

Second chance 201

Chapter 201:

“Don’t,” Cailin said, flinching away. “Just — is a doctor coming or not? I want to leave.”

“I’ll page one now,” Hilliard said. “It’s done.”

“Good.” Cailin pushed off the wall, ready to go.

“Wait.” Charla’s voice drifted from the room as the door swung open again. It was weak, tremulous.
“Cailin...”

Cailin went still. She didn’t turn around. “What do you want, Charla?”

“I’m thirsty,” Charla whispered, now framed in the doorway, leaning heavily on her father. “The nurse isn’t here, and my throat is so dry from the medication. Could you just pour me a glass of water? Please? As a peace offering?”

Hilliard looked at Charla. She looked pathetic, her lips cracked and dry. His gaze drifted to the water pitcher sitting on a tall, somewhat rickety IV stand with an attached tray near the door — right next to where Cailin was standing.

“I’ll get it,” Hilliard said, turning to press the nurse call button on the wall.

“No, please,” Charla said. “Let Cailin do it. I want to know she doesn’t hate me.”

Cailin rolled her eyes. It was a power play. A final humiliation. Serve me.

But she just wanted to leave.

“Fine,” Cailin muttered.

She stepped toward the IV stand — a lightweight metal unit on wheels, with a heavy ceramic water pitcher sitting precariously on the top tray. She reached up for the pitcher.

Hilliard’s back was turned. He was speaking into the intercom.

Charla watched Cailin, her eyes narrowing. The stand was positioned close to the foot of the bed. She extended her uninjured leg, her foot hidden beneath her long hospital gown, and hooked her toes around one of the stand’s wheels. The locking mechanism was loose — she had noticed it earlier when the nurse was changing her IV and had quietly kicked it free.

As Cailin’s fingers brushed the handle of the pitcher, Charla gave a small, sharp tug. Just enough force to unbalance the top-heavy stand.

The stand tipped.

Cailin heard the screech of metal wheels, then a sudden shift in the air. She looked up.

The unit was falling toward her.

There was no time to think — only to react. She gasped and threw her hands up instinctively, but it happened too fast to dodge.

CRASH.

The heavy steel stand slammed into Cailin, pinning her against the wall. The ceramic pitcher shattered against her shoulder. Metal trays and medical instruments rained down on her. A sickening pop echoed through the room as the full weight of the stand crushed her left shoulder — the one already wounded by the knife.

“Ahhh!” The sound that tore from Cailin was pure agony. She crumpled to the floor as the stand bounced off her and clattered onto its side.

Hilliard spun around, his face draining of all color.

“Cailin!”

He rushed across the room, vaulting over the spilled cart. Cailin was curled on the linoleum, clutching her shoulder, her face ashen and her eyes squeezed shut. Small, breathless sounds escaped her with every exhale.

“My shoulder,” she gasped. “It’s out. It’s out.”

Chapter 202:

Hilliard knelt beside her, his hands hovering, afraid to touch her. “Don’t move. I’ll get a doctor.”

“Oh my god!” Charla shrieked from the bed. “The stand — it just fell! It must have been unbalanced! Is she okay?”

Hilliard looked at Cailin. Then he looked at the overturned stand. He studied its position.

It had fallen away from the bed. Toward the door.

Gravity didn’t work like that. Not unless something had pulled it.

He looked at Charla. Her leg was extended from beneath the covers, her foot resting near where the base of the stand had been. She drew it back under the sheet quickly — a fraction of a second too late.

A cold knot formed in Hilliard's stomach.

"It just fell?" he asked, his voice very low.

"Yes! She touched it and it fell!" Charla cried, tears springing instantly to her eyes. "Hilliard, help her!"

He said nothing more. He slid his arms beneath Cailin and lifted her against his chest. She cried out as the movement jarred her dislocated shoulder.

"I've got you," he whispered into her hair. "I've got you."

