

Second chance 161

Chapter 161:

“He went with the Bad Lady,” Davy answered for her. He was throwing a small toy car against the wall. Thwack. Thwack.

“He is stupid,” Elia whispered from her hospital bed. She was curled into a ball, clutching the teddy bear Hilliard had given her — Mr. Paws — though she held it by one leg, dragging it like a dead thing.

Davy stopped throwing the car. He pulled the small black device halfway out of his pocket. “I’m going to find him,” he growled. “I’ll mess with his car. I’ll make his phone stop working.” He started to march toward the door.

Without looking up, Aron reached out and grabbed his brother’s arm. “Stop. You’ll get Mom in trouble.”

“He deserves it!” Davy struggled, his face red.

“Smart revenge is better than fast revenge,” Aron said, pushing his glasses up his nose. “We hack his bank. We lock his car. We delete his calendar. We don’t go to jail.”

Cailin reached out and pulled both boys into a hug. “No one is hacking anyone, and no one is messing with anyone. We are going to let the police do their job.” She smoothed Davy’s hair. “We are the good guys.”

Elia whimpered. She was holding a wrapper from a piece of candy. “The mean nurse gave me candy,” she said softly. “Before the boat.”

Cailin froze. “What?”

“In the car,” Elia recalled, her eyes glassy. “She said it was a magic sweet. A present from the Bad Lady. To make me sleep.” She stuck out her tongue in disgust. “It tasted like medicine. Bitter.”

Cailin’s blood ran cold. Drugging a child. It wasn’t just kidnapping — it was poisoning.

She hit the call button on the bed rail. “Doctor! We need a doctor! Test her blood for sedatives — now!”

Ten minutes later, blood was drawn.

Across town, in the VIP suite of St. Jude’s Hospital, Charla lay in a bed with high-thread-count sheets, the phone pressed against her ear.

“Daddy, fix it,” she whispered, tears streaming down her face. “They found the boat registration. Hilliard knows.”

"The Police Chief's last campaign was funded almost entirely by the English Foundation," Gregg English's voice roared through the receiver. "He knows which calls to take. But I told you to use cash, you idiot!"

"Hilliard is asking questions. I had to fake a heart attack to get away," Charla cried. "I had them bring me to St. Jude's — the one our family funds. I couldn't risk being in the same hospital as her. He promised to prosecute me, Daddy. He looked at me like he hated me."

"Stop crying," Gregg ordered. "I'll handle it. You keep Hilliard busy. Play the victim. Make him feel guilty."

"And the mother? Cailin?" Charla asked, her voice turning venomous.

"She won't be a problem much longer," Gregg said ominously. "Focus on Hilliard."

Back in Elia's room, the doctor returned with a tablet, his face grim.

"Ms. Morton," he said. "The toxicology screen came back. We found traces of benzodiazepines in her system."

Cailin's hands shook with a rage so pure it felt like white heat.

Chapter 162:

“She drugged her,” Cailin whispered.

“It’s a sedative,” the doctor confirmed. “Dangerous for a child her size. If the dose had been higher—” He didn’t finish. He didn’t have to.

Cailin looked at her sleeping daughter. This wasn’t a game. It wasn’t a rivalry.

It was war.

Night fell, bringing a storm with it. Thunder rumbled outside the hospital windows, rattling the glass.

Elia screamed.

It was a high, piercing sound that shattered the quiet of the room. Cailin, dozing in the chair, was at her side in an instant. “Elia! I’m here! Mommy is here!”

Elia thrashed in the sheets, her eyes wide open but seeing nothing. “Cold! Water! Don’t drop me!”

She struck out blindly. Her small fist connected with Cailin’s cheekbone. Cailin didn’t flinch. She caught Elia’s wrists gently and pulled her into a hug, absorbing every blow. “Shh, shh. You’re safe. No water. Just warm blankets.”

“The Bad Lady!” Elia shrieked. “She has a knife!”

Aron and Davy jolted awake on the pull-out couch. Without a word, they climbed into the hospital bed and sandwiched Elia between them — a human shield. Davy took her hand. Aron draped his arm over her legs.

