

Second chance 181

Chapter 181:

For a single second, their eyes met through the crack. His gaze was a physical blow, filled with a terrifying mixture of rage and desperation.

Then the doors sealed with a soft ding, and the car began to rise.

Cailin leaned back against the metal wall. Her legs were trembling so hard she nearly slid to the floor.

Aron reached out and took her hand. His small fingers were cold. "Mommy, is it Bad Dad?"

Cailin looked down at her son. He wasn't crying. He was calculating. He was too much like his father.

"It's a game, Aron," she whispered, smoothing his hair. "We have to play the ultimate game of hide-and-seek. Can you do that for me?"

"I'm good at hiding," Davy piped up, though his voice wavered.

The elevator chimed at the penthouse floor. Cailin ushered them out with quick, jerky movements. She swiped the key card Kegan had arranged. The lock clicked green.

They spilled into the suite. It was luxurious — all cream carpets and floor-to-ceiling windows — but Cailin didn't see the luxury. She saw a cage.

She rushed to the windows and yanked the heavy blackout curtains shut, plunging the room into semi-darkness. She couldn't risk a sniper. She couldn't risk a drone.

Down in the lobby, Hilliard was a storm in human form.

He marched toward the front desk, water dripping from his expensive Italian shoes, leaving a trail of dark spots across the marble floor. He bypassed the line, his eyes sweeping the elevator board, ignoring the startled gasps of other guests. Amerigo's information had been unnervingly precise: The Sanctuary Hotel, VIP entrance, penthouse level. Kegan was good, but Amerigo's network was older — woven into the very foundations of the city.

The night manager, a man named Pierre with a perfectly waxed mustache, stepped forward, his smile faltering. "Mr. Holloway, we weren't expecting—"

"The penthouse," Hilliard cut him off. His voice was gravel. "Who is in it?"

"Sir, that is a private floor. I cannot disclose—"

Hilliard slammed his hand onto the marble counter. The sound cracked through the quiet lobby like a gunshot.

"I don't have time for your protocol, Pierre," Hilliard snarled. He reached into his wet jacket, pulled out a black titanium credit card, and slapped it onto the desk. "The Holloway Corporation owns a twelve percent stake in this hotel chain. I am not buying the floor. I am claiming it. Now give me the key."

Pierre looked at the card, then at Hilliard's eyes — bloodshot and wild. This was not a guest making a request. This was a man standing on the edge of violence. Pierre swallowed hard and typed quickly, his hands shaking. "Of course, Mr. Holloway. Just — a moment." He slid a spare key card across the counter.

Hilliard snatched it without a word and strode toward the elevators.

Up in the suite, Cailin heard it. The faint ding of the elevator arriving on their floor.

Cold, sharp panic pierced through her.

"He's here," she whispered.

She looked around frantically. The suite was open-concept. Nowhere to hide. Nowhere safe.

Except the master bedroom closet.

Chapter 182:

“Quickly!” She herded the children into the bedroom and pulled open the double doors of the walk-in closet. It was massive, lined with cedar shelves.

“Go to the back,” she ordered, her voice trembling but firm. “Behind the coats. Do not make a sound. Do not come out, no matter what you hear. Do you understand me?”

“My tablet!” Davy tried to bolt back toward the living room.

Cailin caught him by the back of his shirt. “Leave it!”

She grabbed the tablet from the sofa and shoved it beneath the cushions.

“Get inside.”

The three of them huddled together at the back of the closet. Aron, thinking fast, pointed upward. “The vent,” he whispered to his siblings. “Uncle Kegan showed us. The escape route.” He began working at the decorative grate near the floor.

Cailin didn’t have time to watch. She shut the closet doors.

She ran her hands through her hair, pulling it loose. She kicked off her shoes. She grabbed a bottle of red wine from the minibar, popped the cork, and splashed it into two glasses. Her hand trembled, spilling some across the counter, but she left the mess. It looked sloppy. It looked real.

She needed to look like a woman alone. Or a woman with a lover. Anything but a mother.

