

Second chance 251

Chapter 251:

“Love?” Cailin let out a short, harsh sound. “You call this love? Bringing your grandfather to my door with a battering ram?”

“I stopped him,” Hilliard said. “I stood between him and them!”

“And what happens tomorrow?” Cailin asked. “When he comes back? Can you stop him then? Can you stop the lawyers? The judges? The media?”

Hilliard said nothing. He knew the answer. Amerigo was a force of nature — one that had been building momentum for eighty years.

“Meet me at the Four Seasons,” Cailin said. “Bring a custody agreement — a fair one. If you want to be a father, prove you can put their needs above your family’s ego.”

“I’m not leaving you here,” Hilliard said. “Amerigo has the building surrounded. If you try to run—”

“I’m not running,” Cailin said. The lie came out measured and quiet, her face arranged into an expression of weary resignation. She knew he wouldn’t trust a promise. But he might believe she was too exhausted to fight. “I’m tired, Hilliard. I want dry clothes and a hot meal. I’ll see you at eight.”

Hilliard studied her face, searching for the deception. He found exhaustion. He found fear. And something else — what looked, just barely, like surrender.

“Okay,” he said slowly. “Eight o’clock. But I’m leaving my men at the door. For your protection.”

“Fine.”

He walked to the door and paused with his hand on the handle.

“They’re beautiful,” he said quietly. “Thank you.”

He left.

The moment the door clicked shut, Cailin locked it. She threw the deadbolt and dragged a heavy metal chair under the handle.

“Kegan,” she said, raising her voice toward the ceiling.

“I’m here,” Kegan’s voice came through the hidden speakers. “The meeting is the misdirection. Amerigo’s men are watching this building. Hilliard’s are watching you. While every eye is on you at the hotel, my team extracts the children.”

“And how do I get out?”

“The hotel has a service elevator that bypasses the lobby. I have a team waiting in a laundry van,” Kegan said. “Hilliard will be in the restaurant, expecting a negotiation. You’ll walk out the back and disappear.”

Cailin was already on the stairs.

Ashley was upstairs packing bags.

“We’re leaving?” Ashley asked.

“We’re leaving,” Cailin said. “Tonight. For good.”

She looked at the clock. 6:00 PM.

Two hours to say goodbye to the life she had built here. Two hours to prepare to break Hilliard’s heart one final time.

The private dining room at the Four Seasons was an exercise in calculated opulence — crystal chandeliers, velvet curtains, and a table set for two with enough silverware to perform surgery.

Hilliard sat alone, an untouched glass of scotch in front of him. He checked his watch. 8:05 PM.

The door opened.

Cailin walked in.

Chapter 252:

She had changed. Gone were the wet, muddy clothes. She wore a sleek black dress that fit like a second skin, heels that clicked with quiet precision on the parquet floor, and a trench coat draped over her shoulders. She looked like a femme fatale from a noir film. She looked like she was dressed for a funeral.

"You came," Hilliard breathed, rising. Relief moved through him like a tide. He had been terrified she wouldn't show.

"I said I would," Cailin replied. She didn't sit. She stood across the table from him. "Where is the agreement?"

Hilliard lifted a thick leather folder. "My lawyers drafted it within the hour."

Cailin took it. She didn't open it.

“Does it give me full custody?” she asked.

“Joint custody,” Hilliard said. “Fifty-fifty. You stay in New York — I set you up in a townhouse on the Upper East Side. The children go to private school. I cover everything.”

“And Amerigo?”

“I handle Amerigo,” Hilliard said. “I’ll threaten to resign. I’ll threaten to tank the stock price. He won’t touch them.”

Cailin looked down at the folder. It was heavy. It was a golden cage.

“I can’t stay in New York, Hilliard,” she said quietly. “This city is poison to me.”

“We can go somewhere else,” he said quickly. “Connecticut. The Hamptons.”

“You don’t understand.” Cailin set the folder back on the table. “I don’t want your money. I don’t want your townhouses. I want freedom.”

“You can’t raise three children on the run!” Hilliard stepped around the table. “They need stability. They need a father.”

“They have a mother who loves them enough to keep them away from the sharks,” Cailin said.

Hilliard stopped directly in front of her. He reached out and took her hands. His palms were warm.

“I’m not a shark, Cailin,” he said softly. “I’m just a man who wants to know his children.”

She looked at him. For a moment, she wavered. He looked so genuinely desperate — so stripped of his usual armor.

But then she thought of Amerigo’s cold eyes. She thought of Charla’s knife.

