

Second chance 171

Chapter 171:

Cailin stumbled back. The sudden movement nearly made her pass out. She scrambled to her feet, still gripping the blade. Instinct. She was surrounded by enemies.

Hilliard stepped between them, placing himself over Charla like a barrier, his eyes fixed on Cailin's bleeding arm.

Charla scrambled backward and clung to his pant leg, burying her face against his calf. "She invited me here — she said she wanted to talk — and then she snapped. She pulled a knife on me, Hilliard!"

"Liar!"

Ashley burst out of the SUV. She no longer cared about safety. She ran around the hood of the car, waving her phone like a weapon. "I have it on video! She ambushed us! Look at the blood!"

Hilliard blinked. The adrenaline haze cleared slightly. He looked at Cailin — really looked at her.

Blood was dripping from her left sleeve. It pooled in her palm and fell to the concrete. Drip. Drip.

"You're bleeding," he said again, his voice stripped of its command. He took a step toward her.

“Stay back!” Cailin raised the blade, pointing the tip directly at his chest.

Hilliard froze. “Cailin—”

“You chose her,” Cailin panted, her chest heaving. “You put yourself between us. Again.”

“I saw you with a weapon,” Hilliard pleaded, raising both hands, palms open. “I saw you were hurt. I was trying to stop this before someone died. Give me the weapon, Cailin. The police are coming.”

“The police you bought?” she spat. “The police who walked her out the front door?”

“I didn’t buy them!” Hilliard shouted. “I’m trying to fix this!”

“You can’t fix this,” Cailin whispered. She looked at the blade in her hand, then at the man she had once loved. “You just proved whose side you’re on.”

Sirens wailed in the distance, the sound spiraling louder as it wound down the ramps of the parking garage.

“Look at the video, you idiot!” Ashley shoved her phone into Hilliard’s face.

Hilliard didn't want to look. He wanted to look at Cailin's arm — to stop the bleeding. But Ashley pressed the screen so close it blurred his vision.

He looked.

The footage was shaky, but the audio was unmistakable.

"You ruined my life... She's a bastard... She shouldn't exist."

Then the visual: Charla lunging. The glint of the blade in her hand. Cailin blocking. The blood appearing.

The color drained from Hilliard's face, leaving it ashen gray. The world tilted on its axis.

He looked down. At his feet. At the woman clinging to his leg.

Charla was sobbing, her face buried in his trousers. "It's a deepfake! She edited it! Hilliard, baby, you know what AI can do these days!"

The lie was so desperate, so pathetic, that it broke the spell completely.

Cailin threw the blade. It skittered across the concrete and clattered against Hilliard's shoe.

"I am done with you," she said. Her voice wasn't angry anymore. It was dead. Empty.

She turned and got into the driver's seat, then slid over to the passenger side as Ashley jumped in behind the wheel.

"Drive, Ashley," she ordered.

Chapter 172:

"Cailin, wait! Let me see your arm!" Hilliard lunged for the door handle.

Click.

Cailin locked it. She stared at him through the glass — eyes dry, expression flat. No love in them. No hate. Just a wall.

Ashley floored the accelerator. The tires shrieked, leaving black rubber streaks across the floor as the SUV shot forward, swerved around Hilliard, and sped toward the exit ramp.

Hilliard was left standing in a cloud of exhaust fumes. The smell of burnt rubber filled his nose. He stood there for a long moment, watching the taillights disappear. Then, slowly, he turned.

He looked down at Charla.

She was already climbing to her feet, brushing dirt from her knees, gazing up at him with wide, hopeful eyes. “Did they go? Oh God, Hilliard, that was terrifying. Take me home.”

Hilliard reached down and grabbed her arm. Not gently. He gripped it with a force that made her wince.

“Get up,” he growled. The sound resonated deep in his chest.

Charla flinched. “Hilliard, baby... you’re hurting me.”

“Don’t speak,” he said. His voice was terrifyingly quiet. “You are going back to jail. And this time, I will personally ensure you never walk out.”