“We’ve got you, Elia,” Aron whispered. “We have lasers. Invisible ones.”

Elia’s thrashing slowed. She blinked, saw her brothers, and began to sob — deep, wrenching heaves.

“She cut my hair,” Elia whispered, her small hand flying to the side of her head. “She held the knife to my face and... snip.”

Cailin looked. She brushed the hair back carefully. There, near the ear, a jagged chunk was missing — hacked off. Cailin covered her mouth, stifling a cry, and wept in silence, tears tracking slowly down her face.

Down the hall, at the nurse’s station, Hilliard stepped out of the elevator. He carried a bouquet of white lilies. He wanted to apologize. He needed to see if they were all right.

He walked toward the room. Then he heard the scream.

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“Don’t let him in! Don’t let the Bad Man in!”

Elia’s voice carried into the corridor. Hilliard froze, one foot suspended above the floor tile.

A nurse stepped in front of him, arms crossed. “Mr. Holloway, you are upsetting the patient.”

“I am her father,” Hilliard said. His voice broke on the last word.

“She is terrified of men right now,” the nurse said firmly. “Especially you. Please leave.”

Hilliard stared at the closed door. From behind it, he could hear Cailin singing — soft and trembling, the Moon Song. He looked down at the flowers in his hand.

Useless.

He walked to the trash can and dropped the bouquet inside. Then he leaned against the wall outside the room and slowly slid down until he was sitting on the floor. He listened to the singing. He listened to his daughter being comforted — protected from a world he had failed to keep safe.

Inside the room, Cailin looked at her three children. A flash of lightning illuminated their faces.

Chapter 163:

“I swear on my life,” she whispered to them. “No one will ever hurt you again. Not Charla. Not Hilliard.”

She lifted her gaze to Kegan, who stood motionless in the shadows of the corner.

“We are leaving,” she said. “As soon as Elia can travel.”

Kegan nodded once. “I have the jet ready.”

“Good,” Cailin said, her eyes hard. “We go to Switzerland. To your sanctuary in Zurich.”

The interview room at the Child Advocacy Center was designed to be disarming — soft pastel walls, bean bag chairs, shelves of toys. But the large mirror on the wall was a dead giveaway.

Elia sat at a small table, clutching the new teddy bear Kegan had bought her. A specialist sat across from her.

"Can you tell me about the boat, Elia?" the woman asked gently.

Elia nodded. She looked small. Too small for any of this. "The men were smelly. They put me in a box."

Behind the one-way mirror, Hilliard stood with Detective Miller and a child psychologist. The word "box" shredded something in his chest. He pressed his hand flat against the glass.

"Did you hear anyone else?" the specialist asked.

"The phone," Elia said. "The Bad Lady called the smelly man."

"Did you know the voice?"

Elia nodded vigorously. "It sounded like... the Bad Man's friend. The one who smells like fake flowers."

Hilliard closed his eyes. Charla's perfume. Gardenia. Heavy and cloying.

"She said to throw the package away," Elia whispered.

The room behind the glass went silent. Hilliard felt as though he couldn't breathe. Package. His daughter was a package.

The interview ended. Cailin entered the room to collect Elia, and Hilliard couldn't make himself stay behind the glass. He needed to see her. He stepped out into the hallway just as they emerged.

"Elia," he said softly, dropping to one knee, trying to make himself small, unthreatening.

Elia saw him. Her eyes went wide. The terror was instant and absolute. She scrambled behind Cailin's legs and buried her face in Cailin's coat.

"Go away!" she screamed.

"Elia, it's Daddy. I want to help," Hilliard pleaded, reaching a hand toward her.

"You are with HER!" Elia accused, peeking out with one furious, tear-filled eye. "I saw you! You held her! You carried her! You are a Bad Man!"

The words, spoken in a child's high, clear voice, didn't merely sting. They landed like physical blows, each one stealing the air from his lungs. He felt himself rock back on his heels, the sterile hallway tilting around him.

Cailin scooped Elia up, shielding her, and looked down at Hilliard with eyes of ice. “You heard her. Stay away.”

