

Second chance 211

Chapter 211:

Because I killed it, she had screamed at him. You and your whore!

She had believed he was dangerous. She had believed he would destroy them.

And looking around this room — destroyed first by his own rage, then by what he could only assume were English's men — he couldn't blame her.

"Mr. Holloway?"

Hilliard turned. Pierre, the manager, stood in the doorway looking pale and frightened. Behind him, two maids peered in with wide eyes.

"The police are downstairs," Pierre said. "They've gone now, but they received a report of a break-in."

"The men who were here," Hilliard said, his voice hard. "They had a warrant?"

Pierre wrung his hands. "It looked official, sir. But they were very aggressive. Not like regular police. Our security tried to intervene, and they were overpowered."

“There were no other men,” Hilliard said, walking toward him. His eyes were cold steel. “Do you understand? I lost my temper. I’ll pay for the damages.”

Pierre swallowed. “Yes, sir. You lost your temper.”

Hilliard walked past him to the elevator. He needed to think. He needed to find her.

If she had children, she needed supplies. She needed a safe house.

He thought of the network anomaly his phone had flagged earlier. The military-grade encryption. He thought of the van that had pulled up in the alley outside the ER.

Kegan.

Charla had mentioned The Vault. Kegan ran The Vault.

If Kegan had them...

Hilliard’s blood went cold. Kegan was dangerous. But Kegan was also — protective.

Kegan had called her.

Hilliard drove his fist into the elevator wall. The metal dented with a hollow boom.

In the trunk of a sedan speeding toward the docks, Charla English screamed against the duct tape sealing her mouth.

She kicked at the lid. Thump. Thump.

No one heard her.

The car hit a hard bump and she groaned, the pain from her broken leg blazing white through her whole body.

She thought of Hilliard. He had hung up on her. He thought she was lying.

For the first time in her life, Charla English was telling the truth — and it was going to get her killed.

The car slowed. She heard seagulls. She smelled salt water.

The trunk popped open.

A man in a ski mask looked down at her. Behind him, the dark water of the harbor churned in the night.

“End of the line, princess,” the man said.

Charla’s eyes went wide with terror.

Hilliard sat in his car on a cliff overlooking the city, the engine off, the world quiet around him. He held the Lego ninja up to the moonlight, turning it slowly between his fingers.

“I know you’re out there,” he whispered. “And I’m coming for you.”

“The hunt has just begun.”

Hilliard sat on the edge of the ruined sofa in the penthouse suite, elbows on his knees, the room around him in shambles. The silence was broken only by the rhythmic drum of rain against the floor-to-ceiling windows.

In his hand, he held the red Lego ninja.

Chapter 212:

He ran his thumb over the plastic mask, feeling its sharp edges. It was small — insignificant to anyone else. But to him, it was a wrecking ball that had just demolished the last five years of his reality.

“The security feed is gone, sir,” Gavin said, stepping into the room. He looked uncomfortable, his eyes moving across the slashed cushions and overturned drawers. “Whoever ransacked this place knew exactly where the servers were. They wiped the local backups, and the cloud sync was jammed.”

Hilliard didn’t look up. He kept his eyes on the toy.

“They weren’t just ransacking it,” he said, his voice rough. “They were looking for something. Or someone.”

“We found traces of mud near the vent,” Gavin added. “Small footprints. And drag marks — like someone was pulled out.”

Hilliard’s grip on the Lego tightened until the plastic bit into his skin.

Drag marks.

His phone buzzed against the coffee table. He ignored it. He didn’t want to talk to lawyers. He didn’t want to talk to the police. He wanted to find Cailin. He wanted to understand why there was a child’s toy in her room.

The phone buzzed again. And again — a persistent, angry pulse.

Hilliard snatched it up, ready to hurl it across the room. But the screen showed neither his lawyer's name nor Charla's.

It read: Unknown Caller.

The signal strength indicator was fluctuating wildly, suggesting a heavily routed call running through military-grade encryption. Hilliard swiped to answer.

"Who is this?"

Silence.

Then — a sound that made the hair on the back of his neck rise. Breathing. Small and shallow.

"Bad Man?"

The voice was tiny, distorted through what was clearly a sophisticated voice modulator rather than a poor connection, but the cadence was unmistakable.

Hilliard froze. His heart slammed against his ribs.

He knew that nickname.

“Elia?” he whispered.

There was a scuffle on the other end — a rustling of fabric. Then a different voice came on. Still young, but sharper. Controlled. A boy’s voice.