He straightened to his full height, holding her close. He looked at Charla one final time. His eyes were dark, filled with a dawning and horrifying suspicion. Then he turned, kicked the door open with his foot, and carried Cailin out into the hallway, shouting for a doctor.

"Doctor! I need a doctor here — now!" Hilliard's voice boomed down the corridor, startling a nurse at the station.

He ignored the stares. He looked down at Cailin. Her head was lolling against his chest, sweat beading on her forehead. The blood from her split lip had smeared across his white shirt collar.

“Stay with me, Cailin,” he murmured, walking fast toward the Emergency Room entrance. “Just breathe.”

“It hurts,” she whimpered through gritted teeth. “Put me down.”

“Not until we get to a bed.”

Back in Room 304, the silence was suffocating.

Charla lay against her pillows, her heart hammering. She listened to Hilliard’s footsteps fade down the hall. She had pushed it. She knew she had pushed it. The look on his face — he suspected.

The door opened and Gregg slipped back in. He took in the overturned stand, the spilled water, the shattered ceramic, and turned to her.

“What the hell happened?” he hissed, closing the door and locking it behind him.

“She had an accident,” Charla said, her voice unsteady. “Daddy, Hilliard looked at me. He looked at me like he knew.”

“Knew what?”

“That I pulled it.”

Gregg dragged both hands down his face. “You are reckless, Charla. We had the upper hand. Why did you have to—”

“Because I hate her!” Charla hissed. “I want her gone!”

She drew a sharp breath, forcing herself to focus. “We need to be careful. Hilliard is going to start asking questions. We need to make sure there’s no evidence.” Her eyes widened suddenly. “The phone!”

“What phone?”

“Cailin’s phone — the one she dropped earlier, when Mom grabbed her!”

Chapter 203:

Gregg looked around the room. “The nurse cleared everyone out. It must still be here.”

“Find it!” Charla ordered. “She said she recorded the Ferris wheel. If Hilliard hears that recording — if he hears me admitting I wanted to kill her — it’s over. The wedding, the money, everything.”

Gregg dropped to his hands and knees without another word. He crawled around the bed, his expensive suit pants dragging along the hospital floor. He checked under the nightstand. Under the chair.

"It's not here," he said, his voice climbing with panic.

"Check under the bed! Deep under!"

Gregg flattened himself on his stomach and peered into the shadows beneath the bed. Dust. A dropped pen.

No phone.

He stood up slowly, brushing himself off, his face pale. "It's gone, Charla."

"Gone?" Her voice pitched into a screech. "How can it be gone? No one has been in here but us and the nurse!"

"Maybe the nurse took it. Or a cleaner."

"If a cleaner took it—" Charla seized a fistful of her own hair. "If someone unlocks that phone — Daddy, you have to find it. Bribe the hospital staff. Check lost and found. Buy everyone off. We cannot let that phone reach Hilliard."

"I'm on it," Gregg said, already pulling out his own phone. "I'll call security. We'll say it was stolen — say it had sensitive company data on it."

Down in the ER, chaos reigned.

Hilliard laid Cailin onto a gurney as a team of nurses swarmed around them.

"Dislocated left shoulder," Hilliard said sharply. "Possible concussion. She hit her head."

A doctor stepped in and shone a light in Cailin's eyes. "Ma'am, can you hear me?"

"Yes," Cailin gasped. "Just — put it back in."

"We need to X-ray first to rule out fractures," the doctor said.

"No time." Cailin seized his scrub top with her good hand. "Just do it. Please."

The doctor glanced at Hilliard. Hilliard gave a single nod.

“All right. On three,” the doctor said, gripping her arm firmly. “One... two—”

He pulled and rotated on two.

CRACK.

“AHHH!” Cailin arched off the gurney, her vision going white.

Then, relief — sudden and overwhelming. The bone slid back into the socket with a dull, deep thud. The sharp, tearing pain collapsed into a heavy, throbbing ache.