“Cailin, please — I didn’t know.” Hilliard rose to his feet, his hands open. “I was trying to help a sick woman.”

“Ignorance is not a defense, Hilliard. It’s a choice,” Cailin said. “You chose to believe her over a child.” She turned and walked away, her heels clicking a sharp, steady rhythm against the tile.

Hilliard was left alone in the hallway. The silence was deafening.

Chapter 164:

A moment later, Detective Miller tapped his shoulder and held out a file. “Mr. Holloway? Based on the testimony and the drug screen, we have enough for an arrest warrant for Ms. English.”

Hilliard watched the retreating form of his daughter until she disappeared around the corner. He felt a part of himself die — the part that still believed in mercy.

“Do it,” he said. His voice was hollow. “Arrest her.”

Mornings at the English Family Estate were usually serene affairs — birds chirping, sprinklers hissing over manicured lawns.

Today, it was sirens.

Charla sat in the garden having breakfast, dressed in a silk robe, looking perfectly recovered from her “heart attack.” Then a fleet of police cars smashed through the wrought-iron gates, tires screeching on the gravel.

Gregg English shot to his feet, knocking over his coffee. “What is the meaning of this!”

Detective Miller stepped out of the lead car and held up a document. “Charla English, you are under arrest for kidnapping, conspiracy, and attempted murder.”

Charla dropped her teacup. It shattered on the patio stones.

“No!” She scrambled backward. “Daddy, do something!”

Officers swarmed the patio and grabbed her arms.

“Get your hands off me!” Charla screamed. “Call Hilliard! Call Hilliard!”

A black sedan pulled up behind the police cruisers. Hilliard stepped out, followed closely by Gavin, who carried a briefcase.

Charla's face lit up. "See? He came to save me! Hilliard!"

Hilliard walked past the police line and stopped ten feet away. He leaned against the hood of his car, arms crossed, and watched them handcuff her.

"Hilliard, tell them!" Charla pleaded, struggling as officers marched her toward the cruiser. "Tell them it's a mistake!"

Hilliard said nothing. His eyes were cold, studying her the way one studies a specimen no longer worth recognizing.

"You drugged my daughter, Charla," he said quietly.

Charla froze. The mask slipped completely. Her face twisted into a snarl of pure ugliness. "She's a brat!" she spat. "She deserved it! She was ruining everything!"

The confession hung in the air.

An officer shoved her head down and pushed her into the back of the cruiser.

Gregg English marched up to Hilliard, his face purple with rage. “You made a mistake, boy,” he threatened, jabbing a finger at Hilliard’s chest. “You declared war on us.”

“Your daughter tried to kill my heir,” Hilliard replied, swatting the finger away. “The war is already over.”

Gregg held his gaze for a long moment, then turned to summon his lawyers.

Hilliard got back in his car and watched the police convoy roll out through the shattered gates. He felt no satisfaction. Only a vast, hollow emptiness.

He picked up his satellite phone and called Cailin.

“It’s done,” he said when she answered. “She’s in custody.”

“Good,” Cailin said. “Keep her there.”

Click.

Hilliard stared at the phone. He had believed that justice would fix things — that arresting Charla would somehow bridge the gap between him and his daughter.

He was wrong.

The library of Holloway Manor was a fortress of mahogany and leather.

Hilliard entered. Jeraldine and Amerigo were waiting.

Chapter 165:

Jeraldine threw a newspaper at him. It fluttered to the floor, the headline screaming: SOCIALITE ARRESTED IN HOLLOWAY SCANDAL.

“You let them arrest Charla? Are you insane?” Jeraldine screeched, her pearls rattling against her collarbone.

“She kidnapped a child, Mother,” Hilliard said wearily, sinking into a chair.

“Allegedly!” Jeraldine began to pace. “It’s that woman — Cailin! She framed her! She wants to destroy our family alliances!”

“We have the child’s testimony,” Hilliard countered. “We have the boat registration.”

“The English family is our biggest investor!” Amerigo barked from behind his desk. “If their stock drops, ours drops. We lose millions — millions, Hilliard!”

Hilliard looked at his parents. "Is money worth more than your grandchild?"