Heavy footsteps in the hallway. Fast. Angry.

Beep.

The electronic lock disengaged.

The door handle turned. Cailin had engaged the security chain, but she knew it wouldn't hold. Not against him. Not tonight.

The door flew open and slammed against the chain with a violent crack. The wood splintered around the frame.

"Cailin!" Hilliard's voice roared through the gap. "I know you're in there!"

Cailin drew a slow, deep breath. She forced her face into a mask of icy indifference. She lifted one of the wine glasses, wrapping her fingers so tightly around the stem she was surprised it didn't shatter.

Bang.

Hilliard threw his shoulder against the door. The security chain snapped like a twig. The metal bracket flew across the room and struck the wall.

Hilliard stumbled into the suite.

He was a mess. His shirt clung to his chest, translucent with rain. His eyes swept the room in rapid, darting movements — scanning every corner, searching for small shadows. Looking for ghosts.

“Where are they?” he demanded, not even glancing at her. He was looking beneath the table. Behind the sofa.

Cailin raised the wine glass to her lips, the liquid sloshing, but she didn’t drink.

“Where is who, Hilliard?” she asked, her voice dripping with mock boredom. “My new lover? He’s in the shower. Should I call him out?”

Hilliard froze. He turned slowly to face her. The vein in his temple was throbbing.

“Don’t lie to me,” he whispered, stepping closer. The smell of rain and expensive scotch rolled off him. “Amerigo saw them. Three heads. Three children in that car.”

“Amerigo is senile,” Cailin scoffed. “Or perhaps he saw my bodyguards. They’re short.”

Hilliard didn’t laugh. He walked directly up to her, invading her space, looming over her, radiating heat and fury.

Chapter 183:

“I am going to tear this room apart,” he said, his voice dropping low and dangerous. “And if I find a single toy — a single shoe — God help you.”

He turned his gaze toward the bedroom door.

Toward the closet.

Hilliard didn’t wait for permission. He moved like a storm front, sweeping past Cailin and kicking a suitcase out of his path. It spun across the hardwood floor and crashed into the wall.

“Hilliard, stop!” Cailin shouted, chasing after him. “You have no right!”

“I have every right!” He spun around, his chest heaving. “If they are mine, I have every right!”

He stormed into the bathroom and ripped the shower curtain back so hard the plastic rings snapped, pinging against the tiles like hail.

Empty.

He yanked open the vanity cabinets. Towels. Soap. No rubber ducks. No toothbrushes with cartoon characters.

He growled — a sound of pure frustration — and marched into the bedroom.

Cailin positioned herself in front of the closet doors. Her heart was hammering against her ribs so hard she thought he might see it through her shirt.

“Get out of my way,” Hilliard warned.

“There is nothing in there but my clothes,” Cailin said, lifting her chin. “Are you going to sniff my laundry now? Is that your new obsession?”

Hilliard grabbed her upper arms. His grip was firm, bruising. He lifted her effortlessly, moved her to the side, and pinned her against the wall with one hand while he threw the closet doors open with the other.

Cailin stopped breathing.

The closet was filled with hanging coats and dresses.

Hilliard shoved the clothes aside, thrashing through silk and wool. He dropped to his knees and checked the floor.

Empty.

He stood up, breathing hard, staring at the vacant space. He looked confused. He looked shattered.

"They were here," he muttered, dragging a hand across his face. "I saw the car. Amerigo saw them."

"Amerigo saw what he wanted to see," Cailin said, rubbing her arms where he had grabbed her. "He wants leverage. He wants to control you. And you're letting him drive you insane."

Hilliard turned to her. His eyes were red-rimmed, filled with a raw pain that made Cailin's stomach twist.

"The baby," he whispered, his voice cracking. "If there was a baby — why hide it? Why put me through five years of hell?"

“Because you killed it!” Cailin screamed. The lie tasted like bile, but she spat it out anyway. “You and your whore! The stress, the betrayal — my body couldn’t take it! I lost the baby because of you!”