She fell back against the pillow, panting, tears streaming freely down her face.

Hilliard was there instantly. He took her hand, his thumb moving slowly across her knuckles.

“It’s over,” he whispered. “It’s back in.”

Cailin opened her eyes and looked at him. He looked wrecked — hair disheveled, eyes wild with something that looked dangerously close to genuine fear. For just a moment, he looked like the man she had married.

“Why,” she rasped, “are you pretending to care?”

“I’m not pretending,” Hilliard said. He took a damp cloth from a passing nurse and gently pressed it to her split lip.

“You watched her do it,” Cailin whispered. “You saw the stand fall.”

His hand stilled. “I saw it fall. I didn’t see her pull it.”

Chapter 204:

“But you suspect.” She watched the doubt move behind his eyes. “You know she did it. Just like you know she jumped off that wheel.”

Hilliard looked away. He couldn’t hold her gaze. He was a man standing on a cracking foundation, too afraid to look down.

“Mr. Holloway?”

A voice cut through the curtain.

Two uniformed police officers stood at the entrance of the ER cubicle. Neither of them looked friendly.

"Can I help you?" Hilliard asked, rising to his feet and positioning himself between them and Cailin.

"We received a call," the older officer said, "regarding a disturbance in Room 304. And an assault."

"The assault was on her," Hilliard said, gesturing toward Cailin. "The stand fell."

"We're not here about the stand," the officer replied. He produced a pair of handcuffs. "Mr. Holloway — we're here for you."

"Me?" Hilliard let out a short, incredulous laugh. "You're joking."

"Gregg English has filed a complaint," the officer said, stepping forward. "He claims you physically assaulted him and his wife during the altercation in the patient's room. He says you shoved Mrs. English."

"I stopped her from slapping my wife a second time!" Hilliard roared. "This is ridiculous. It's a misunderstanding."

"You can explain that at the station, sir. Right now, we need to bring you in. Assault and battery. Disturbing the peace."

Hilliard stared at the handcuffs. Then he looked at Cailin, lying pale and vulnerable on the gurney.

It was a trap. A blatant, clumsy trap designed to pull him away from her. Gregg knew that Hilliard was the only thing standing between Cailin and whatever the English family had planned next.

"I'm not leaving her," Hilliard said, crossing his arms. "My lawyers will meet you here."

"Sir, if you resist, we will add resisting arrest to the charges," the officer said, his hand dropping toward his baton. "Don't make a scene in a hospital."

Hilliard clenched his jaw and looked at Cailin.

"Go," Cailin whispered. She knew the game. "If you fight them, they'll only hurt you. Go."

Hilliard leaned down close to her. "I'll call Gavin. He'll be here in ten minutes to sit with you. Don't leave this bed. Do you hear me? Don't go anywhere."

"I'm not going anywhere," Cailin lied.

Hilliard straightened and turned to face the officers. "Fine. Let's go."

He held out his wrists. They cuffed him and led him away.

The moment the curtain swished shut behind them, Cailin sat up. The room tilted, but she forced herself to focus.

Ten minutes until Gavin arrived. Ten minutes of unguarded time.

She needed to get out. She needed to reach a secure line.

She slid off the gurney. Her legs wobbled beneath her but held. Her left arm was already in the sling the doctor had applied. She grabbed her coat and draped it over her shoulders to conceal the sling and the blood.

She peered through the curtain. The nurses' station was busy.

She slipped out, keeping close to the wall.

She needed a phone.

Chapter 205:

She passed a patient dozing in a hallway bed, his phone resting on the tray table beside him. She reached for it, but he stirred. She pulled back. Too risky.

She kept moving. She reached the waiting room. It was crowded.

Near the exit, two men in dark suits stood by the vending machines. They weren't police. They were private security — scanning photos on their phones, studying the faces of everyone coming and going. English family security. They were watching the exits. They were waiting for her.

Cailin turned and slipped into the women's restroom.