"That child is a scandal waiting to happen!" Jeraldine spat. "A secret kept for five years! You are trusting the word of a woman who ran away — and for what? To bring this family down?"

Hilliard slammed his hand on the table. The lamp rattled.

"She is a Holloway!" he roared. "And Cailin is still my wife!"

Silence filled the room. Dust motes drifted lazily through the light.

"You will fix this," Amerigo ordered, his voice dropping low. "Get Charla released. Now."

"No," Hilliard said.

"Then we will," Jeraldine said coldly, reaching for her phone. "We have judges in our pocket. We have the DA. We have favors owed."

"If you interfere," Hilliard rose to his feet, his shadow stretching across the room, "I will burn this company to the ground. I will liquidate everything."

“You wouldn’t dare,” Amerigo sneered.

Hilliard turned and stormed out.

Meanwhile, in the city jail holding cell, Charla met with her legal team — the Dream Team.

“Don’t worry, Ms. English,” the lead lawyer said with a wink. “Judge Miller is an old friend of your father’s. The bail hearing is in an hour.”

“And the drug test?” Charla asked, biting her nail.

“Lost in the lab,” the lawyer said smoothly. “A clerical error. The chain of custody was broken.”

Charla smiled. “Perfect.”

At the hospital, Cailin watched the news on the wall-mounted television. Reporters were already spinning the story. The chyron scrolled across the bottom of the screen: Holloway Stands By Fiancée Amidst Scandal. Sources say Ms. English was entrapped by a jealous ex-wife...

“They are spinning it,” Cailin said, feeling sick.

“Money talks,” Kegan said from the corner, cleaning a knife.

“And Hilliard’s money is talking loudest,” Cailin whispered, her voice laced with venom. She assumed he was the one pulling the strings. The misunderstanding deepened, a chasm quietly widening between them.

Hilliard stood in the sterile hallway of the police precinct, his patience wearing thin. He was waiting for Detective Miller.

“Where is the lab report on the drugs?” Hilliard asked the moment the detective appeared.

The detective wouldn’t meet his eyes. “We... can’t find it, sir.”

“What do you mean you can’t find it?” Hilliard’s voice dropped low, dangerous.

“The sample was contaminated,” the detective said, shuffling papers badly. “We have to discard it.”

Chapter 166:

Hilliard grabbed the detective’s collar and hauled him against the wall. “Who paid you? My father? English?” he demanded, his face inches from the terrified officer’s.

“Let him go, sir!” Other officers rushed in and pulled Hilliard back.

“Making a scene won’t help, sir.” Gavin stepped forward, placing a steady hand on Hilliard’s arm.

Hilliard released the man and smoothed his suit, still breathing hard. He followed Gavin outside into the biting city air.

“The boat registration?” Hilliard asked.

“Reported stolen three days ago,” Gavin said grimly, opening the car door. “Backdated paperwork appeared this morning. Someone in the maritime office was bought.”

Hilliard laughed — a bitter, hollow sound. “They are erasing everything,” he said, sliding into the back seat. “The Machine is working.”

He pulled out his phone and called Judge Miller.

“Judge Miller, this is Hilliard Holloway.”

“Ah, Hilliard. Your mother called,” the Judge’s voice was oily with reassurance. “Don’t worry, son. We’ll handle this quietly. No need for a scandal.”

"I want her in prison!" Hilliard shouted into the phone.

"Now, now. Let's not be rash. Think of the merger. Think of the stock."

The line went dead.

Hilliard threw his phone across the car. It shattered against the partition.

He drove to the hospital. He needed to tell Cailin — to warn her that the system had failed them. But Kegan's men stopped him at the elevator.

"No visitors," the guard said, his hand resting on his holster.

Hilliard turned to the nurse's station and grabbed a notepad. He scribbled a note:

They are fixing the case. I am trying to stop it. The evidence is gone. Be careful. I am on your side.

He folded it and handed it to a nearby nurse. She had a kind face and a warm smile. "Of course, Mr. Holloway," she said sweetly. "I'll make sure she gets it right away."

Hilliard left, already moving toward his next call, his next lawyer, his next fight.