The words landed like physical blows. Hilliard flinched. He took a step back, his shoulders sagging.

Inside the ventilation shaft above the closet, Elia felt a tickle in her nose. The dust was thick. She scrunched up her face. Her breath hitched.

A-choo.

It was tiny. Muffled. Like a mouse sneezing.

But in the sudden silence of the bedroom, it was a thunderclap.

Hilliard’s head snapped up. His eyes locked onto the ceiling vent. “What was that?”

Cailin’s blood ran cold. “The pipes. It’s an old building.”

Chapter 184:

“That wasn’t a pipe,” Hilliard said. The despair in his eyes vanished, replaced by a hunter’s focus. “That was a sneeze.”

He grabbed a heavy wooden chair from the vanity and dragged it beneath the vent.

“Hilliard, don’t!” Cailin lunged and seized his arm. “That’s the maintenance shaft — there are rats up there! You’re imagining things!”

He shook her off. He stepped up onto the chair and reached for the vent cover, fingers curling around the metal slats.

“Come down,” Hilliard said to the ceiling, his voice softening. “It’s okay. Come down.”

Cailin looked around wildly. She grabbed a heavy crystal ashtray from the bedside table and raised it above her head. She would knock him out if she had to. She would go to prison for assault before she let him take them.

Just as his fingers began to pry the vent loose, the massive flat-screen television on the wall flickered to life.

A loud, jarring ringtone filled the room.

Hilliard froze. He looked over his shoulder.

The screen illuminated. A video call. Kegan's face filled the sixty-inch display — silk robe, glass of brandy in hand, looking relaxed and utterly arrogant.

"Hilliard," Kegan drawled, his voice booming through the surround-sound speakers. "Breaking into my fiancée's room? Is this how the American aristocracy behaves?"

Hilliard stepped down from the chair, but he didn't move away from the vent. He glared at the screen. "She's hiding them," he said, pointing at the ceiling. "They are in the vents."

Kegan laughed — a dark, rich sound. "She's hiding the anniversary gift I sent over. A rare sculpture. Very fragile. If you break my gift, Holloway, I will break your stock price in half by morning."

"You're lying," Hilliard spat.

"Am I?" Kegan took a slow sip of his drink, then tapped a command on the tablet beside him. A split screen appeared on the television: on one side, Kegan; on the other, a flight manifest for a private jet. The names Kegan Volkov, Aron Volkov, and David Volkov were highlighted. "Check the GPS on my jet. It landed an hour ago. The children you think you saw were my nephews. I dropped them at my sister's in Queens before Cailin checked in. They are quite small for their age — easily mistaken for five-year-olds."

It was a lie. A smooth, seamless lie, backed by forged documents displayed in real time. But it planted a seed of doubt.

Hilliard looked at the vent, then back at Cailin. She had lowered the ashtray, but her chest was still heaving.

“The tattoo,” Hilliard said abruptly, his mind seizing on the one piece of physical evidence he had seen. “The roses. You said it was from a crash.”

Cailin froze. “It was.”

“You’re lying,” he said, his voice dropping. “It’s covering a C-section scar, isn’t it? I saw it that night in the car. The texture — it’s not trauma scarring. It’s surgical.” He took a step toward her. “You had a baby, Cailin. I know you did.”

Chapter 185:

Cailin stared at him, trapped. The lie about the car crash had been her last line of defense, and he had just dismantled it with a single, damning observation.

“That scar,” Hilliard said, stepping closer, his voice low and intense. “It’s the only truth I have in this whole mess. So stop lying to me.”

The room fell silent, save for the rain battering the glass. The air was thick with five years of unspoken pain. Cailin glanced at the vent above his head, where her children were holding their breath.

She looked at the man in front of her — a man broken by his own blindness.

“You want the truth?” she whispered. “The truth is you don’t deserve it.”

The hotel phone on the bedside table chirped.

Hilliard didn't move. Cailin stared at it. Don't answer. Please, don't answer.