She locked herself in a stall and leaned against the door, breathing hard. She was trapped. No phone. No money. Injured. Hunted.

Her eyes traveled up to the small window high on the wall — frosted glass, tilted open for ventilation. Ground floor. A dark, narrow service alley on the other side.

It was her only way out.

She climbed onto the toilet. She pushed the window open as far as it would go with her good hand. Cold night air rushed in and struck her face.

She gritted her teeth as a fresh wave of agony radiated from her shoulder. Every muscle screamed in protest. For the children, she thought. The mantra burned through her like a current. She gripped the window frame with her right hand, knuckles white, and used the toilet tank as a foothold to push herself up. The motion sent a bolt of white-hot pain through her left side, and for a moment her vision went black. She bit down on her lip until she tasted blood, letting the sharp sting anchor her against the overwhelming tide of pain.

She didn't so much climb through as wedge and slide, her hips scraping against the frame. She kicked her legs until her feet found purchase against the brick wall outside.

Then she dropped.

It was only five feet to the alleyway below, but the landing jarred every bone in her body. She stumbled and went down on both knees in a puddle of cold, dirty rainwater. She gasped, clutching her shoulder.

She was out.

Before she could even push herself upright, a black, unmarked van screeched to a stop beside her. The side door slid open with a pneumatic hiss.

A hand — firm, but not rough — reached out and caught her good arm. "Kegan sent us," a voice said from the darkness inside. "We've been on standby. Get in. Now."

Cailin didn't hesitate. She let herself be pulled into the van's dark interior. The door slammed shut behind her, swallowing her in blackness as the vehicle accelerated away — leaving the hospital and all its ghosts behind.

The security office at the Wonder Wheel Amusement Park smelled of stale coffee and ozone. Banks of monitors covered the wall, displaying grainy black-and-white views of the silent, rain-swept park.

Chapter 206:

Hilliard stood behind the security chief's chair. His lawyers had secured his release on bail in under twenty minutes, but as they drove away from the precinct, a cold clarity had cut through his anger. Going back to the hospital without proof would only be another shouting match. He needed leverage. He needed the truth. He had ordered the car to turn around.

"Rewind that," Hilliard said.

"Mr. Holloway, I keep telling you — these cameras are meant for crowd control on the ground," the chief said, his fingers moving quickly across the keyboard. "The pods at the top of the wheel, that far out, it's just pixels."

"Enhance it. Sharpen it. Do whatever you have to do."

The chief sighed and clicked his mouse. The image on the main screen zoomed in on the top of the wheel, blurry and distorted by rain and distance.

"This is timestamped 9:42 PM," the chief said.

On the screen, two figures — little more than blobs of heat and shadow — struggled inside the small cage at the top.

“There,” Hilliard said, leaning forward. “Pause.”

The image froze.

One figure — clearly Charla, identifiable by the white dress — was halfway out of the cage door.

“She says Cailin pushed her,” Gavin said from the corner. He had met Hilliard here.

“Look at the arms,” Hilliard said, bringing his face close enough to the screen that his breath fogged the glass.

The figure inside the cage — Cailin — was not extending her arms in a pushing motion. Her body was leaned back, away from the door. Her arm was extended, but it was rigid. Taut. Like a rope pulled taut.

“She’s pulling,” Hilliard whispered.

He traced the line of Cailin's body with his finger. "If you push someone, you lean into it. You use your weight. Cailin is anchored. She's holding on."

"Play it forward," he ordered.

The footage resumed. The Charla-figure slipped. The Cailin-figure lurched sharply forward, nearly spilling out herself, then scrambled back from the edge. Then the Charla-figure dropped.

But she didn't simply fall. She paused on the structure below — just for a moment.

"What is she doing?" Hilliard asked.

"It looks like she's... positioning herself," the chief muttered, leaning in. "Before the final drop."

Hilliard straightened. The cold knot in his stomach turned to a solid block of ice.