As soon as the elevator doors closed behind him, the nurse's smile vanished. She walked directly to a biohazard bin, dropped the folded note inside among the used swabs and gauze, and then drew out her phone, typing a single encrypted message to a contact saved only as JH: Message intercepted.

Upstairs, Cailin sat in the silence of Elia's room.

"He hasn't even called," she thought. "He arrested her for show, and now he's letting her go."

She was completely alone.

The steps of the police station were crowded with cameras. It was a circus.

Cailin stood on the sidewalk, summoned by the DA for a "statement." Kegan was beside her.

The heavy doors swung open.

Charla walked out.

She wasn't in handcuffs. She wore a fresh designer dress, her hair perfectly styled, and she looked as though she were leaving a spa rather than a jail cell. Cameras flashed like lightning.

"Justice has prevailed!" Charla beamed, waving to the crowd. "It was a terrible misunderstanding! I am the victim here!"

Cailin stepped forward, her body trembling with rage. "You monster!"

Kegan held her back. "Easy, Cali."

Chapter 167:

Hilliard came through the doors behind Charla, shoulders slumped, his expression defeated. To the cameras, it looked as though he were escorting her out.

Charla turned. She saw the cameras. She grabbed Hilliard and pulled him into a hug.

Every muscle in his body went rigid. Every instinct screamed at him to shove her away. But he was surrounded — trapped in a cage of flashing lights. A public scene would only feed the narrative she was spinning. As she pressed against him, her lips brushed his ear.

"Smile, darling," she hissed, her voice a venomous secret against his skin. "Or that fragile little kid might have another accident. A permanent one."

He went still — not from indecision, but from the cold, calculated checkmate she had just played.

Click. Click. Click.

The photo was taken: Hilliard Holloway reuniting with his fiancée.

Cailin saw the hug. It snapped the last thread of hope she hadn't even known she was still holding.

Charla descended the steps and passed Cailin, leaning in close enough that her perfume was suffocating.

"You can't touch me," Charla whispered, her eyes dancing with malice. "I own this city."

She stepped into a waiting white limousine and was gone.

Hilliard walked toward Cailin. He looked desperate.

"Cailin, let me explain," he said, reaching for her. "They destroyed the evidence. The judge—"

Smack.

Cailin slapped him. Hard. Her palm stung from the impact, but the sound was deeply satisfying. The motion cost her — a wave of black dizziness swept through her and she stumbled back, Kegan's arm catching her instantly.

"You promised," she said, tears streaming down her face.

"I tried," Hilliard said, touching his cheek.

"Trying isn't enough!" Cailin screamed. "My goddaughter was poisoned, and you let her walk!" She lowered her voice to a hiss. "Don't come near us. If the law won't help, I will find another way."

She turned to Kegan.

"Do whatever you have to do," she told him. "Burn it down."

Kegan smiled — a wolfish, terrifying smile. "With pleasure."

Cailin got into Kegan's armored SUV.

Hilliard watched them drive away. He stood alone on the steps, his cheek still stinging, surrounded by reporters shouting questions about wedding dates.

He had lost everything.

Somewhere in the distance, tires screeched against concrete — a high-pitched wail that echoed through the garage. But Cailin couldn't look. Her world had narrowed to the burning certainty of betrayal, a sharp edge that cut deeper than any physical wound.

The sound of the zipper was too loud in the quiet hospital room. It hissed like a snake, sealing away the few belongings Elia had needed during her stay: a small pink backpack, Mr. Paws shoved face-first against a change of clothes.

Chapter 168:

Cailin's hands were shaking. She told herself it was the residual weakness from the pneumonia — the way her lungs still felt packed with broken glass every time she drew a breath. She had taken the full cocktail of painkillers the doctor prescribed just to be able to stand, and the drugs made the world feel sharp and distant, humming just beneath her skin. But it wasn't only the sickness, and it wasn't only the medication. It was the fear. A cold, sliding thing that had taken up permanent residence in her gut.

"Are we going on a trip, Mommy?" Elia asked. Her voice was small, barely a whisper. She sat on the edge of the hospital bed, her legs dangling motionless. Elia always swung her legs. Now they were still. Too still.