Hilliard reached out and hit the speaker button.

"Yes?" he croaked.

"Sir?" The cheerful voice of the front desk clerk filled the room. "My apologies for the intrusion. Will you be requiring the extra rollaway beds for the Family Suite package booked under the name Morton? We want to ensure the children are comfortable."

The air left the room.

Cailin stopped breathing.

Hilliard's hands went still. Slowly, he lowered them.

He looked at the phone. Then he looked at Cailin.

The guilt in his eyes evaporated instantly, replaced by a rage so pure, so white-hot, it was terrifying.

“Family package,” Hilliard whispered.

“No,” Cailin stammered, backing away. “It’s a mistake. He is trying to manipulate you—”

“Rollaway beds?” Hilliard rose to his feet. He didn’t stumble this time. He moved with lethal, deliberate grace. “For the children that don’t exist? For the miscarriage that nearly killed you?”

He grabbed the fruit knife from the untouched welcome platter on the table.

“Hilliard, no!”

He didn’t come for her. He turned to the sofa.

Slash.

He drove the knife into the leather cushion and ripped it open. Stuffing exploded into the air like snow.

“Where are they?!” he roared.

He overturned the coffee table. Glass shattered across the floor. He ripped the curtains from the wall, letting the gray storm light flood the room.

“You are lying to me! You have been lying to me for five years!”

He marched back toward the closet, the knife still in his hand.

“Come out!” he screamed at the empty room. “I know you’re here!”

Cailin watched the madness overtake him. He wasn’t going to stop — not until he had dismantled the room piece by piece, torn down the very ceiling if he had to.

She looked at the knife. She looked at the vent.

She had to stop him. Physically.

She kicked off her heels and took a fighting stance.

Hilliard was a whirlwind of destruction. He slashed the mattress, ripping the expensive Egyptian cotton sheets. Feathers from the duvet filled the air, clinging to his wet hair and clothes.

He turned to the wardrobe, the knife glinting in the dim light. He raised it, aiming for the wood paneling beside the closet.

“Stop it!” Cailin screamed.

Chapter 186:

She launched herself at him. This wasn't the socialite wife anymore. This was a mother protecting her young, fueled by every grueling hour of Krav Maga training Kegan had forced on her. She grabbed his wrist — the one holding the knife — and used her momentum to slam him against the wall.

“Drop it!” she yelled.

Hilliard roared, a primal sound, and shoved her back. He was stronger, driven by adrenaline and betrayal. He swung his arm wildly, trying to shake her off.

The blade sliced through the air.

Cailin didn't dodge fast enough.

The tip of the fruit knife caught her left forearm, slicing through her silk blouse and biting deep into the flesh.

“Ah!” She gasped, clutching her arm.

Blood bloomed instantly on the white fabric — bright and red — and dripped onto the carpet.

The sight of it seemed to snap Hilliard out of his trance. He froze, the knife trembling in his hand. He stared at the wound, then at his own fist, as though he couldn’t understand how the weapon had gotten there.

“Cailin...” he whispered. The knife clattered to the floor.

Cailin didn’t wait for his apology. She kicked it away, sending it skittering under the bed. She grabbed a towel from the bathroom and pressed it hard against her arm, teeth gritted against the stinging pain.

“You’re insane,” she panted, backing away from him. “Look at yourself. You’re a monster.”

Hilliard looked at her. He looked at the destruction surrounding him — the feathers, the broken glass, the blood on his wife’s arm. He took a step toward her, hands raised in surrender.

“I — I didn’t mean to—”

“Stay back!” Cailin shouted. “Don’t you dare touch me.”

Hilliard stopped. He looked utterly defeated. He slumped against the wall and slid slowly to the floor, sitting amidst the ruin he had made.

“I just want the truth,” he said, his voice breaking. “Why is that so hard? Why do I feel like I’m losing my mind?”

Cailin stared at him. For a moment, she almost pitied him. Almost. But then she remembered the three small hearts beating silently in the vent above his head.