“I need to use the restroom,” Cailin said, pulling her hands free.

Hilliard frowned. “Now?”

“Nerves,” she said. “I’ll be right back. Then we can talk about the townhouse.”

His face opened with cautious hope. “Okay.”

He watched her cross toward the en-suite bathroom. “Cailin,” he called out just before she reached the door.

She turned.

“I love you,” he said.

Her heart squeezed with a pain that had no clean name.

“I know,” she said.

She stepped inside and locked the door.

Immediately, she kicked off her heels. She bypassed the vanity entirely and moved to a plain, unmarked panel in the wall that resembled a fuse box cover. Kegan’s team had prepared it. She slid it open — revealing not wires, but a dark opening into a service corridor.

It was a tight fit.

She pulled herself through and slid the panel back into place behind her. The concrete hallway stretched ahead, dim and silent.

She ran.

Five minutes passed.

In the dining room, Hilliard checked his watch. Then he looked at the bathroom door.

"Cailin?" Silence. "Cailin, are you all right?"

He walked to the door and knocked. Nothing.

Panic spiked through him. He tried the handle. Locked.

"Cailin, open the door."

Chapter 253:

He didn't wait. He stepped back and drove his foot into the wood beside the lock. It splintered. The door swung open.

The bathroom was empty.

He stood in the doorway, staring. The window was painted shut. There was no other visible exit.

Then he saw it — the wall panel, designed to sit flush with the wallpaper, slightly ajar. A thin dark line where there should have been none. It wasn't a vent.

It was a door.

"No," he whispered.

He ripped the panel open. The empty service corridor stretched away into darkness, mocking him.

She was gone.

A sound tore out of him — raw, animal, somewhere between rage and grief. He drove his fist into the tiled wall. His knuckles split open.

"Gavin!" he roared into his headset. "Lock it down. Lock down the entire city."

The service elevator descended with a quiet hum, smelling of bleach and industrial grease.

Cailin slid out into the basement loading dock and landed near a cart of dirty linens. Kegan was already there, wearing a mechanic's jumpsuit.

"You're late," he said, helping her up.

"He talked a lot," Cailin said, brushing lint from her black dress. "Where are they?"

"In the van. Loading dock."

They ran.

They burst out into the cool night air. A nondescript white van idled nearby, Ashley in the driver's seat. The children were in the back.

"Go!" Cailin called, diving into the passenger seat.

The van screamed out of the alley.

"Hilliard has the airport locked down," Kegan said from the back, studying a tablet. "Plan A is gone. We're on Plan B — the water. Private dock at Chelsea Piers."

Ashley took a sharp left toward the West Side Highway. “Are you sure he won’t be there?”

“He’ll be watching the main marinas, the public slips. This dock is off-book. We should—” Kegan stopped.

He slammed his hand on the seat. The satellite image on his screen showed two of Hilliard’s black SUVs sitting squarely across the entrance to the private pier.

“He’s faster than I thought,” Kegan said. “Plan B is gone. He’s cut off the water.”

“What’s left?” Cailin asked, her stomach dropping.

“Plan C,” Kegan said grimly. “The airport. Hilliard locked down the major fields, but my pilot found a loophole — a twenty-minute window at a private strip in Teterboro before Hilliard’s new FAA restrictions take full effect. It’s a suicide run, but it’s all we have.”

Ashley floored it.

They hit 10th Avenue.

Without warning, a series of black, plate-less SUVs pulled out of side streets ahead, forming a rolling barricade across the road. Cars hit their brakes. Horns erupted.

“What the hell?” Ashley slammed the brakes to avoid plowing into a taxi.

Cailin looked at the intersection. The SUVs were methodically boxing them in, manufacturing gridlock from the outside in.

“It’s Hilliard,” she said. “He’s using his own men to shut down the street.”

“He’s shutting down a section of New York City to catch us?” Ashley said, incredulous. “That’s supervillain territory.”

“The van can’t get through,” Kegan said. He kicked the back doors open. “Plan D. Bikes.”

Chapter 254:

Two Ducati motorcycles were secured inside the van.

“Aron and Davy, with me,” Kegan ordered. “Cailin, you and Elia ride with Ashley.”

Ashley was already in full leathers, straddling the second bike, helmet buckled. She gave Cailin a sharp nod.

“I cannot ride on the back of a bike dressed like this,” Cailin said, gesturing at her form-fitting dress.

“Improvise,” Kegan said, tossing her a helmet and a tactical harness.