Cailin forced the corners of her mouth upward. It felt like stretching old rubber. "Yes, baby. A vacation."

“A secret vacation,” Ashley added, stepping away from the door. She wore a baseball cap pulled low, her eyes sweeping the hallway through the small rectangular window. “Coast is clear. No press. The shift change happened five minutes ago.”

Cailin grabbed her car keys from the bedside table. The metal bit into her palm. She squeezed until it hurt, needing the sharpness to ground her.

“Kegan is meeting us at the safe house,” she whispered to Ashley. “He’s securing the perimeter.”

“Good,” Ashley muttered, snatching up the backpack. “Let’s get out of here before he comes back.”

She didn’t say Hilliard’s name. She didn’t have to. The air in the room was still thick with the memory of him leaving to chase after Charla.

They flanked Elia — Cailin on the left, Ashley on the right — a human shield moving quickly down the corridor, avoiding eye contact with the nurses’ station. Cailin had signed the discharge papers Against Medical Advice an hour ago. She couldn’t stay here. Not after Hilliard had proven, on national television, that he would choose the woman who tried to kill their daughter over the truth.

The elevator ride was a descent into the belly of the beast. The numbers ticked down. 4... 3... 2...

Cailin leaned against the metal wall and closed her eyes for a moment. Her chest burned. She was drowning again — cold Atlantic water filling her throat.

Ding.

The doors slid open to Level B3. The parking garage.

The air was different here. Heavy. It smelled of exhaust fumes, old oil, and damp concrete. The lighting was dim, flickering fluorescent tubes casting long, dancing shadows between the rows of parked cars.

“Where did we park?” Ashley asked, her voice catching a slight echo.

“Row G,” Cailin said. “The black SUV.”

They walked. Their footsteps slapped against the concrete floor — slap, slap, slap — like a countdown. Cailin scanned every shadow. Paranoia pricked at the back of her neck. Every concrete pillar looked like a hiding spot. Every dark corner looked like a threat. She tightened her grip on Elia’s hand.

“Almost there,” she murmured.

They reached the SUV. It sat dusty and alone near a support column.

“I’ll get the door,” Ashley said, moving to the rear passenger side. She pulled it open and ushered Elia inside. “Hop in, bug. Buckle up fast.”

Cailin walked around to the driver's side, keys in hand, her thumb hovering over the unlock button. She reached for the handle.

A shadow detached itself from the concrete pillar directly in front of her.

Cailin gasped, stumbling back.

Chapter 169:

It wasn't a shadow. It was a person — a figure in a dark, oversized hoodie, hood pulled up to obscure the face. But Cailin knew that posture. She knew the manic energy radiating off that body.

The figure stepped into the pool of yellow light.

Charla.

She looked wrecked. The designer dress from the police station was torn at the shoulder and stained with something dark. Her hair was matted. Her eyes were wide and rimmed with red, the pupils blown enormous.

"Going somewhere?" Charla hissed, her voice scratchy, as though she had been screaming for hours.

Cailin froze. Her heart slammed against her ribs — a frantic bird hurling itself against a cage.

“Ashley, get inside! Lock the doors!” Cailin shouted.

Ashley didn’t ask questions. She shoved Elia fully into the seat and slammed the door. The lock engaged with a solid thud.

Charla took a step forward. Her hand emerged from the kangaroo pocket of the hoodie. Metal glinted in the dim light — a switchblade, its stiletto point wickedly sharp. The kind of cheap, brutal weapon bought in a back alley rather than a boutique. She must have paid off a runner the moment she was released. She flicked her wrist and the blade snapped open with a terrifying click.

“You ruined my life,” Charla said, taking another step. She wasn’t walking — she was stalking. “Everything was perfect. I was going to be Mrs. Holloway. I was going to be the Queen.”

“You kidnapped my goddaughter!” Cailin shouted, backing away slowly. She let her purse drop. It hit the floor with a heavy thud. She didn’t need it. She needed her hands free.

“She’s a bastard,” Charla sneered, waving the blade. “She shouldn’t exist. You shouldn’t exist.”