“But — but your reputation—” Charla stammered.

“Forget my reputation,” Hilliard said.

High above the city, the speeding SUV was wrapped in silence.

Cailin sat in the passenger seat, pressing a towel Ashley had thrown her against her arm, phone held to her ear.

"It happened. She tried to stab me," Cailin reported. Her voice was flat.

"Are you safe? Where are the kids?" Kegan's voice on the other end was ice cold — the sound of a glacier cracking.

"We are heading to the safe house. But my apartment — I need the locket. The one from my mother. It's in the safe," Cailin said. "The one I use as Cali. The passports and drives are already with you?"

"Of course. But don't go there — it's compromised," Kegan warned. "That address was always temporary, and the children have never been near it. Good thing, too. I have men watching the building. A black van just pulled up."

At Cailin's apartment complex, a nondescript black van idled at the service entrance. Four men climbed out wearing maintenance uniforms, though they moved like soldiers.

They were hired thugs — not professionals like Kegan's men, but brutal breakers sent by Gregg English to find leverage, to destroy evidence. They bypassed the doorman with a bribe and a threat, took the service elevator to the penthouse, and within minutes were picking the lock.

Click. The door swung open.

Inside, the apartment was dark. City lights filtered through the floor-to-ceiling windows, casting long shadows across the modern furniture.

“Smash it all,” the lead thug whispered. “The boss wants any leverage — hard drives, papers, anything.”

They stepped inside.

On the coffee table, a small red light blinked on a drone.

Aron and Davy weren't there. They were miles away at the safe house. But their systems were very much active.

Chapter 173:

“Intruder Alert,” a robotic voice announced cheerfully from the ceiling speakers.

The lead thug — a man with a scar running through his eyebrow — stepped into the living room and kicked over a vase. It shattered.

“Check the bedrooms,” he ordered.

Miles away, in the basement of the safe house, Aron sat before a bank of monitors. He adjusted his glasses. The blue glow of the screens reflected in his lenses.

"Guests," Aron said.

Davy, sitting beside him with a bag of chips, grinned — a wicked grin, full of missing teeth and malice.

"Can I deploy the Sonic Scramble?" he asked, bouncing in his chair.

Aron typed a command sequence. "Authorized."

In the penthouse, a low, sub-audible hum began to emanate from the hidden speakers in the walls. It was a frequency engineered to cause intense nausea and disorientation.

The lead thug paused. "You guys feel that? My head is spinning."

He took another step, and the frequency spiked. A wave of vertigo crashed over him. He staggered, clutching his forehead, and vomited onto the expensive rug.

"What the hell!" Thug 2 spun around, yanking a gun from his waistband.

“Nightfall Protocol,” Aron said into his headset.

The smart home system killed every light. The apartment plunged into absolute darkness. Automated steel security shutters slammed down over the windows with a deafening clang.

Whirrrr.

A drone lifted off from the bookshelf, buzzing like an angry hornet.

“I can’t see!” Thug 3 yelled.

The drone hovered above them. Hiss. Hiss. Hiss. Targeted streams of a fast-acting sedative gas shot from the modified mechanism beneath it — not pepper spray, but a knockout agent.

Chaos erupted.

“I’m feeling... sleepy...”

“Shoot it! Shoot the drone!”

A single gunshot flashed in the dark, destroying a lamp and shattering the television, but the drone was too fast. It zipped around their heads, herding them like cattle until, one by one, they slumped to the floor and went still.

Kegan stood behind Aron's chair, watching the feed. His face was a mask of stone.

He leaned closer. On the high-definition monitor, he spotted a patch on the jacket of the thug still twitching on the floor — a private security firm logo. Titan Security. A subsidiary of English Holdings.

Something in Kegan's expression went darker than Cailin had ever seen it.

"They dared to enter your home," he whispered. "Where the children sleep."

"Did we do good, Uncle Kegan?" Davy asked, looking up.

Kegan placed a hand on Davy's head. His touch was gentle — a stark contrast to the murder in his eyes.