Cailin hadn't pushed her. Cailin had saved her. And Charla had used that act of mercy to frame her.

"She lied," Hilliard said. His voice was terrifyingly quiet. "She lied about everything."

He thought about the IV stand — the direction it had fallen, away from the bed. He thought about the knife Cailin claimed Charla had brought to the wheel.

“Did you find a knife?” he asked the chief.

“No, sir. We swept the area. Nothing.”

“Check the roof of the ticket booth,” Hilliard said, gesturing toward the structure directly below the drop zone on the nearest monitor. “If she dropped it before she jumped...”

The chief picked up his radio and called a guard.

Two minutes later, static crackled through the speaker. “Chief? We found something. A paring knife — looks like it came from a fruit basket. It’s wedged in the gutter up here.”

Hilliard closed his eyes.

A fruit knife. Like the one in the hotel room.

Chapter 207:

Charla had brought a knife to kill Cailin. When that failed, she had jumped to destroy her instead.

It was madness. Pure, distilled malice. And he had let Cailin be arrested. He had forced her to sign a restraining order.

"Oh god," Hilliard breathed.

His phone rang. The hospital.

"Mr. Holloway?" It was the ER nurse. "We have a problem. Ms. Morton is gone."

"What?" He gripped the phone.

"She's not in her cubicle. She left against medical advice. We can't find her anywhere."

"Did she check out?"

"No. She just... vanished."

He hung up. Panic clawed at his throat.

She was injured. She had no phone. And she was out there somewhere, believing he was the enemy — that he had chosen Charla's side.

"Gavin," Hilliard said, spinning around. His voice was sharp enough to cut glass. "Get the car. We're going back to the hospital."

"To find Cailin?"

"No," Hilliard said, his eyes dark with a fury that made the security chief instinctively lean back in his chair. "To have a word with my fiancée."

Hilliard didn't walk down the hospital corridor — he marched. He was a man on a warpath, propelled by guilt and a rage so potent it blurred the edges of his vision.

He reached Room 304. The door was closed. He didn't bother with the handle. He kicked it open.

Bang.

The door slammed hard against the wall.

Victoria startled, dropping the spoon she had been using to feed Charla soup. "Jesus! Hilliard! You scared us half to death!"

Charla looked up, eyes wide. "Hilliard? Did you — is she in jail?"

Hilliard walked to the side of the bed and looked down at Charla. He took in the cast, the bandaged nose. He used to feel protective of her fragility. Now he saw only the cracks running through a porcelain mask.

"I went to the park," he said. His voice was low, vibrating with suppressed violence. "I watched the security tapes."

Charla went still. The spoon clattered onto the tray.

"It was dark," she stammered. "It was raining. You couldn't possibly have seen—"

"I saw enough," Hilliard cut her off. "I saw you hanging. I saw her pulling you up. I saw you jump."

"No!" Charla cried, tears spilling instantly. "That's not what happened! She tried to throw me! The camera lies!"

"And the knife?" Hilliard asked. "The fruit knife they found on the ticket booth roof — does that lie too?"

Charla's mouth opened and closed. She looked at Victoria for help.

"Hilliard, stop this!" Victoria shrieked, moving to block him. "She is the victim here! Look at her leg!"

"She broke her own leg to frame my wife," Hilliard said, turning to Victoria with disgust. "And you probably helped her plan it."

"How dare you!"

"Hilliard, please!" Charla sobbed. "I did it for us! She was trying to take you away from me! She's evil — she has secrets!"

"The only evil in this room is you," Hilliard said.

Chapter 208:

Charla's face twisted. The sorrow evaporated, replaced by a frantic, desperate anger. Her eyes darted around the room. She snatched the plastic knife from her dinner tray — dull and useless — and pressed it against her wrist.

"If you leave me," Charla screamed, "I'll do it! I swear I'll do it! I'll kill myself right now!"

It was a performance he had seen a dozen times. A manipulative tactic — designed to hold him in place through guilt, to make him stay. He had fallen for it before.