Cailin measured the distance between them. Six feet. Too close to run. If she turned her back to open the car door, Charla would be on her before the handle clicked.

“Hilliard isn’t here to save you,” Charla laughed — a wet, broken sound. “He’s probably crying in his penthouse. He’s weak. But I’m not.”

“I don’t need him,” Cailin said. Her voice dropped, turning steady. The fear was still there, but it had gone cold now. Useful.

She shifted her stance. Her feet widened. Her hands came up, palms open. The Krav Maga training Kegan had forced on her in Europe surfaced from somewhere beneath the exhaustion. Adrenaline surged through her — a chemical fire that momentarily burned away the pain in her lungs. Muscle memory overrode the pneumonia.

“Come on, then,” Cailin said.

Charla screamed. Not a word — a primal shriek of rage. She lunged, the switchblade driving straight for Cailin’s face.

Charla was fast. Faster than Cailin had expected. The desperation gave her a frantic, jerky speed that was nearly impossible to predict.

She slashed again — a wild, horizontal cut.

Cailin threw her arm up to block, catching Charla’s forearm with her own. But she was a fraction of a second too slow. The tip of the blade snagged her leather jacket sleeve, sliced through the material, and bit into the skin beneath.

A sharp line of fire raced up Cailin's forearm.

"Mommy!"

Chapter 170:

Elia's scream was muffled by the car glass, but it pierced Cailin's heart. She could hear the dull thump-thump-thump of small fists pounding against the window.

Inside the car, Ashley was fumbling with her phone, holding it up with violently shaking hands as the red recording light blinked.

Cailin ignored the pain in her arm. She ignored the warm trickle of blood sliding down to her wrist. She focused entirely on Charla's wrist.

Charla drew back for another stab — this time aiming for the stomach.

Cailin stepped in. She didn't retreat. She moved into the danger zone, grabbed Charla's wrist with both hands, and drove her thumbs into the tendons.

She twisted. Hard.

There was a sickening crack.

Charla screamed, her mouth forming a perfect O of agony. Her fingers spasmed, and the switchblade clattered to the concrete floor.

Cailin didn't stop. A wave of dizziness washed over her, her vision tunneling as her lungs screamed for air, but she pushed through it. She swept her leg behind Charla's ankles and shoved. Charla went down hard, her head bouncing off the pavement with a hollow thud.

Cailin dove on top of her. She pinned Charla's good arm with her knee and snatched the blade from the floor. Her breath came in ragged, wheezing gasps. A deep, rattling cough tore through her chest, and she tasted blood.

She held the blade inches from Charla's throat.

"You touch her again, I kill you!" Cailin roared, spittle flying from her lips. She wasn't Cailin Morton the socialite. She wasn't Cali the auctioneer. She was a mother protecting her young.

Headlights blinded them.

A car drifted around the corner, tires smoking, and screeched to a halt ten feet away. The high beams cut through the gloom and spotlighted them like actors on a stage.

The driver's door flew open. Hilliard jumped out.

He looked frantic — tie gone, shirt unbuttoned at the collar. He took in the scene in an instant: the glint of steel, Cailin straddling Charla, the dark wet stain spreading down Cailin's arm, Charla pinned and helpless beneath her.

Charla saw him. The transformation was instantaneous. The manic rage vanished, replaced by a mask of terrified victimhood.

"Help! Hilliard!" she wailed, tears springing instantly to her eyes. "She's crazy! She's going to kill me! Help me!"

Hilliard ran forward. "Cailin, stop! You're hurt!"

Cailin looked up. Her hair was wild, plastered to her forehead with sweat, her eyes dark hollows of adrenaline.

"She attacked us!" Cailin shouted, her voice cracking.

"I see the blood! Just drop the knife so I can help you!" Hilliard commanded. He had received a security alert that Charla had left her monitored residence and had tracked her phone here, fearing exactly this — but what he saw was worse than he had imagined. Cailin, wounded, holding a weapon over a weeping woman. His mind struggled to process the contradictory signals.

He reached them. He grabbed Cailin's shoulder — not to shove her, but to pull her up and away.

"Come on, get up!"