his lips brushing her ear, his voice a secret pressed into the roaring dark.

“I fixed the DNA test, Cali. The moment I found out he had sent the sample, I swapped the data in the lab server,” he said. “The official report in his system reads zero percent match. It’s a digital ghost. He has no proof — only doubt.”

“Are you certain it’s untraceable?” she asked, a new terror threading through her voice. “His security infrastructure is the best in the world.”

“I am better,” Kegan said, his eyes fierce and absolute. “I knew he would push for this one day. I protected you.”

The relief that moved through Cailin was so profound it made the world tilt. But then the tilting didn't stop. The adrenaline had been holding her together for hours, and now it was gone — burned through completely — leaving the pneumonia, the hypothermia, and the ocean's cold to settle their accounts all at once. The edges of her vision began to narrow and darken.

"Thank you," she whispered, her voice fading to almost nothing.

The world went sideways. She slumped forward.

"Cali!" Kegan caught her before she hit the floor. Her skin was burning hot now — a stark, alarming contrast to the shivering of moments before.

"Pilot! ETA to the hospital!" he barked into his headset.

"Five minutes, sir!"

Kegan pressed two fingers to her neck. Her pulse was thready and racing far beyond what it should be.

"Stay with me," he said, his voice dropping to a low, desperate growl as he held her upright. "Don't you dare leave me."

Cailin drifted into the dark.

Chapter 154:

In the blackness, she dreamed of the ocean — the crushing weight of it, the cold pressing in from every direction, the slow surrender of sinking. And then she dreamed of an arm closing around her waist, pulling her upward through the dark water toward the surface and the light.

Hilliard's arm.

Even in the nightmare, he was the one who saved her.

She hated herself for it.

The helicopter banked hard and began its descent toward the welcoming, indifferent lights of the city below.

The private wing of the hospital was a sterile, hushed world removed entirely from the chaos of the ocean.

Ashely rushed in, her face drained of color. "Where is she? Where is Elia?" she demanded, making straight for Kegan, who stood like a grim statue outside the trauma room doors.

“Cailin is resting — severe pneumonia and hypothermic shock,” Kegan said, his voice low and measured. “Elia is fine. Shaken, but fine. They’re keeping her under observation.” His eyes moved past Ashely, sharpening. “Where are the boys?”

“In the car with one of your men,” Ashely said, twisting her hands together. “Aron saw the news feed before I could turn it off. He’s furious.”

“Good,” Kegan said. “Keep them away from here. Hilliard is on his way, and I don’t want him anywhere near them.”

As if summoned, the elevator doors slid open.

Hilliard stepped out. He had been taken to a different hospital for a brief examination and had changed into plain gray scrubs, but nothing about him looked rested or composed. He looked like a man who had been taken apart and hadn’t quite managed to reassemble himself. His gaze swept the hallway and landed on Kegan. He walked forward, his steps heavy and deliberate.

“How is she?”

“No thanks to you,” Kegan said.

Before Hilliard could respond, a side door swung open and two police officers wheeled a gurney into the corridor. Charla was strapped to it, handcuffed, her wet hair matted against her face, her expression a shifting mask of disbelief and barely contained rage.

“Hilliard!” Her voice cracked when she saw him. “They are arresting me! Help me! Tell them it was a mistake — tell them you know I would never —”

Hilliard turned to look at her. Whatever had remained of the man who had once been engaged to her was gone, burned cleanly away by the hours that had just passed.

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He turned his back on her.

“Officer,” he said, his voice clear and unhurried in the quiet hallway, “take her full statement. My legal team will be in contact. I will be pressing charges — conspiracy and attempted murder.”

Charla screamed his name — a long, raw, desperate sound that echoed down the corridor as the gurney rolled toward the elevators. Then the doors closed, and the hallway was quiet again.

Hilliard turned back to Kegan. “I am here for Cailin. I am not leaving until I know she is okay.”

“She doesn’t want you here,” Kegan said.

“That is a decision she can make when she’s conscious,” Hilliard replied. He crossed to a hard plastic chair directly opposite Kegan and sat down, arms folded over his chest, gaze fixed on the closed doors of Cailin’s room. “I’m not leaving.”