"You did perfect," he said. "Now it's my turn."

He walked out of the room, drawing his phone from his tactical vest.

“Prepare the convoy. And the armored SUV,” he ordered his lieutenant, Silas.

“Target?” Silas asked.

“The English Estate,” Kegan said. “Burn it to the ground.”

Cailin walked into the room. Her arm was bandaged, the white strip stark against her black shirt. She had heard him.

Chapter 174:

She didn’t tell him to stop. She said nothing about the law or justice. The law had failed her. Hilliard had failed her.

She nodded.

“Finish it.”

The iron gates of the English Estate were masterpieces of wrought iron — twelve feet high, topped with gold-leaf spikes. They had been designed to keep the world out.

They were not designed to stop a five-ton armored SUV moving at sixty miles per hour.

The night air shattered with the sound of twisting metal. The gates buckled and flew off their hinges with a groan of steel. The SUV didn't slow. It plowed over the debris, headlights cut, running dark. Two black vans followed in its wake like sharks trailing a whale.

Security guards poured out of the gatehouse, fumbling for their weapons. "Halt! Stop the vehicle!"

The side door of the first van slid open.

Flash. Bang.

Flashbangs rolled across the driveway. The world turned white, then deafeningly silent. The guards dropped to their knees, clutching their ears, blinded. Before any of them could recover, zip-ties were cinched around their wrists and they were dragged into the bushes — efficient, silent, gone.

Kegan kicked open the front door of the mansion. The wood splintered around the lock.

Gregg English was in the foyer, a crystal glass of scotch in his hand and a velvet smoking jacket on his shoulders. He looked up, his mouth falling open.

"Who are you? I'll call the police!" he stammered, backing away.

Kegan didn't break stride. He crossed the foyer in four steps and pistol-whipped the older man across the face.

Crack.

Gregg spun and fell, blood spraying from his split lip onto the marble floor.

"The police work for you," Kegan said calmly. "I don't."

From the hallway, mercenaries dragged Victoria English and Charla into the room. Charla had arrived by taxi just minutes earlier, fleeing the parking garage before the police could secure the scene, certain she was safe here.

She screamed when she saw Kegan.

"You touched Cailin," he said, circling them slowly, a predator in no hurry. "You touched Elia."

"It was a mistake! We can pay!" Gregg pleaded from the floor, clutching his jaw. "How much? Ten million? Twenty?"

"Money is useless to a dead man," Kegan said.

He signaled his men. "Take them to the balcony."

"No! No!" Charla shrieked, kicking and clawing as they hauled her toward the grand staircase.

Kegan paused at the landing. On the wall hung a massive oil painting of the English family — Gregg, Victoria, and Charla, looking regal and untouchable. He drove the butt of his gun through the canvas, tearing Charla's face cleanly out of the portrait.

Outside, a sleek sedan pulled through the broken gates. Cailin stepped out.

She walked through the destruction without hurrying. She stepped over the zip-tied guards without looking down. Her arm throbbed, but her heart was cold.

She wasn't here to stop anything. She wanted to watch.

Upstairs, on the third-floor balcony, Kegan's men were knotting climbing ropes around the ankles of the English family.

Chapter 175:

"What are you doing? Are you insane?" Victoria shrieked, her pearls rattling against her collarbone.

“Gravity check,” Kegan said.

They tossed them over the railing.

Three bodies plummeted — then jerked to a violent halt as the ropes went taut.

They dangled upside down, thirty feet above the stone patio, blood rushing immediately to their heads, swinging in the night wind, twisting and helpless, screaming into the dark.

Cailin stood in the garden. The scent of jasmine and roses hung thick in the air, threaded through with the metallic smell of fear.

She looked up.

Charla, Gregg, and Victoria spun slowly in the night air. Their expensive clothes flopped down over their faces, exposing their undergarments, stripping them of every last shred of dignity.

“Help! Help us!” Charla screamed. Her face was mottling to a deep, swollen purple from the blood rushing to her head. “My head — it feels like it’s going to explode!”