Suddenly, Hilliard’s personal cell phone buzzed — not a normal ring, but a specific, jarring alarm he had set for emergencies.

He frowned and pulled it from his pocket. His face went pale.

He tapped the screen and put it on speaker.

“Hilliard! Oh God, Hilliard!”

It was Victoria English. Her voice was a shriek of pure panic.

“Victoria?” Hilliard asked, confusion cutting through his anger.

“It’s Charla! She’s at the old pier amusement park — she’s on the Ferris wheel! She’s going to jump!”

Cailin stiffened. Charla. Always Charla.

“What are you talking about?” Hilliard demanded, rising to his feet.

“She posted a video,” Victoria sobbed. “She said she can’t live without you. She said Cailin stole you back. She said if you don’t come — if you don’t bring her — she’s going to end it.”

Hilliard looked at Cailin. His eyes were wide.

“Bring me?” Cailin asked, disbelief edging her voice. “Why me?”

Chapter 187:

“She wants to say goodbye to the woman who ruined her life,” Victoria wailed. “Hilliard, please! The police are there, but they can’t get her down! She has a knife! She says she’ll cut the safety harness if anyone but you approaches!”

The call ended.

Silence returned to the room, heavier than before.

Hilliard looked at Cailin. He looked at her bleeding arm. Then his gaze drifted back up to the ceiling vent. He still suspected. He knew he was right. But a life was hanging in the balance.

“We have to go,” Hilliard said.

“No,” Cailin said firmly. “I am not going anywhere with you. That woman is manipulative. It’s a trick.”

“If she jumps,” Hilliard said, his voice dropping cold and hard, “and you refused to come — the press will destroy you. They will say you drove her to it. And if the press destroys you, Cailin, they will dig. They will find whatever it is you are hiding in this room.”

It was a threat. Clear and calculated.

Cailin looked at the vent. If the press camped outside this hotel — if police came to question her — she couldn’t smuggle the children out.

She had to leave. She had to draw the fire away from this room.

"Fine," Cailin said, grabbing her coat to cover her bleeding arm. "I'll go. But if this is a trick, Hilliard — I will never forgive you."

"I'll have security watch the door," Hilliard said, moving toward the exit. "No one goes in or out until we get back."

Cailin's heart stopped. If security posted outside the door, the children were trapped.

She had to text Kegan. She had to signal Ashley.

"Let's go," she said, walking past him. She needed to get him away from this room.

Now.

The drive was a blur of speed and silence. Hilliard drove the Aston Martin as though trying to outrun his own demons. Rain lashed against the windshield, fighting a losing battle against the wipers.

Cailin sat in the passenger seat, pressing the bloody towel against her arm. With her free hand, she typed a blind text to Ashley, keeping the phone low in her lap.

Code Red. He knows. Get them out via the roof. Now.

The reply came back in seconds. Laundry chute access, service elevator B. Kegan's team is on standby. Go.

Relief washed over her, sharp and dizzying. They would be safe. Ashley and Kegan would get them out.

The car screeched to a halt at the entrance of the Coney Island amusement park. Closed for the season, it was a skeletal landscape of rusting rides and flickering lights against the stormy sky. Police cruisers blocked the entrance, their red and blue lights strobing in the rain. An ambulance sat parked near the base of the Wonder Wheel.

Hilliard jumped out before the car had fully stopped. He ran around to Cailin's side and yanked the door open.

"Come on," he ordered.

Cailin stepped out into the rain. The wind whipped her hair across her face. She looked up.

Chapter 188:

The Wonder Wheel was massive — a giant iron spiderweb stretched against the black clouds. And there, in one of the swaying cars near the very top, was a figure in white.

Charla.

She looked like a ghost. Her dress was soaked through, clinging to her thin frame. She was shouting something, but the wind tore the words away.

Victoria English came running toward them, ducking under the police tape. Her makeup streaked down her face in dark rivulets.

“You brought her!” Victoria shrieked, jabbing a manicured finger at Cailin. “You witch! You did this to my daughter!”