Chapter 155:

The waiting began — a silent war conducted in a hospital corridor, with nothing between them but the hum of fluorescent lights and the distant sound of the building breathing around them.

Hours passed. The hospital hallway had grown dim, the fluorescent lights humming their low, monotonous tone. It was three in the morning.

Gavin Thorne arrived looking grim, carrying a fresh set of clothes for Hilliard, two cups of black coffee, and a thick encrypted tablet. He handed Hilliard a cup along with a new, fully charged satellite phone.

“Your personal device was beyond repair, sir,” Gavin murmured.

Hilliard nodded and took a sip of the scalding coffee. “What did you find on Aguirre?”

Gavin powered on the tablet. “The man is a ghost — not easy to pin down. But our contacts in the intelligence community have a file.” He turned the screen toward Hilliard. “Arms dealer, global scale. Suspected art smuggler. His official company, Aguirre Global Security, is a front for one of the most sophisticated private mercenary armies in the world.”

Hilliard studied the grainy photographs, the blocks of heavily redacted text. Across the hallway, Kegan sat dozing in his chair, arms crossed over his chest. “He’s dangerous,” Hilliard muttered. “Why is Cailin involved with a man like this?”

“Maybe she had no choice,” Gavin said quietly. “A man like that doesn’t offer protection without a price. He tends to own what he protects.”

The words sent a slow chill down Hilliard’s spine.

The doors to the pediatric observation unit opened. A nurse stepped into the hallway and called out softly, “Family of Elia Trevino?”

Kegan was on his feet before the sentence finished — a single fluid motion, instantly alert.

“Here,” Hilliard said, rising alongside him.

They regarded each other across the sterile linoleum.

The nurse wheeled Elia out. She was awake, looking small and fragile in an oversized hospital gown, a stuffed animal clutched against her chest that one of the nurses had found for her. Her eyes moved around the hallway — wide, searching, still carrying the shadow of everything that had happened.

Hilliard’s breath left him.

Under the unforgiving fluorescent light, with her face clean and her hair brushed back from her features, the resemblance was no longer a fleeting impression or a trick of dim lighting. It was a statement of fact, as clear and unambiguous as a legal document. Her jawline. The shape of her nose. The dark, serious set of her eyes when she was trying to understand something. He had seen that expression in every mirror of his childhood.

He didn't need a photograph to confirm it. The image was written into him biologically. It was absolute.

Kegan read Hilliard's face in an instant. He saw the dawning, unshakable certainty settling there — the look of a man whose last doubt had just been removed. He stepped smoothly between Hilliard and the gurney, his broad frame blocking the line of sight entirely.

"Show's over, Holloway," Kegan said, his voice carrying a quiet menace that required no volume to land.

Chapter 156:

Hilliard didn't look at the child anymore. He looked directly at Kegan — and felt every remaining piece click into place with the cold precision of a lock engaging. The ghost. The arms dealer. The man with the resources and the reach to do the genuinely impossible.

"You forged the test," Hilliard said. Not a question. A declaration.

Kegan smiled — a cold, sharp expression that stopped well short of his eyes. The smile of a man who had planned for exactly this moment.

“Prove it,” he said.

Cailin woke with a gasp, her body jerking upright as though she were still fighting the pull of the ocean. The air in the room was dry and sterile — nothing like the salt spray haunting her nightmares. Pain radiated sharply through her chest, her lungs burning with every shallow breath.

“Elia!” The name tore from her throat, raw and panicked. Her hands scrabbled at the stiff hospital sheets, searching.

“She is in the next room. Sleeping. Ashely is with her.”

The voice was low and steady. A heavy hand pressed gently onto her shoulder, grounding her. Cailin looked up, her vision blurring before sharpening on Kegan’s face. He looked exhausted — lines etched deep around his eyes — but his presence was solid and immovable.

Cailin sank back against the pillows, the adrenaline draining out of her all at once. The IV line swayed gently beside the bed. She closed her eyes and forced her heart to slow its hammering.