“You have five seconds,” the boy said. “Tell us where she is.”

Hilliard rose to his feet. The Lego ninja slipped from his hand and bounced silently on the carpet.

“Who is this?” he demanded, his mind racing. “Where is Cailin?”

“Don’t play dumb,” the boy snapped. “We’re tracking your movements. We saw your car at the hotel. We know you went inside. Where did you take Cali?”

The room seemed to tilt. They thought he had her.

The children — Cailin's children — were calling him not for help, but with an accusation.

"She's not with you?" Hilliard asked, the blood draining from his face. "I thought — when she disappeared from the hospital, I assumed she was with you."

"If she were with us, I wouldn't be wasting a secure call on you," the boy said. "Her comms went dark an hour ago. She missed her check-in. The last place she was tracked was the hospital you just left. So I'll ask you again — did you take her?"

"No," Hilliard said, panic rising in his throat. "No. I went to the hotel to find her, but the room was empty. It had been destroyed."

Chapter 213:

Silence on the line. Heavy. Terrified.

"Destroyed?" The boy's voice wavered, the tough facade cracking for just a fraction of a second.

"Yes," Hilliard said, gripping the phone with both hands. "Listen to me. I don't know who you are, but if Cailin is missing, we need to find her. Tell me where you are. I can help."

"We don't need your help," the boy said, his voice hardening again. "We just needed to confirm you don't have her. Now you're a loose end."

“Wait!” Hilliard shouted. “Don’t hang up! Tell me — are there three of you?”

“Stay away from our mother,” the boy said.

Click.

The line went dead.

Hilliard stared at the black screen, his chest heaving.

Three. The boy, the girl — and likely one more. He remembered the cryptic notification he had glimpsed on Cailin’s phone at the restaurant: Asset 1 has a fever. And then, just days ago, a spiteful anonymous text from Chloe had landed in his inbox after she was fired: Ask your precious Cali who Asset 1, Asset 2, and Asset 3 are in her contacts. She’s playing you. At the time he had dismissed it as bitter revenge, assuming they were Kegan’s clients. But now the math was terrifyingly clear.

And more urgently: Cailin was missing. The children didn’t have her. He didn’t have her. And the room had been turned over by professionals.

“Gavin,” Hilliard said, shoving the phone into his pocket. “Get the car. Now. We’re going to every hospital, every precinct. She’s injured — she can’t have gone far.”

“Sir, is it—”

“Just drive!”

Hilliard strode toward the door, stepping over the debris of his past life. He was halfway to the elevator when his phone buzzed again. He pulled it out, hoping it was the boy calling back.

It was Charla.

His face twisted. He almost let it ring out. But something — some small, nagging remnant of what he used to feel — made him answer.

“What now, Charla?” he snapped. “Did the aliens bring you back?”

“Hilliard!”

Her voice was a shriek. High-pitched, wet, and hysterical.

“Please! You have to help me! They’re putting me on a boat! There’s a man — he has a knife!”

Hilliard stopped walking. He listened to the background noise. Wind. Seagulls. The low groan of a boat engine.

It sounded real.

But so had the Ferris wheel. So had the suicide attempt with the plastic knife. So had the accident with the IV stand.

“You really don’t know when to quit, do you?” Hilliard said, his voice cold as stone. “Are you using sound effects now? Or did Gregg rent a yacht for your little performance?”

“No! It’s real! His name is Stone! He says — ahhh!”

A sharp slap rang through the phone. Then sobbing.

“Tell Gregg,” Hilliard said, stepping into the elevator, “that if he tries to extort me with another fake kidnapping, I will buy English Holdings just to liquidate it. I’m done playing these games.”

“Hilliard, please! I’m bleeding!”

Chapter 214:

“Goodbye, Charla.”

He hung up. He tapped the screen three times.

Block Caller.

The elevator doors slid shut, sealing him in. He felt a grim, hard-edged satisfaction. He had finally cut the cord. He was not going to let her manipulate him away from Cailin again.

He looked at his reflection in the polished metal doors. A man on a mission stared back.

He did not know that miles away, in a dark and damp shipping container, the woman he had just hung up on was screaming for her life — and no one was listening.

The air inside the shipping container tasted of rust and brine. A damp cold seeped into the marrow of Charla’s bones.

She was huddled in the corner, her expensive white dress smeared with grease and grime. Her hands were zip-tied behind her back so tightly her fingers had gone numb. Her broken leg throbbed with a sickening, rhythmic pulse.