Hilliard stepped between them. “Not now, Victoria. Where is the negotiator?”

“She won’t talk to them!” Victoria sobbed. “She only wants her.”

A police officer approached, his expression grim. “Mr. Holloway? She’s demanding your wife come up. Alone. She says she has a confession to make before she — jumps.”

Hilliard looked at Cailin. “You have to go up there.”

“Are you insane?” Cailin shouted over the wind. “She’s dangerous! She has a knife!”

“She’s suicidal, Cailin — she’s broken!” Hilliard yelled back. “Just go up there, listen to her, and talk her down. I’ll be right below you. The police have snipers.”

“Snipers,” Cailin repeated, laughing bitterly. “This is a circus.”

But she saw the cameras. News vans were already positioning behind the barricades. If she refused, she would be the villain — the heartless ex-wife who let the fragile fiancée fall.

“Fine,” Cailin spat. “But if she tries anything, I’m throwing her off myself.”

She marched toward the ride operator. The man looked terrified. He unlocked a car at the bottom. Cailin stepped in. The metal cage rattled around her.

“Send her up,” Hilliard commanded.

The wheel groaned and lurched into motion. Cailin gripped the cold metal bars and watched Hilliard shrink below her — small, helpless. As she rose, the wind grew stronger. The city lights spread out like a glittering ocean of indifference.

The wheel stopped.

Her car was level with Charla's. They hung suspended three hundred feet in the air.

Charla turned to face her.

She wasn't crying.

She was smiling — a cold, predatory smile that never reached her eyes. She gripped the safety bar with one hand. In the other, half-concealed in the folds of her wet dress, was a glint of steel.

"You actually came," Charla called out, her voice surprisingly steady. "I didn't think you were stupid enough."

"Cut the act, Charla," Cailin called back, leaning against the door of her cage. "What do you want?"

"I want my life back," Charla said.

Then she climbed out of her car and onto the maintenance walkway connecting the gondolas. It was reckless. Insane.

"What are you doing? Get back in!" Cailin yelled.

Charla walked along the narrow beam as the wind whipped her dress around her legs. She stopped directly outside Cailin's cage. She reached through the bars and unlatched the door.

"You took everything from me," Charla hissed. "Hilliard. The money. The status."

"I didn't take anything," Cailin said, stepping back. "He left you because you're a liar."

Chapter 189:

"He left me because of that brat," Charla snarled. The mask fell completely. Her face twisted into something ugly and absolute. "Elia. That little mistake."

Cailin went still. "Don't you say her name."

"Oh, I'll say it," Charla laughed. She stepped into Cailin's car. It swayed violently. "And after tonight, no one will say it again. Because you're going to have a tragic accident. A struggle to save a suicidal woman — gone wrong."

She raised the knife.

"It's a long way down, Cailin," Charla whispered.

The car rocked wildly as Charla lunged.

Cailin had no room to retreat. She threw her left arm up — the injured one — to block the strike.

Pain exploded through her forearm as Charla's wrist slammed directly into the wound. Cailin cried out, her knees buckling.

Charla slashed again. The knife tore through Cailin's coat, missing her ribs by an inch.

"Die!" Charla shrieked. "Just die!"

Cailin seized Charla's knife hand with her right and slammed her against the metal bars of the cage.

"You're crazy!" Cailin gritted out, straining to hold the blade back.

They grappled in the confined space. The wind howled around them. The car swung like a pendulum, metal groaning against metal.

Down below, the crowd gasped. Hilliard watched with his heart in his throat. From the ground, it looked as though Cailin was the aggressor — pushing a grieving woman, attacking her.

“Stop the ride!” Hilliard screamed at the operator. “Bring them down!”

“I can’t!” the operator shouted back. “The emergency brake is engaged — it’s jammed!”

Up in the air, Cailin managed to hook her leg behind Charla’s knee. She swept Charla’s legs out from under her. Charla hit the metal floor of the car hard. The knife skittered from her hand and slid toward the open door.