“Did they catch them?” she whispered, opening her eyes again. “The men on the boat?”

“The hired muscle? Yes. My men handed them to the police an hour ago,” Kegan said, pulling a chair closer to the bedside. “They aren’t talking yet — professionals, or at least paid well enough to stay quiet for now.”

“We need proof, Kegan. Hilliard won’t believe —”

“The boat talks.”

Kegan reached into the inner pocket of his tactical coat and produced a ruggedized tablet. He tapped the screen and held it up. It displayed a digital copy of a maritime registration document.

“The yacht Sea Witch,” Kegan said, his finger tracing the relevant line. “Registered owner: English Holdings LLC.”

Cailin stared at the name. The letters seemed to swim before snapping into a terrible, absolute clarity.

“English Holdings,” she breathed. “Charla’s family company.”

“It’s a shell company, buried deep — but my analysts dug it out,” Kegan said, his voice hardening. “This is the smoking gun, Cali. She didn’t just hire them. She provided the equipment. She gave them the means to take Elia.”

A commotion erupted in the hallway. Raised voices, the urgent squeak of rubber soles on linoleum.

“Mr. Holloway, you cannot go in there! The patient needs rest!” A nurse’s voice, shrill and desperate.

“Get out of my way.”

The door flew open and struck the wall stopper with a bang.

Hilliard stood in the frame. He looked like a man who had walked through something that hadn't finished with him yet. His shirt was wrinkled and open at the collar, his tie long gone, his eyes dark and fixed solely on Cailin.

Kegan rose instantly and placed himself between Hilliard and the bed — a wall of muscle, unhurried and immovable.

Chapter 157:

“Get out, Hilliard,” Kegan said. It wasn't a request.

“I need to speak to my wife,” Hilliard said, looking past him, trying to catch Cailin's gaze.

“I am not your wife!” Cailin pushed herself upright, ignoring the sharp protest of her bruised ribs and the scraping fire in her lungs. “You lost the right to that title five years ago.”

Hilliard stepped into the room. The door drifted shut behind him. The air seemed to contract, leaving a vacuum filled with nothing but tension.

“We are still married, Cailin. The papers were never filed — you know that,” Hilliard said, his voice dropping an octave, vibrating with a strange and terrifying certainty. “That was my daughter in the water. And I have a feeling she is not the only secret you have been keeping from me.”

Cailin went still. Her hand moved to her throat. The denial rose and died on her lips, choked by a surge of panic. He didn’t know everything — but he suspected enough.

“We can discuss custody later,” Kegan cut in, his voice slicing cleanly through the tension. “Right now, you need to look at this.”

He didn’t wait for permission. He pressed the tablet against Hilliard’s chest.

Hilliard caught it instinctively and looked down at the screen. His eyes moved across the document. Sea Witch. English Holdings LLC.

The color drained from his face. He stared at the words, his legal mind working fast, hunting for the loophole, the error, the explanation that didn’t require the woman he had almost married to be a monster.

“This proves ownership,” he said, swallowing. “But it doesn’t prove intent. The boat could have been stolen, or used without her knowledge.”

The plastic water cup on Cailin’s bedside table went airborne.

She threw it with everything she had left. It struck Hilliard square in the chest, splashing water down his shirt before clattering to the floor.

“Stop defending her!” The scream tore out of her and collapsed into a ragged sob. “My daughter was thrown into the ocean, Hilliard! And you are standing there talking about stolen boats?”

Hilliard didn’t flinch. He let the water drip down his shirt. His fists clenched at his sides, knuckles whitening.

“If she did this,” he said slowly, his jaw working, “if she actually hurt Elia —”

Ashely appeared in the doorway, her face flushed and furious. She had clearly argued her way past the nurses’ station and followed the noise.

“The proof is in your hand, you blind idiot!” she shouted. “She tried to kill her — just like she tried to kill Cailin!”

Hilliard looked at the document again. Then he looked at Cailin — her face pale and bruised, her eyes holding a mixture of fear and hatred that hollowed him out.

He thought of Elia’s small body on the deck. He thought of the seawater coughing from her lungs. He thought of the arm that had reached for him and found only air.