“Please,” she whimpered. “My father will pay you. Whatever you want.”

Stone sat on a wooden crate across from her, cleaning his fingernails with a tactical knife. He didn't look like a thug. He looked like a soldier — efficient and bored.

"Money," Stone said, without looking up. "That's all you people understand. You think you can buy your way out of consequences."

"I didn't do anything!" Charla sobbed. "Cailin is the crazy one! She attacked me!"

Stone stopped. He looked at her. His eyes were flat, dead things.

"We saw the video," he said. "Thermal imaging from the helicopter. You jumped, princess. You tried to frame the Mistress."

Mistress.

Charla blinked, confusion cutting through her terror. "Mistress? You mean — Cailin?"

"That's her title," Stone said. He stood and walked toward her. "And you tried to kill her. Twice."

He grabbed a fistful of her hair and yanked her head back. Charla screamed.

“The Boss isn’t happy,” Stone whispered. “He wants to send a message. Not to you — you’re irrelevant. To Hilliard.”

He pulled a phone from his pocket. Charla’s phone. He dialed Hilliard’s number.

“He won’t answer,” Charla cried. “He blocked me. He thinks I’m lying!”

“Let’s see.”

Stone put it on speaker. It rang. And rang. Then clicked over to voicemail.

“You have reached Hilliard Holloway. Leave a message.”

Stone chuckled — a dry, humorless sound. “Cold. Ice cold.”

He dialed again, this time from his own phone with the number masked. Hilliard picked up on the second ring.

“Who is this?” His voice was impatient. Angry.

“Your fiancée has something to tell you,” Stone said. He pressed the phone against Charla’s cheek.

“Hilliard!” Charla screamed. “It’s real! They’re going to kill me! Please!”

“If this is about a ransom,” Hilliard said, his voice thin and distant through the speaker, “tell Gregg to pay it out of his legal defense fund. I don’t care.”

“Hilliard, look at the video! They sent you a video!”

“I’m not watching your production, Charla. I’m busy looking for my wife. My real wife.”

Chapter 215:

Charla felt her heart stop.

My real wife.

“She’s not your wife!” Charla shrieked. “She’s a whore! She has bastards!”

Stone sighed. “Wrong answer.”

He moved the knife.

He didn't stab her. He simply sliced — a quick, shallow cut across her upper arm.

"AHHHH!" The sound that tore from Charla was raw and primal. It wasn't performance. It was pure agony.

"Did you hear that, Mr. Holloway?" Stone asked calmly into the phone. "That's the sound of interest accruing."

"I heard it," Hilliard said, his voice like ice. "Tell your boss that if he wants to play games, he picked the wrong opponent. But if this is about Charla — tell him to finish the job. She's a loose end he's welcome to tie up."

Click.

The line went dead.

Charla stared at the phone in Stone's hand. The silence that followed was louder than her scream.

He had hung up. He had heard her pain, her terror — and he had mocked it.

“See?” Stone said, wiping the blade on Charla’s dress. “The boy who cried wolf. Eventually the wolf actually shows up. And the villagers? They just close their windows.”

Charla slumped against the metal wall. The wound on her arm burned sharp and hot, but the pain in her chest was worse.

She was alone.

Hilliard wasn’t coming. Her father didn’t know where she was.

“What are you going to do to me?” she whispered.

Stone smiled. It didn’t reach his eyes.

“We’re just getting started. The Boss wants a pound of flesh. And since you like cutting things...” He let his gaze drop to her hand. “We might start there.”

Miles away, Hilliard tossed his phone onto the passenger seat of the Aston Martin.

“Everything all right, sir?” Gavin asked from the driver’s seat.

“Fine,” Hilliard said, pressing two fingers to his temple. “English family theatrics. They’re getting desperate.”

He stared out at the rain-slicked streets. A small, stubborn unease pricked at him. That scream — it had sounded visceral. Too raw, too broken to rehearse.

He pushed the thought away. He had made the mistake of choosing Charla’s word over Cailin’s again and again. He would not let her pull him away from what actually mattered — not this time. This was a distraction, deliberately designed to break his focus.

“Focus on Cailin,” Hilliard said. “We have no leads. Start a city-wide search. I want every private investigator, every informant on my payroll activated. I want to know about every Jane Doe admitted to a clinic, every woman matching her description who bought a bus ticket. Go.”

“Sir.” Gavin hesitated, glancing at the GPS. “There’s one more thing. The men you had watching the English family — they’ve lost them.”

“Lost them? What do you mean, lost?”