Kegan leaned over the balcony railing above, lighting a cigar. The flame illuminated the hard planes of his face.

"Comfortable?" he asked, blowing a slow stream of smoke down at them.

"Please! I'll do anything!" Charla sobbed. "I don't want to die!"

"Then admit it," Kegan commanded. "Loudly."

"Admit what?" Charla wailed.

"The boat. The drugs. The hit."

"I did it! I hired them!" Charla's voice tore loose and echoed off the mansion walls. "I wanted the brat dead! I hated her! I hated them all!"

Kegan held up his phone. "Recorded."

Tires screeched on the driveway. Blue and red light strobed against the tree line, but Kegan's armored trucks held firm at the gate, blocking any approach.

Hilliard had abandoned his car at the blockade and sprinted the rest of the way on foot. He ran into the garden and stopped dead.

He took in the broken glass. The mercenaries. The three figures hanging from the balcony like slabs of meat.

"Kegan! Are you insane?" Hilliard shouted, running toward Cailin. "Cut them down! This is murder!"

Kegan didn't move. He looked down calmly from the balcony.

"It's her call," he said.

Hilliard turned to Cailin. She stood perfectly still, her face pale in the moonlight.

"Cailin, stop this," Hilliard pleaded, grabbing her shoulders. "If they die, you go to prison. You lose the kids. Don't become them."

Cailin looked at him. Her eyes were voids.

"They wanted a child dead, Hilliard," she said calmly. "They didn't care about prison."

“We are better than them,” he begged. “We have the confession now. We have the proof.”

“You might be better,” Cailin said, pulling free from his grip. “I’m not. Not anymore.”

She walked toward one of Kegan’s men and held out her hand.

“Belt.”

The mercenary unbuckled his heavy leather belt and placed it in her palm without a word.

“Lower her,” Cailin said, pointing to Charla.

The rope whirled. Charla descended slowly until she hovered just inches above the ground, still upside down, her face swollen and grotesque. She saw Cailin standing over her.

“Cailin... please...” Charla wheezed. “I’m sorry...”

Chapter 176:

Cailin tested the weight of the belt. She wrapped the buckle end around her fist and raised her arm.

“You like pain?” she asked softly. “You like hurting little girls?”

Crack!

The leather struck Charla’s back — not a measured blow, but a lash of pure fury.

Charla screamed, twisting in the air, unable to escape.

Hilliard flinched. The sound was sickening. He took a step forward. “Cailin, don’t!”

A red laser dot appeared on his chest.

“Stay there,” a voice from the balcony said, cold and professional. Kegan didn’t even glance up from his cigar, but one of his men already had Hilliard sighted.

Cailin struck again. And again. She used her right arm, her uninjured side, but the force of each movement sent a jolting shockwave of pain through her wounded left arm, which she kept pressed tight against her body.

“This is for Elia!” Crack!

“This is for the lies!” Crack!

“This is for five years of my life!” Crack!

Charla sobbed and begged for mercy, her body jerking with every impact.

Cailin was crying too — tears of rage, of release, of sheer exhaustion tracking down her face. Her injured arm throbbed, but she didn’t feel it. What she felt was something deeper: the exorcism of the ghost that had haunted her marriage.

She dropped the belt. It lay in the grass like a dead snake.

She stood there panting, chest heaving, then reached down and grabbed Charla’s hair, pulling the swollen purple face close to her own.

“If you ever come near my family again,” Cailin whispered, her voice trembling, “I won’t use a belt. I’ll use a knife. And I won’t stop.”

She straightened and looked up at Kegan.

“Cut them down.”

The mercenaries cut the ropes. Gregg, Victoria, and Charla collapsed in a heap on the grass, moaning, too broken to stand.

Hilliard rushed over to check them. They were alive — shattered, humiliated, and terrified, but alive. He looked up at Cailin.

He didn't recognize her. The soft, artistic woman he had married was gone.

"Who are you?" he asked, his voice hollow with horror.

"I am the woman you failed to protect," Cailin said.