Cailin muttered under her breath, grabbed the hem of the designer dress with both hands, and tore the fabric at the seam up to her thighs. She fastened the harness across her chest, then strapped Elia against her, pulling every strap brutally tight before double-checking each buckle.

“Hold on tight, baby,” she whispered.

“I’m scared,” Elia whimpered.

“Be brave. Like Batman.”

Cailin climbed onto the back of the Ducati and locked her arms around Ashley’s waist. Kegan took the boys on his — one in front, one behind.

They roared up onto the sidewalk, weaving between stalled cars and startled pedestrians.

Sirens wailed in the distance, growing closer.

“He knows we’re moving,” Cailin shouted over the wind.

They hit the West Side Highway. It was a parking lot. Ashley drove down the center line, the mirrors clipping the sides of motionless cars on both sides.

The George Washington Bridge rose ahead of them.

Blue and red lights strobed at the entrance. A police barricade stretched across the road.

“He tipped them off!” Cailin yelled.

“We can’t stop!” Kegan called back.

“Follow me!”

Kegan didn’t aim for the toll booths. He aimed for the maintenance ramp on the far side — a steep gravel incline. He hit it at sixty miles an hour. The bike launched into the air and landed hard on the pedestrian walkway of the bridge. Ashley followed without hesitation.

Cailin felt the bike leave the ground. For one suspended second, she was weightless. Then — slam. The suspension groaned beneath them. Elia screamed.

They were on the walkway.

Far below, a black helicopter descended through the dark, its searchlight sweeping across the gridlocked traffic. It touched down on a closed-off section of the bridge approach. Hilliard jumped out before the skids fully settled. He grabbed a megaphone from a nearby officer.

“CAILIN!” His voice boomed out over the water. “STOP! IT’S TOO DANGEROUS!”

He wasn’t ordering her to surrender. He sounded terrified for her.

Cailin didn’t look down. She pressed her face against Ashley’s back and held on with everything she had as they accelerated across the bridge, the lights of New Jersey swelling ahead of them.

Toward freedom.

Hilliard threw the megaphone to the ground.

“Get the helicopter back in the air,” he told Gavin. “Meet them at the airport.”

The wind whipped Cailin's hair into a frenzy as they tore down the New Jersey Turnpike. The airport was five miles ahead.

Without warning, headlights blazed from the right.

A massive semi-truck lurched out of its lane, cutting directly across their path. It wasn't an accident. The truck was aiming for them.

Chapter 255:

"Look out!" Kegan screamed from the lead bike.

Ashley wrenched the handlebars left. The bike skidded violently, sparks screeching from the footpeg as it raked the asphalt. The truck's bumper missed their rear tire by inches.

"Who is that?" Cailin yelled. "Hilliard wouldn't do this!"

"It's not Hilliard!" Kegan shouted back. "It's a mercenary! English money!"

Charla. Even in defeat, she had paid for one last strike.

The truck corrected and came at them again.

Kegan twisted the throttle and pulled his bike alongside Ashley's, putting himself between them and the truck. He reached into his jacket and drew a Glock.

"Hold steady!" he yelled over the engine's roar.

He aimed with one hand, his body a wall between the threat and Cailin.

Bang. Bang.

The muzzle flashes split the dark.

The truck's front tire exploded. The massive vehicle lurched hard to the right, crashed through the guardrail, and plowed into the ditch beside the road.

Ashley fought to keep her bike upright, every muscle straining. She brought it back under control — but the violent swerve sent a bolt of white-hot pain tearing through Cailin's injured shoulder.

"We're here!" Kegan called, pointing ahead.

The gates of Teterboro Airport appeared through the dark. Kegan hit them at speed, the chain link snapping. Ashley followed him through.

They raced onto the tarmac.

The Gulfstream was there — engines whining, stairs down, waiting.

They skidded to a stop at the base of the steps.

“Go, go, go!” Kegan shouted, lifting the boys off his bike and propelling them toward the plane.

Cailin unstrapped Elia. “Run to the plane, baby! Run!”

Elia scrambled up the stairs.

Cailin dismounted. Her legs felt like they belonged to someone else.

A roar from above.

A black helicopter descended rapidly and touched down on a designated helipad fifty yards away. The rotors were still spinning when the door slid open and Hilliard jumped out. He sprinted toward a line of black SUVs that screeched to a halt in a solid wall across the Gulfstream's path. Four armed guards flanked him.

"Stop the plane!" Hilliard commanded.