“Gregg and Victoria English left the hospital twenty minutes ago. Our team followed, but a garbage truck blocked the side street. By the time they got around it, the English car was gone. Vanished.”

Chapter 216:

Hilliard went still, staring out at the dark, wet city.

It wasn't just Cailin who had disappeared. The board was being cleared.

"Find them," Hilliard said quietly. "Find everyone."

Cailin stumbled out of the hospital's service alley, the cold air a shock against her feverish skin. The van that had picked her up — Kegan's men — had been forced to abandon her two blocks later, their vehicle flagged by a police scanner broadcast describing a suspicious black van leaving the scene. One of the men had shoved a wad of cash into her hand. "Go to ground. Find a terminal. We'll re-establish contact." Then they were gone.

Now she was alone. A ghost in the machine. Hunted.

She saw them at the end of the block — two men in dark suits, the same kind who had been stationed at the hospital exits. English family security. They were expanding their search grid.

She ducked into a side alley and spotted her chance: a janitor's cart left unattended beside a service entrance. Without hesitation, she stripped off her blood-stained coat and stuffed it beneath a pile of trash bags, then pulled on a grimy, oversized janitor's uniform hanging from the cart's handle. It smelled of bleach and exhaustion, but it was a shield. A disguise.

She forced herself to walk, not run, blending into the city's late-night shuffle of service workers. Every siren made her flinch. Every pair of headlights felt like a searchlight. Her left arm hung dead and heavy in the sling, throbbing with a dull, nauseating rhythm.

She stopped.

Across the street stood the 12th Precinct — a beacon of blue light and uniformed officers. The law.

She took one step forward. This was her last chance to let the system work, before she disappeared for good. She would walk in. She would tell them everything: about Charla, about the attempts on her life, about the children.

Then a black sedan pulled up to the curb.

The rear door swung open, and Gregg English stepped out. He wasn't in handcuffs. He was smiling. He crossed the sidewalk and shook hands with a man in a white uniform shirt — the Police Captain. They laughed, clapping each other on the back like old war buddies.

Cailin froze, her foot hovering over a puddle.

Gregg handed the Captain a thick envelope. It disappeared inside the Captain's jacket in the space of a blink.

Cailin stepped back into the shadows, her breath catching in her throat.

There was no law for people like the English family. There was only inventory. And the police were just another asset they owned.

If she walked in there, she wouldn't be filing a report. She would be delivering herself — and by extension, her children — straight into the hands of the people trying to kill them.

She turned and ran.

She stumbled down the alley, slipping on wet garbage, her shoulder screaming with every stride. She needed a phone. A secure line.

Chapter 217:

She found a bodega on the corner of Pine and 5th. The neon OPEN sign buzzed and flickered in the rain.

She pushed inside. The clerk, a bored teenager, didn't look up from his phone.

Cailin went to the back. A payphone — an ancient, graffiti-covered relic — hung on the wall. She fumbled in her pocket for loose change from the cash Kegan's man had pressed into her hand. Her fingers shook so badly she dropped a quarter. She bent to retrieve it, wincing as her shoulder ignited with fresh pain.

She dialed. She knew the number by heart. It was the emergency line — the number Kegan had made her memorize five years ago.

Ring.

Ring.

“Talk,” a voice answered. Low. Dangerous.

“Kegan,” Cailin choked out.

“Cali?” The voice changed instantly. The hard edge vanished, replaced by a terrifying intensity. “Where are you? Your emergency comms went dark after the drop.”

“I had to go to ground,” she whispered. “I’m at a bodega. Pine and 5th. Gregg English owns the police, Kegan. I saw him.”

“I know,” Kegan said. “Are you hurt?”

“My shoulder — Charla—” She couldn’t finish. The room was beginning to spin.

“Stay there,” Kegan ordered. “Do not go outside. Do not talk to anyone. Three minutes.”

“Kegan, the kids—”

“They are with Ashley. They are moving to the safe house now. We were just waiting for you.”

Cailin let out a sob of relief. She slid down the wall and sat on the dirty linoleum floor. “Okay. Okay.”

“Three minutes, Cali. Stay with me.”

She pressed the receiver to her ear and listened to his breathing. It was the only thing anchoring her to the world.

Two minutes and forty seconds later, tires screeched outside.

Not sirens. Heavy, aggressive tires.

Two black armored SUVs mounted the curb and blocked the storefront. The doors flew open and four men in tactical gear poured out, securing the perimeter.

Then Kegan.