Not anymore.

He looked at the plastic knife dragging uselessly against her skin. He looked at her face, contorted in its practiced display of anguish.

He felt nothing.

The hook that had been lodged in his chest for years simply dissolved. He put his hands in his pockets and leaned back against the wall.

“Go ahead,” Hilliard said.

The room went silent.

Charla stopped. She stared at him, stunned. “What?”

“Do it,” he repeated, his voice cold and flat. “Cut. Or jump out the window. I don’t care anymore.”

Charla's hand trembled. She looked at the knife, then at him. She realized, with dawning horror, that the audience had left the theater.

"You... you monster," she whispered.

"No," Hilliard said. "I'm just awake."

Charla looked to Victoria, lost. She had no next move. She couldn't actually go through with it — she didn't want to die. She only wanted to win.

Victoria let out a wail. "My baby! You're pushing her to the edge!" She threw herself over Charla, clawing for the plastic knife. "Give it to me! Don't do it!"

It was a clumsy, desperate scene. Charla released the knife immediately and buried her face in her mother's chest, sobbing loudly.

Hilliard watched them both. It was like observing a bad soap opera he had been starring in for years without ever realizing it.

"Your acting has slipped, Charla," he said.

He turned his back on them.

“We’re done,” he said over his shoulder. “Don’t contact me. Don’t come near the office. And if you ever go near Cailin again, I will hand that footage to the police myself.”

“Hilliard!” Charla screamed his name as he crossed the threshold.

He didn’t slow down. He didn’t look back. He walked out of the room and left the toxicity sealed behind him, in a room that smelled of dying flowers.

Victoria ran into the hallway, her heels clicking frantically on the linoleum. She grabbed Hilliard’s arm just as he reached the elevators.

“You can’t do this!” she hissed, her face blotchy with rage. “You have a contract! A social contract! You are engaged!”

Hilliard shook her off as though she were a piece of lint.

“There is no engagement,” he said. “There never was. It was a PR stunt you and your husband engineered while I was grieving.”

“If you walk away, we will ruin you!” Victoria jabbed a finger at his face. “We’ll tell the press you abused her! We’ll tell them you drove her to suicide!”

Hilliard laughed — a dark, dangerous sound.

Chapter 209:

“Do it,” he said. “And I will launch a full forensic investigation into the Ferris wheel incident. I’ll have experts analyze the drag marks on the cage floor. I’ll have them dust for fingerprints on the safety latch. I’ll hand the knife we found over to the DNA lab.”

Victoria went pale. Her hand dropped.

“And while I’m at it,” Hilliard stepped closer, towering over her, “I’ll have my auditors go through the English Family Foundation’s books. I hear the IRS is very interested in charity fraud these days.”

Victoria stepped back, her mouth working soundlessly.

“Stay away from me,” Hilliard said. “And stay away from my wife.”

He turned and stepped into the elevator.

As the doors closed, he pulled out his phone and dialed Gavin.

“Boss?”

“Issue a press release,” Hilliard said, his voice clipped and precise. “Effective immediately, Hilliard Holloway has severed all personal ties with Charla English. There is no engagement.”

“Understood. Anything else?”

“Yes. Blacklist English Holdings from our supply chain. Cancel the logistics contracts. Pull the funding for their charity gala. I want them frozen out by morning.”

“Sir,” Gavin hesitated. “That’s a declaration of war. The board will freak out.”

“Let them,” Hilliard said. “Burn it down.”

He hung up.

He leaned his head back against the elevator wall. He felt lighter — and heavier at the same time. He had cut out the cancer, but the patient was still bleeding.

Cailin.

She was out there. Injured. Alone.

He checked his watch. It had been an hour since she left the ER.

“The hotel,” he said to himself. “She went back to the hotel.”

He ran to his car. He drove through the rain with no regard for speed limits or red lights, his hands tight on the wheel. He had to get to her. He had to explain. He had to tell her he believed her — and beg for forgiveness.