Charla scrambled for it. But the car tilted.

She slid.

She went through the open door.

“No!” Cailin lunged forward.

Charla fell — but not far. Her hand clamped onto the bottom rail of the doorway. She dangled there, three hundred feet above the concrete, her legs kicking at empty air.

“Help me!” Charla screamed. The bravado was gone, replaced by terror — raw and ugly. “Cailin! Pull me up!”

Cailin looked down at her. She saw the woman who had tried to kill her daughter. Who had tried to kill her.

She could just let go. She could kick Charla's fingers loose. It would be self-defense. It would be justice.

But then she thought of Elia. She thought of Aron and Davy. She couldn't be a murderer. She couldn't let them grow up knowing their mother had let someone die.

"Give me your other hand!" Cailin yelled, reaching down.

Charla reached up, sobbing. Cailin grabbed her wrist — wet and slippery. She pulled. Her injured arm screamed in protest, blood soaking through the bandage again, but she pulled.

She hauled Charla upward until her chest was level with the floor of the car.

"Grab the bar!" Cailin ordered.

Charla seized the vertical bar of the doorframe. She was safe. She was halfway in.

Chapter 190:

She looked up at Cailin — at the blood soaking through her sleeve, at the exhaustion carved into her face.

And she saw an opportunity.

Charla's expression shifted. The fear drained away, replaced by cold calculation.

"You shouldn't have saved me," Charla whispered.

She didn't climb in. Instead, she braced her feet against the outside of the car and wrenched Cailin's arm. Hard. She used her full weight to drag Cailin toward the open door.

"You're coming with me!" Charla screamed.

Cailin lost her balance. She pitched forward, her upper body flying out into the void.

Gravity grabbed Cailin. The world spun — sky, ground, lights — a kaleidoscope of vertigo.

She slammed her free hand onto the doorframe, fingers clawing at the wet metal. Her nails broke, but she held on. She was hanging half out of the car, staring down at the dizzying drop.

Charla still had her other arm, hauling her downward.

“Let go!” Cailin kicked out blindly.

Her boot connected with Charla’s shoulder. Charla grunted, her grip loosening.

Cailin kicked again — harder. This time, her heel struck Charla’s face.

Charla shrieked and released her to clutch her nose.

Cailin scrambled back into the car, gasping, her heart hammering like a trapped bird. She curled into the corner, shaking uncontrollably.

Charla remained on the maintenance walkway outside, blood streaming from her nose, staring at Cailin with pure venom.

Then she looked down.

The ride jolted. It began to lower — slowly, grinding.

They were coming down.

Charla wiped the blood from her face and surveyed the police lights below. She had lost the knife. Cailin was still alive. The plan had failed.

Unless.

Charla's eyes found a maintenance platform on the ride structure, perhaps fifteen feet below them now. Not a fatal drop — but enough to break a bone. Enough to look like a murder attempt.

"You pushed me," Charla said, a smile spreading slowly across her bloody face.

"What?" Cailin whispered.

"You pushed me!" Charla screamed at the top of her lungs.

And then she jumped.

Not a fall — a leap. She aimed deliberately for the maintenance platform below and hit the metal grating hard.

Crack.

A scream of genuine agony tore through the night. Her leg was twisted at an unnatural angle.

“She pushed me! She tried to kill me!” Charla wailed, her voice echoing across the empty park.

The Ferris wheel ground to a halt as Cailin’s car reached the bottom. Before the gate even opened, police were swarming.

“Hands where I can see them!” an officer shouted, leveling a taser at Cailin.

Cailin stepped out with her hands raised, still trembling. “She jumped. She tried to stab me first.”

“Liar!” Victoria English was screaming, clawing past the officers. “Look at my daughter! Look at her leg!”

Hilliard pushed through the line. He looked at Charla being loaded onto a stretcher, screaming in pain. Then he looked at Cailin — blood soaking her sleeve, hair wild, shaking in the rain. To anyone who didn’t know Charla, she looked like the aggressor.