He strode into the bodega wearing a long black trench coat soaked through with rain. He looked like a wraith — a spirit of pure, cold vengeance.

He saw her on the floor.

His face, usually so carefully composed, fractured.

“Cali.”

He was beside her in an instant, dropping to one knee in the dirt. He didn’t ask if she was all right. He took in the sling, the blood dried on her lip, and said nothing. He simply scooped her up into his arms, indifferent to the mud on her clothes, and held her as though she were made of something fragile and irreplaceable.

“Burn the tapes,” he said to one of his men, nodding at the security camera above the counter.

The man vaulted over the counter without a word. The clerk yelped.

Kegan carried her out into the rain. The cool air hit her face, but she felt warm. She felt safe.

“I’ve got you,” he whispered against her hair. “No one touches you again.”

He placed her in the back of the SUV. The leather was soft. She closed her eyes.

“Go,” Kegan said to the driver.

Chapter 218:

The convoy peeled away and dissolved into the night.

Sixty seconds later, Hilliard’s Aston Martin roared around the corner. He slammed to a stop in front of the bodega, jumped out, and sprinted inside.

“Have you seen a woman?” he shouted at the clerk. “Blonde, injured, wearing a sling?”

The clerk stood behind the counter, staring at a smoking heap of melted plastic where the DVR had been.

“Man, I haven’t seen anything,” the clerk stammered, eyes wide. “I don’t know nothing.”

Hilliard looked at the ruined device. He looked at the wet boot prints tracked across the linoleum floor — heavy tread, not police issue. He walked back outside.

The rain fell on him, steady and indifferent.

He was too late. Again.

Someone had taken her. Someone powerful. Someone who knew precisely how to erase a trail.

Hilliard stood in the empty street, the water running cold down the back of his neck, and felt — for the first time that night — a flicker of genuine fear. He was no longer hunting a wounded, helpless woman. He was hunting a ghost protected by an army.

The gates to Kegan's upstate New York estate were massive wrought-iron structures that looked more like the entrance to a fortress than a home.

Inside, in the master suite, Cailin lay against a mountain of pillows. Kegan's private doctor had re-set and braced her arm. The pain was a dull roar now, muffled beneath a layer of painkillers.

The door creaked open.

"Mommy?"

Cailin's heart leaped. She tried to sit up.

Three small figures rushed into the room.

"Gently!" Ashley warned from the doorway.

But they couldn't be gentle. They were terrified.

Elia climbed onto the bed first, burying her face in Cailin's neck. "You were gone. You were gone and the Bad Man was looking for us."

Aron and Davy climbed up on the other side. They didn't cry. They simply pressed their bodies against hers, as though trying to physically anchor her to the bed, to the world, to them.

"I'm here," Cailin whispered, kissing the tops of their heads one by one. "I'm not going anywhere."

Kegan stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame, watching. His expression was unreadable, but his hands were balled tight in his pockets.

"The jet is fueled," he said quietly. "As soon as you're stable, we leave for the Swiss Alps."

“Thank you,” Cailin said, looking at him over her children’s heads.

“Don’t thank me,” Kegan said. “Marry me. Make it legal, so I can kill anyone who looks at you wrong.”

It was an old joke between them. Tonight, it didn’t sound like a joke.

“Sir.” A voice crackled in Kegan’s earpiece. “We have a situation at the main gate.”

Kegan tapped his ear. “What is it?”

“Hilliard Holloway. He’s demanding entry. Says he tracked his wife here.”

Cailin went still. The children stiffened against her.

“He found us?” Aron whispered, reaching for his backpack where he kept his tablet.

“No,” Cailin said quietly. “He found me.”

Chapter 219:

"I'll handle it," Kegan said, pushing off the doorframe. "I'll tell him you're not here."

"No." Cailin pushed the covers back. "I need to see him."

"Cali, you can barely stand."

"Get me a wheelchair," she said. Her voice was weak, but her eyes were steel. "I need to end this. If I hide, he'll keep hunting. I need to look him in the eye and tell him to go to hell."

Ten minutes later, the rain had stopped, leaving the air thick and cold.

Hilliard stood at the intercom by the main gate, soaked through. His suit was ruined. He looked like a man who hadn't slept in a week, his knuckles white against the side of the intercom panel.

The massive gates groaned and began to swing inward.

Hilliard stepped forward, something that felt dangerously like hope flaring in his chest.

But it wasn't Cailin running to meet him.

It was Kegan, pushing a wheelchair.