Chapter 158:

Something inside him broke cleanly in two. The lawyer died. The father woke up in his place.

“I will get the truth,” Hilliard said. His voice was cold, stripped of every last trace of hesitation. “From her.”

He turned, raised his phone, and snapped a photograph of the tablet screen before pressing the device back into Kegan’s hands. He walked to the door.

“Don’t leave this room,” he said — though whether the order was meant for Cailin or for himself was unclear.

The heavy door clicked shut behind him.

The interrogation room was actually a converted office, the main rooms being occupied elsewhere in the building. It smelled of stale coffee and floor wax.

Charla sat in a metal chair wrapped in a thick wool blanket provided by the station. She looked small, fragile. Her makeup was smudged just enough to suggest genuine distress, but not so much as to look unpolished.

The door didn’t open — it was thrown open.

Hilliard slammed a printed copy of the boat registration onto the metal table. The sound cracked through the room like a gunshot.

"Explain this," he said. No greeting. No warmth.

Charla startled, her hand flying to her chest. She looked at the document, her hands beginning their practiced trembling.

"The Sea Witch?" Her voice wavered with precision. "My father's old boat? I thought he sold it years ago."

Hilliard planted both hands flat on the table and leaned over it, filling her field of vision. "It was used to kidnap my daughter, Charla."

Charla gasped, covering her mouth. Her eyes widened and filled with instant tears. "Oh my God. Hilliard... you don't think —" She looked up at him, her lower lip quivering. "You think I did this? You think I would hurt a child?"

"The kidnappers knew my schedule," Hilliard pressed, his voice grinding like stone on stone. "They knew Cailin. They had significant resources."

“Anyone could know those things!” Charla sobbed, the tears spilling over now. “You are famous, Hilliard — people watch our every move! Someone stole my identity. They used my family’s name to frame me because they know how close I am to you.”

From the corner of the room, her lawyer — a polished man in an expensive suit named Mr. Vance — stepped forward. “Mr. Holloway, my client is in shock. She has a documented heart condition. You are badgering her without due process.”

Hilliard hesitated. He looked at Charla — shaking, pale, barely holding herself together. The identity theft defense was not implausible in his world of corporate warfare. Shell companies were weaponized against executives constantly. White-collar criminals used this exact playbook.

Could she be a pawn rather than the architect?

The door opened — not with a bang but a sharp click — and Ashely burst through it, held back by a uniformed officer, her face a mask of barely contained fury.

Chapter 159:

“Don’t buy her crocodile tears!” Ashely shouted the moment she saw Hilliard, jabbing a shaking finger toward the interrogation room. “She threatened Elia before! Ask the staff at the café! She poured hot water on Cailin with her own hands! She is a psychopath!”

“Ma’am, you need to lower your voice!” The officer tightened his grip on Ashely’s arm.

Through the open doorway, Charla shrank back into her chair — carefully positioning herself so Hilliard could see every inch of her distress. “She is crazy! Just like Cailin! They are both obsessed with ruining me!” she wailed, her voice carrying deliberately down the hall.

Hilliard looked from Ashely’s raw, unperformed fury to Charla’s terrified fragility. His head throbbed. Evidence against explanation. Logic against instinct.

He straightened his collar and forced himself to be the judge.

“If you are innocent, Charla, you have nothing to fear,” he said, his voice dropping to a deadly calm loud enough to reach both of them. “We will investigate this thoroughly.”

“Promise me!” Ashely dug her heels into the linoleum as the officer tried to steer her back. “Promise you will prosecute her if she’s guilty! Even if she is whatever she still is to you!”

Charla looked up at Hilliard with wide, pleading eyes, waiting for him to step in, to dismiss the hysterical woman in the doorway.

Hilliard looked at Ashely. Then he looked back through the doorway at the boat registration lying on the table.

“I promise,” he said clearly.

The hallway went quiet.

"If the evidence holds," Hilliard continued, his gaze moving back to Charla and locking there, "I will destroy anyone who touched my child."