"No!" Cailin pulled the weapon Kegan had given her and leveled it at Hilliard.

He stopped. He looked at the gun. He looked at her face.

"You won't shoot me, Cailin," he said, and walked toward her. The wash from the jet engines tore at his clothes.

"Try me," Cailin said. Her hand was trembling.

"Look at you," Hilliard said, his voice raw. "You're bleeding. You're exhausted. Just stop. Please."

"I'm leaving," Cailin said, stepping backward toward the stairs.

"I can't let you take them," Hilliard said. "They're my children too."

While he spoke, two of his guards had quietly circled around the tail of the plane.

Cailin didn't see them.

As she lifted her foot onto the first step, a hand closed around her ankle. She kicked out hard, but a second hand seized her arm and wrenched the gun away.

"No!"

Chapter 256:

In the chaos, Elia — who had come back to the doorway to look for her mother — was grabbed. A guard caught her around the waist and lifted her off the stairs.

"Mommy!"

"Elia!" Cailin lunged forward, but Hilliard was already there. He wrapped his arms around her from behind, locking her arms to her sides.

"It's over," Hilliard said, his voice strained.

"Let her go!" Cailin screamed, twisting and thrashing against him. "Hilliard, let her go!"

The guard carried a kicking, shrieking Elia toward one of the waiting SUVs.

“Take her to the hospital,” Hilliard ordered. “Keep her safe.”

“No! No! No!” The sounds tearing out of Cailin were not words anymore. They were the sound of something breaking that might never be made whole again.

The tarmac was a scene from hell. The jet engines whined, the helicopter rotors chopped the air, and Elia’s screams cut through the dark.

Hilliard held Cailin tightly. She had stopped fighting. She went limp against him, sobbing.

“I’m sorry,” Hilliard whispered into her hair. “I’m doing this for us. For her.”

“You’re a monster,” Cailin choked out.

“I’m a father,” Hilliard said.

Kegan appeared at the top of the stairs, an assault rifle in his hands.

“Let her go, Hilliard!” he shouted.

Hilliard’s guards raised their weapons. A standoff settled over the tarmac like a held breath.

“You fire, and we all die,” Hilliard called up to him. “There’s jet fuel everywhere.”

Kegan looked at Cailin. He saw the desperation in her eyes. He saw Elia being loaded into the SUV.

He reached into his vest and pulled out two canisters.

Smoke grenades.

He yanked the pins and hurled them onto the tarmac.

Hisss.

Thick white smoke erupted and swallowed everything.

“Secure the girl!” Hilliard shouted, blinded.

In the smoke, Cailin came alive.

She didn’t run for the plane. She twisted in Hilliard’s grip and raised her hands to his face — not to strike, but to hold him still. To make him look at her.

“Hilliard,” she said. Her voice was calm. Eerily calm.

He looked down, trying to find her face through the haze.

“If I die tonight,” she whispered, her lips brushing his ear, “will you regret this?”

“What?” Hilliard frowned.

As he spoke, her left thumb drove precisely into the pressure point just below his jaw. A white-hot bolt of paralyzing pain detonated through his neck. His whole body seized involuntarily, his grip failing all at once.

Hilliard let out a choked, guttural sound and staggered.

Cailin shoved him away and disappeared into the smoke.

“Cailin!” Hilliard clutched his neck, the muscles already beginning to spasm. He lurched toward the stairs. “She’s not here!” Kegan shouted from the doorway. “She ran the other way!”

Hilliard stopped.

The other way. Toward the highway.

“No,” he whispered.

He turned and ran through the smoke — away from the plane, away from the helicopter — and burst out of the white cloud into open darkness.

A figure was sprinting across the black grass toward the perimeter fence. Toward the interstate.

She wasn’t trying to escape. She was trying to draw them away from the children.

Or worse.

Chapter 257:

“Don’t do it!” Hilliard screamed, running faster than he ever had in his life.

Cailin scrambled up the embankment and onto the highway shoulder. Cars whipped past at seventy miles an hour, their headlights blazing streaks across the dark.

She stood at the edge and looked back.

The Gulfstream was taxiing. Kegan was taking off. He had the boys. He was saving who he could.

She smiled — a small, sad, broken thing.

Hilliard was clawing his way up the embankment behind her. “Cailin! Get away from the road!”

She turned to face the traffic.

A truck was coming. A massive 18-wheeler, its headlights flooding the lane.

She didn’t step back.