He pulled up to The Sanctuary, threw his keys to the valet, and sprinted through the lobby. Pierre, the manager, looked up from the front desk, startled.

“Mr. Holloway? The police were just here—”

Hilliard didn’t slow down. He drove his key card into the elevator slot.

The ride to the twenty-fifth floor felt like an eternity. He paced the small car, his heart hammering against his ribs.

Please be there. Please be safe.

The doors opened.

Hilliard stepped into the hallway and stopped.

The door to the penthouse suite was open — not just unlocked, but standing wide. The door jamb was splintered.

The hallway itself was in disarray. A vase lay overturned on the floor. Heavy boot prints tracked mud across the carpet in both directions.

“Cailin!” Hilliard shouted, running inside.

Silence answered him.

The suite had been destroyed — but not by him this time. The sofa cushions were slashed open. The mattresses were overturned. Every drawer had been pulled out and emptied onto the floor.

This wasn’t a search. It was a ransacking.

“Cailin!”

He checked the bathroom. Empty. He checked the bedroom. Empty.

He stood in the middle of the wreckage, turning in a slow circle. “Where are you?!”

He looked at the closet. The doors were open. The clothes were gone.

She had run. Or she had been taken.

Chapter 210:

A crushing weight settled in his chest. He had been too late. He had been playing games with Charla while Cailin was in danger.

He moved toward the closet, his shoes crunching on broken glass, and looked down.

Lying on the floor near the ventilation grate — which had been pried open — was a small object.

Hilliard crouched and picked it up.

It was a Lego minifigure. A tiny ninja with a red mask.

He stared at it. Small. Plastic. Undeniable.

The call from Amerigo's man surfaced in his memory — the mention of a "Family Suite," of children. He had dismissed it as a manipulation, a cruel lie designed to destabilize him. But this was real. This was proof.

She hadn't lost the baby. She had hidden them.

A boy's toy. His mind raced. Amerigo's man had thought he'd seen a little girl — Elia. But this was a ninja. Did Elia have a brother? Was it possible there were more than one?

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Hilliard closed his hand around the figure, the plastic edges pressing into his palm.

He had stood in this very room and roared, Where are they?! And they had been right here. Hiding. Terrified of him.

His phone rang.

He looked at the screen. Charla.

He nearly threw the phone against the wall. But he answered — if only to tell her to go to hell.

“What?” he snarled.

“Hilliard!” Charla’s voice was different this time. The whiny, manipulative tone was gone, replaced by something shrill and genuinely raw. “Help me! Please! They took me!”

“Who took you?” Hilliard said, his eyes closed. “The aliens?”

“No! Men in masks! I’m in a trunk! I paid a nurse to wheel me down to the lobby to find you — to apologize — and they grabbed me from the pickup lane! They said it was for Cailin!”

Hilliard went still.

“Stop lying, Charla,” he said coldly. “You’re in your hospital bed.”

“I’m not! Please! They have guns! They said — they said, ‘The Vault sends its regards!’”

Hilliard looked at the Lego figure in his hand.

“Good luck with that,” he said.

He hung up. He blocked the number.

He didn’t believe her. He couldn’t afford to believe her anymore. She was the girl who cried wolf, and she had cried it one too many times.

He slipped the phone back into his pocket and stood alone in the ruined room, looking at the empty space where her clothes had been.

“I will find you,” he whispered to the silence. “And I will find our children.”

Hilliard stood in the wreckage of the penthouse suite, the silence ringing in his ears. The storm outside had passed, leaving behind a heavy, humid stillness that pressed against the windows like held breath.

He looked at the Lego ninja in his hand. It was warm from his grip.

A child. Children.

The realization struck him like a physical blow, reshaping five years of memory in an instant. The miscarriage. The disappearance. The secrecy. She hadn’t lost the baby. She had hidden them.

Why?