Kegan came down from the balcony. He walked to Cailin and put his arm around her waist — possessive, protective.

"Let's go home, love," he said, loudly enough for Hilliard to hear.

Cailin leaned into him. She looked at Hilliard and saw everything written plainly on his face: the confusion, the horror, and the lingering thread of hope still clinging on beneath it all. She needed to kill that hope. She needed to sever the tie so completely that he would never follow her again.

“He’s not just my protector, Hilliard,” Cailin said. Her voice was steady.

“We are getting married.”

Hilliard froze. The world stopped. The sirens, the moaning of the English family, the wind — everything vanished.

“Married?” he choked out. The word tasted like ash.

“Yes,” Cailin said. She took Kegan’s hand and interlaced their fingers. “So sign the divorce papers. Or I’ll let Kegan finish the job next time.”

Chapter 177:

She turned and walked away with Kegan toward the waiting car.

Hilliard knelt in the grass, surrounded by the ruins of the English family, and watched her go.

The weight that settled into his chest was crushing — the unmistakable certainty that he had lost her. Not just for now.

Forever.

The interior of Kegan's SUV was silent.

Cailin sat in the back seat, her hands trembling in her lap. The adrenaline was fading, leaving behind a cold, hollow shock.

Kegan handed her a bottle of water. He didn't touch her. He knew she was fragile right now.

"You were magnificent," he said softly.

Cailin took a sip. Her teeth chattered against the plastic rim. "I lied. About the marriage."

Kegan smiled — a sad, crooked thing. "I know. But the offer stands. Always."

"I can't think about that now," Cailin murmured, leaning her head against the cool window. "I just want the papers signed. I want to be free."

Back at the English Estate, police finally secured the scene.

Hilliard sat on the bumper of an ambulance while paramedics attended to Charla. She was bruised and weeping, clutching a blanket around her shoulders.

“Who did this?” Detective Miller asked, notebook in hand, surveying the devastation. “This looks like a military strike.”

Hilliard looked at the phone Kegan had left behind — the one with the recording of Charla’s confession. Then he looked at the detective.

“It was a dispute. A business deal gone wrong between Gregg English and some unsavory partners. Charla and Victoria were collateral damage,” Hilliard said, his voice flat.

The detective blinked. “Mr. Holloway, people were hung from a balcony.”

“And Mr. English will not be pressing charges, because doing so would expose his own criminal liability,” Hilliard replied. “It was a private matter that has been privately resolved.”

He wouldn’t let Cailin be charged with assault. He couldn’t allow Elia’s mother to become a felon — not after everything she had endured. This lie was his final, twisted act of protection. He would pursue Charla’s kidnapping charges separately, using the recording, but first he had to build a wall of fire around Cailin.

He walked to his car and called his lawyer.

“Draft the divorce papers,” Hilliard said. His voice broke. Tears leaked from his eyes, hot and stinging. “Give her everything — the alimony, the properties, full custody. Just get it done.”

“But sir, the assets — the board will be furious,” the lawyer protested.

“Just do it!” Hilliard shouted, slamming his hand against the steering wheel. “She’s marrying him. Because of me, she’s marrying him. Just — let her go.”

He hung up. He put his head against the wheel and wept — for the woman he had pushed into another man’s arms, for the daughter he had failed, and for a life now irrevocably shattered.

Alone in the dark.

The following morning, Amerigo Holloway arrived at Hilliard’s penthouse. He didn’t knock. He used his key.

Chapter 178:

Hilliard was sitting on the floor of the living room, surrounded by empty scotch bottles. He hadn’t slept.

“You let them attack the English family? Are you weak?” Amerigo barked, striking the floor with his cane. “Our stock is down four points this morning!”

“They deserved it,” Hilliard said, staring at the wall.

“And now Cailin is with that arms dealer? Aguirre?” Amerigo asked, his voice thick with contempt. “I heard the rumors. Engaged?”

“Yes,” Hilliard whispered.

Amerigo narrowed his eyes. He calculated.