Instead, she moved quickly along the shoulder to the specific mile marker Kegan had briefed her on during their emergency planning. Hidden in the tall, overgrown weeds behind the guardrail was a heavy, weighted medical dummy, staged by Kegan's ground team hours earlier for exactly this contingency.

With a grunt of effort that tore at her abdominal stitches, Cailin grabbed the silicone figure and hauled it up against the metal rail. She timed the move with precision.

"NO!" Hilliard's scream shredded his throat.

The truck driver leaned on his air horn. A blast split the night. Brakes locked up. Tires screamed against asphalt.

Rather than stepping forward, Cailin shoved the dummy over the guardrail directly into the truck's path and simultaneously threw herself backward — tumbling over the edge and down into the steep, grassy ditch running alongside the road.

The truck's grill connected with the dummy at full speed, rupturing the theatrical blood packs concealed inside it, spraying a sheet of red across the asphalt.

Cailin tumbled violently down the embankment and slid into a concrete culvert hidden beneath the road. The impact was brutal — a sickening crack, a flash of white-hot pain — but she was out of sight. Out of reach.

The truck ground to a halt a hundred yards down the highway.

Hilliard fell to his knees on the asphalt. The world went silent around him. The sound of the jet climbing into the darkness behind him faded to a dim, distant roar.

He crawled. He couldn't make himself stand. He crawled through the wet grass to where the shape lay — twisted, one arm bent at an unnatural angle, blood pooling black beneath the head and soaking into the dirt.

"Cailin..." He reached out and touched the face.

Cold. Stiff. Rubber.

Hilliard's breath locked in his chest. He pressed his palm flat against the features and wiped the blood away, revealing the blank, expressionless face of a silicone training dummy staring up at him with empty eyes.

"MEDIC!" The shout tore from somewhere deep and wordless in him — not from grief, but from the sharp, electric shock of absolute realization.

His guards arrived, breathless. One of them crouched beside the shape.

"Sir," the medic said, his voice professionally controlled. "This is a decoy."

Hilliard rose slowly. He looked at his hands — smeared with stage blood — and wiped them on his jacket.

Chapter 258:

She wasn't dead. She had staged it. Bought herself time. Made him stop chasing the plane.

"She's gone," Hilliard said quietly.

He wasn't mourning a death. He was acknowledging a move on the chessboard — and recognizing, with cold clarity, that she had just outplayed him completely.

The tarmac at McGuire Air Force Base was a landscape of gray concrete and flashing lights. Hilliard stood at the open hatch of the Gulfstream, the wind from the jet engines whipping his coat around his legs.

He had ordered the plane grounded under emergency FAA protocols, certain Cailin and the boys were on board.

The cabin was empty.

Leather seats. A half-drunk glass of scotch. Three inflatable dummies dressed in hoodies, buckled neatly into their seats.

“Sir.”

Gavin came up the stairs at a run, tablet in hand, his face drained of color.

“We checked the manifest. Nothing. The pilot says he was contracted to fly a decoy route to Paris — he believed it was a corporate security drill.”

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

“Where are they?” he roared. “They didn’t just vanish!”

“Sir, Kegan Aguirre’s maritime logs just updated,” Gavin said, swiping across his screen. “A stealth submersible launched from Chelsea Piers thirty minutes ago. Running dark, heading for international waters. Ashley and the boys bypassed the airport entirely. The plane was a decoy — designed to pull your attention and your resources away from the water.”

Hilliard gripped the railing. Kegan had outmaneuvered him completely. The boys were gone.

“And Cailin?” Hilliard demanded. “She wasn’t on the sub. She was at the highway.”

“We analyzed all departures from Teterboro in the hour before the lockdown,” Gavin said. “One other aircraft took off in that window. Delta Flight 492 to London.”

“Passenger list?”

“Clean. No Cailin Morton. No aliases we have on record.”

“Check everything,” Hilliard ordered. “Luggage. Cargo. Fuel manifests.”

“We did,” Gavin said. “There’s an anomaly in the cargo hold sensors. The pet transport section is registering fifty-five kilograms over the manifested weight of the animals.”

Hilliard went still.

Fifty-five kilograms. One hundred and twenty pounds.

Cailin. She had stayed behind deliberately — to make sure he chased the decoy, to give her children time to disappear. She had made herself the sacrifice.

He looked up at the sky. The Delta flight was already somewhere over the Atlantic.

“Turn it around,” Hilliard said.

“Sir, it’s a commercial aircraft. There are three hundred people on board. We can’t simply—”

“I said turn it around.” Hilliard seized Gavin by the collar. “Call the Senator. Tell him there’s a bomb in the cargo hold. Tell him I will personally fund his next ten campaigns if he gets that plane back on the ground in New York within the hour.”