Cailin sat in it, wrapped in a blanket. She looked small. Broken. Her face was pale, bruises blooming along her jawline where Victoria's hand had landed.

Hilliard felt as though he'd been punched in the gut.

"Cailin," he breathed. He took a step toward her.

"Stop," Kegan said. Low. A growl. "One more step and I release the dogs."

Hilliard ignored him. He looked only at Cailin.

"I know," Hilliard said, his voice cracking at the edges. "I saw the tape, Cailin. The Ferris wheel. I know you saved her. I know she lied."

Cailin looked at him. Her eyes were empty.

"You know?" she repeated. "Now? You know now?"

"I was wrong," Hilliard said, stepping closer despite Kegan's warning glare. "I was blind. But I've fixed it. I broke things off with Charla. I declared war on her family. I'm here to take you home."

Cailin laughed — a dry, hollow sound.

"Home?" she said. "To the penthouse where you kept her clothes in the closet? To the life where your mother slaps me and you just stand there?"

"I didn't stand there," Hilliard said. "I defended you."

"You arrested me," Cailin said. "You made me sign a document that treated me like a criminal. You watched me get crushed by that stand and you hesitated."

"I took you to the hospital!"

"You took me to a prison," she said. "And then you left me there to be hunted by them."

"I came back!" Hilliard shouted. "I came back for you!"

"You're always too late, Hilliard," Cailin said softly. "Five years ago, you were too late. Tonight, you were too late."

“Cailin, please.” His voice dropped to a desperate whisper. “Stop hiding her. Let me see our daughter. Let me apologize to her.”

Cailin’s face hardened into stone.

“There is no child for you to see,” she said. “You’re delusional. Leave us alone.”

“I’m not delusional!” he said. “The call I received — ‘Bad Man.’ Your sons, Cailin. They called me. I know I have sons. Don’t do this.”

“Go home, Hilliard,” Cailin said. She looked at Kegan.

Chapter 220:

Kegan began to pull the wheelchair back toward the house.

“Cailin!” Hilliard lunged forward and seized the iron bars of the gate. “I won’t stop! I will tear this city apart!”

“You already did,” Cailin said, without looking back. “There’s nothing left to tear.”

The gates slammed shut with a definitive, metallic clang.

Hilliard stood gripping the cold iron, watching them disappear up the driveway until the darkness swallowed them whole.

He was locked out. Again.

And this time, he knew he deserved it.

Hilliard didn't leave.

He leaned against the hood of the Aston Martin, staring at the closed gates. The rain started again — a slow, miserable drizzle that darkened his shoulders and ran cold down the back of his neck.

Gavin stood beside him, holding an umbrella out. Hilliard waved it away. He wanted the cold. He wanted the discomfort. It was the only thing that still felt real.

"Sir," Gavin said carefully. "Your mother is calling again. Fifth time."

"Let it ring," Hilliard muttered.

"She sent a text." Gavin hesitated. " 'Emergency. Police involved.' "

Hilliard exhaled. “Probably Charla faking a heart attack because I blocked her number.”

He took the phone anyway. He answered.

“What, Mother?”

“Hilliard!” Jeraldine’s voice was unrecognizable — not shrill, not cold. Terrified. “They sent a video. Oh god, the video.”

“Who sent a video? Slow down.”

“The kidnappers! Charla — they have her. They cut off her finger, Hilliard. I saw it. I saw them do it.”

Hilliard straightened. “What?”

“Gregg is talking to the FBI now. They sent a file to your secure email. They said — they said it’s the price.”

“Price for what?”

“For Cailin,” Jeraldine sobbed. “They said, ‘An eye for an eye, a finger for a finger.’ They want us to suffer the way she suffered.”

The blood drained from Hilliard’s face.

He opened his email. It was there — a video file from an encrypted sender. Subject: Payment Due.

He pressed play.

The footage was grainy. Charla was tied to a chair in a dark room, screaming. A masked man held her hand flat against a surface. A knife caught the light.

Hilliard looked away before the blade came down, but he heard the scream. It was the same scream he had heard over the phone earlier. The one he had mocked.

The video ended on a close shot of the floor, and then a voice, calm and unhurried: “The debt is paid.”

Hilliard let the phone drop. It clattered on the wet pavement.

He looked up at the gate — at the eagle crest welded into the iron.

The Vault. Kegan.

“An eye for an eye,” he whispered.

This was not a random kidnapping. It was retribution.

Kegan had taken Charla. He was torturing her. Because of what she had done to Cailin.

And Cailin was inside that house right now. Did she know?