“Aguirre is dangerous. He has resources. If she is with him, she is a threat to this family — she knows too much about our operations.” He turned toward the door. “I’m going to pay her a visit. Broker a peace deal.”

“Leave her alone,” Hilliard warned, without looking up.

“I need to ensure she leaves the country,” Amerigo said. “Permanently. Before she drags the Holloway name through the mud any further.”

He left with his security team.

Hilliard felt a cold dread settle deep in his stomach. He reached for his phone, but his hand was shaking too badly to dial.

The safe house was supposed to be a secret. But money buys secrets.

A convoy of black SUVs surrounded the small suburban house. They weren't attackers. They were lawyers. And the Police Commissioner.

Amerigo Holloway stepped out of the lead vehicle, leaning heavily on his cane, his white hair perfectly coiffed, his suit impeccable.

Kegan came out onto the porch. His hand rested on the holster at his hip.

"Mr. Holloway. To what do I owe the displeasure?" Kegan asked.

"I want to speak to Cailin," Amerigo demanded. "Alone." His voice was gravel and authority.

Cailin stepped out. She wore jeans and a sweater. She looked tired, but not frightened.

"Speak," she said.

Amerigo studied her. He saw the change. The girl who used to serve tea at charity functions was gone. The woman standing before him was harder — like a diamond.

"You caused a mess, girl. My stock is dropping," he said, waving a hand toward the convoy. "Assault. Kidnapping. Property damage."

"Your grandson's mistress kidnapped a child," Cailin retorted.

"Details," Amerigo scoffed. "I am here to make a deal."

He signaled a lawyer, who stepped forward with a leather portfolio.

"Sign this NDA. Admit no wrongdoing. Leave the country today," Amerigo said. "Never come back. Never speak to the press."

"And in return?" Cailin asked, crossing her arms.

"I won't prosecute you for the assault on the English family, or for the theft of company funds you call alimony," Amerigo said. "And Hilliard will sign the divorce."

He held up the papers. They were already signed. Hilliard's signature sat at the bottom — shaky, jagged, as though the pen had trembled in his hand.

Cailin stared at the ink. It was real. He had finally let her go.

“And safe passage?” she asked. “No tails?”

“You have my word. Just go. Take your... baggage,” Amerigo said, glancing toward the house. Something made him pause. The house felt too full.

“Fine. I’ll sign,” Cailin said, taking the pen.

Chapter 179:

She signed her name quickly — wrote “Cailin,” paused for the space of a heartbeat, then finished defiantly with “Morton.” Amerigo’s eyes flickered at the choice of surname, but he gave a slight, dismissive nod. Her name didn’t matter, as long as she was gone.

“We leave now,” Cailin told Kegan.

“Load the car,” Kegan ordered his men.

Amerigo watched closely as they carried out bags. Ashley emerged with a large pile of blankets — bulky, far too large for just clothes.

Amerigo’s eyes narrowed.

“Is that all?” he asked.

“That’s all,” Cailin said. “Goodbye, Amerigo.”

The armored SUV idled in the driveway, its engine a low, steady rumble.

Cailin climbed into the passenger seat. The windows were heavily tinted, almost black.

In the back seat, huddled together beneath the pile of blankets Ashley had carried out, three small forms lay perfectly still.

“Stay down,” Cailin whispered. “Don’t move until we are on the plane.”

“Yes, Mommy,” three tiny voices whispered back in unison.

Tires screeched on the gravel.

Hilliard’s Aston Martin slid sideways as he slammed on the brakes. He jumped out, leaving the door wide open.

“Cailin!”

Amerigo stepped into his path, planting his cane between them. “It’s done. She signed. Let her go.”

“I need to say goodbye.” Hilliard pushed past his grandfather and ran to the SUV.

Kegan put the car in gear. It began to roll.

Hilliard ran alongside the driver’s window and banged on the glass. Cailin lowered it just an inch — just enough to see his eyes. They were red, swollen, filled with a pain so raw it was difficult to look at.