The color left Charla's face — not the practiced pallor of performance, but the bloodless gray of genuine terror. For one unguarded fraction of a second, the mask slipped entirely, and what showed beneath it was a cornered animal.

Then she clutched her chest.

"I — I can't breathe," Charla wheezed, her hand clawing at her throat.

"Ms. English?" Mr. Vance stepped forward.

Charla's eyes rolled back. She slid from the chair and crumpled to the floor like a puppet with its strings cut.

"Charla!" Hilliard moved around the table on instinct, dropping to his knees — his body acting before his mind caught up. He caught her head before it struck the linoleum. His movements were automatic, but his thoughts were cold and entirely clear. She cannot die here. Not before I have the truth. It was a tactical calculation, not an act of tenderness.

“Call a medic!” he shouted.

In the doorway, Ashely stopped struggling. She looked at Hilliard cradling the woman who had ordered a hit on his daughter and slowly, deliberately rolled her eyes.

“Here we go,” she muttered.

The lobby of the police station was a chaotic swirl of movement. Reporters were already clustering outside the glass doors, sensing blood in the water.

Hilliard burst through the secure hallway carrying Charla bridal-style, her head lolling against his shoulder, one arm hanging limp at her side.

“Call a paramedic! She’s unconscious!” he shouted at the desk sergeant. “Get an ambulance — now!”

The automatic doors slid open.

Cailin walked in.

Chapter 160:

She had no business being there — the doctor's warnings were a dull, distant hum beneath the need to see this through. She leaned heavily on Kegan, her face an ashen gray against the dark wool of his coat. Every breath she drew was a visible effort.

They stopped dead.

The scene arranged itself before her like something from a novel she had never wanted to read. Hilliard — the hero — carrying the damsel. His face etched with concern, his focus entirely on the woman in his arms. He laid Charla gently onto a long wooden bench near the entrance, checked her pulse, and loosened the collar of her dress with practiced care.

Cailin stared. The image burned itself into her retinas, settling over the memory of him pulling her from the ocean like a second exposure on the same photograph.

"He's saving her again," Cailin whispered. The words were barely audible, but they carried the weight of five years compressed into a single breath.

Hilliard looked up. He saw them.

"Cailin!" Relief crossed his face immediately, then gave way to confusion. "What are you doing here? You should be in bed." He glanced down at Charla, then back up. "She collapsed. Her heart — the stress —"

"Her heart is black, Hilliard," Cailin said. Her voice didn't rise. It was flat and utterly still. "And you are blind."

Sirens cut through the air outside. Two paramedics pushed through the doors with a stretcher, moving past Cailin and Kegan without breaking stride.

Hilliard stood. His hands were trembling. A thin scratch traced his cheek where Charla's nail had caught him during her fall, bleeding slightly. He stepped toward Cailin.

"I promised Ashely I would find the truth. I mean to keep that promise," he said. "But I cannot let her die on the floor of a police station."

Kegan moved in front of Cailin — not aggressively, not with a shove this time. He simply existed in the space between them, immovable.

"Go with your mistress, Holloway," Kegan said. "We are here to file charges. You do what you do best."

Hilliard's jaw tightened. He looked at the stretcher where the paramedics were lifting Charla. Her hand reached out blindly, fingers searching.

"Hilliard," she moaned, barely audible. "Don't leave me."

He looked at Cailin.

Cailin turned her back on him. She walked toward the desk sergeant, her weight resting against Kegan's arm.

A sound came from Hilliard's throat — low, involuntary, somewhere between frustration and pain. But his rigid, unyielding sense of duty made the decision for him, as it always had.

He turned and followed the stretcher out through the doors.

Cailin watched his reflection move across the bulletproof glass of the station window. She watched him climb into the back of the ambulance. She watched the doors close.

She didn't turn around.

The waiting room of the pediatric ward was painted in cheerful yellows and blues — a cruel contrast to the mood of its occupants.

Cailin sat in a vinyl chair, exhausted. She had given her statement. She had filed the charges. But it all felt like shouting into a void.

"Where is Hilliard?" Aron asked. He didn't look up from his tablet, his fingers flying across the screen.