“Don’t follow us, Hilliard,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” he wept, breaking into a run to keep pace. “For everything. I love you. I always loved you.”

“Sorry doesn’t fix Elia,” Cailin said. “And love doesn’t keep secrets.”

She rolled up the window.

As the car accelerated over the uneven gravel, a sudden jolt threw Elia off balance beneath the blankets. She popped her head up with a small gasp. Aron and Davy grabbed her immediately, pulling her back down — but for a single, unguarded moment, three heads were visible above the seat.

The sun struck the window at a perfect angle. The tint went transparent for the space of a heartbeat.

Amerigo was standing ten feet back. He was watching.

He saw a silhouette. Then another. Then a third.

Not one child.

Three small heads — one little girl, and beside her two other nearly identical profiles, their features a chilling echo of the childhood portrait of Hilliard that hung in his own study.

The car sped away, leaving a trail of dust.

Amerigo stood motionless. His heart knocked hard against his ribs.

“Three,” he whispered.

Hilliard collapsed onto the gravel, watching the taillights fade. He buried his face in his hands.

Amerigo walked over and looked down at his grandson — this broken man kneeling in the dirt.

“Hilliard,” Amerigo said sharply. “Did she have multiples?”

Hilliard looked up, confused, dragging a hand across his face. “What? No. She lost the baby. It was one baby.”

Amerigo stared at the settling dust cloud on the road ahead. A slow, predatory smile spread across his face.

Chapter 180:

“I think she didn’t lose anything,” he murmured. “And I think she has more than just a daughter.”

Rain hammered against the reinforced glass of the black SUV — a relentless drumbeat that matched the frantic rhythm of Cailin’s heart. The world outside was a blur of gray water and neon lights smearing into oblivion as the vehicle descended into the concrete throat of the hotel’s underground garage.

“The Sanctuary,” read the sign in elegant gold script. It mocked her. There was no sanctuary here. Not anymore.

Cailin stared into the rearview mirror, knuckles white against the leather armrest. Her chest felt tight, as though iron bands were slowly constricting her lungs.

A notification pinged on her phone. Kegan. The message was encrypted, dissolving seconds after she read it.

Storm has grounded all flights. Airport closed. Lay low for the night. Level 25 is secured.

Cailin let out a breath she hadn't known she was holding. It came out shaky and ragged.

"Mommy?" Elia's voice was small from the backseat. "Why are we stopping?"

Cailin turned, forcing a smile onto her face. It felt brittle — like it might crack and bleed. "Just a pit stop, baby. The rain is too heavy for the plane to fly right now."

The SUV came to a halt in a secluded corner of the VIP section. Her security detail — two men Kegan trusted with his life — were out of the car in seconds. They snapped open large black umbrellas, creating a tunnel of nylon to shield the group from the security cameras Cailin knew were watching.

"Hoods up," she said softly.

Aron and Davy pulled their dark hoodies over their heads without a word. They moved with a discipline that broke her heart. Five-year-olds shouldn't know how to move like shadows. They shouldn't know how to disappear.

Cailin scooped Elia up and wrapped her own trench coat around the little girl, burying Elia's face in her shoulder. She smelled of strawberry shampoo and innocence.

They moved quickly toward the private elevator bank. The garage air was damp and heavy with the smell of gasoline and wet concrete.

Just as the elevator doors began to slide shut, a flash of silver caught Cailin's eye.

Her stomach dropped.

A sleek silver sports car screeched around the corner of the entrance ramp, tires squealing against the wet floor. It didn't slow down. It drifted aggressively, headlights cutting through the gloom like predator eyes.

She knew that car. She knew the way he drove it.

Hilliard.

He had found them.

“Close it,” Cailin hissed, jamming her finger against the button. “Close it now!”

The doors hesitated, then began to slide shut. Through the narrowing gap, she watched the silver car slam to a halt. The driver’s door flew open.

Hilliard stepped out. He was soaked — hair plastered to his forehead, suit jacket ruined. But he didn’t look like a CEO. He looked like a man possessed. He looked directly at the closing elevator doors.