Thirty thousand feet above the ocean, the world tilted.

Cailin felt the shift in gravity before the announcement came over the intercom. The plane was banking hard to the left.

Chapter 259:

She was huddled in the darkness between a crate containing a golden retriever and a wall of stacked luggage. It was freezing in the cargo hold. Her breath came out in small white clouds.

Her abdomen was on fire. The fall into the culvert off the highway had not killed her, but it had broken something inside — she could feel it. The warm, sticky wetness spreading beneath her fingers told her what she already knew: the impact had torn open her old surgical scars.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a syrette. A military-grade cocktail of coagulants, painkillers, and a metabolic stabilizer. Kegan had pressed it into her hand before they’d separated, his expression saying everything his voice hadn’t: for a worst-case scenario.

She jammed it into her thigh.

The fire in her gut dulled to a deep, throbbing ache. Her head cleared for a few precious seconds.

Through the small porthole in the cargo door, she caught a flash of strobing light. A fighter jet, holding position just off the wing.

They weren't going to London.

They were turning back.

She slumped against the cold metal wall, her cheek pressing against the steel. He had found her. He always found her.

She coughed, and a spray of blood appeared on her palm — bright red against her pale skin.

She stared at it.

She wasn't going to make it to the ground. Not like this.

The hospital room was quiet, save for the soft hum of the air filter.

Elia sat in the center of the large bed with her knees pulled to her chest. The hospital gown was far too big for her. Her eyes, wide and gray, moved restlessly around the room.

Aron and Davy were gone. The men in dark suits had taken her — and the man who called himself her father had brought her here, to this white, frightening place, telling the nurses she needed to be evaluated for shock before being brought to a “new home.”

The door opened.

Elia flinched.

It wasn't the nurse. It was a lady with shiny hair and a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

Charla.

She was carrying a basket of fruit wrapped in cellophane. She had been released from police custody less than an hour earlier — a technicality her father's lawyers had exploited before Hilliard could file his own statement. Jeraldine Holloway had met her at the precinct, pressed a visitor's pass into her hand, and given her a single instruction: Find out what the child knows.

Charla nodded to the two guards standing outside the door.

“Jeraldine sent me,” she said, her voice warm with counterfeit concern. “She insisted I check on the poor dear myself. She’s terribly worried.”

The guards exchanged an uncertain glance. The Holloway matriarch’s name was a key that opened most doors in this building. Contradicting Hilliard was one thing; contradicting his mother was another kind of risk entirely. They stepped aside.

Charla walked in and pulled the door shut behind her. The lock clicked.

The smile dropped from her face instantly — slid away like a mask, leaving something cold and reptilian in its place.

Chapter 260:

“Hello, little rat,” Charla whispered.

Elia pressed herself against the headboard. “Go away. I want my mommy.”

Charla moved to the foot of the bed. She set the fruit basket on the table and leaned forward.

“Your mommy isn’t coming,” she said. Her voice was soft — silk wrapped around a razor blade.

“She is!” Elia cried. “She promised!”

Charla produced her phone and held the screen up.

It was a photograph of the highway. The smashed truck. Red spread across the grass.

“See that?” Charla tapped the screen with a manicured nail. “That’s your mommy.”

Elia stared at the image. Her bottom lip trembled. Tears spilled silently down her cheeks.

“No...”

“Yes,” Charla hissed. “And do you know why?”

She circled the bed slowly and leaned close to Elia’s ear. She smelled of expensive perfume and something that had no name.

“Because you were bad,” she whispered. “Because you ran away. Because you made trouble. Mommy had to come find you, and the truck hit her. Squish.”

Elia pressed both hands over her ears. “Stop it! Stop it!”

Charla seized Elia’s wrists and pulled them down. Her grip was bruising.

“Listen to me,” she said, her eyes locked on the child’s. “Hilliard is furious. He knows you caused this. He’s going to send you somewhere with no windows. A place full of rats.”

Elia was sobbing now, her whole body shaking.

“Unless...” Charla released her wrists and smoothed Elia’s hair with a gentle, terrible hand. “Unless you go find her.”

Elia sniffled. “Find her? You said she was dead.”

“Her body is dead,” Charla said. “But her spirit is waiting for you. Downstairs. In the cold room. The basement.” She pointed toward the door. “If you’re brave enough to go down, you might be able to say goodbye. But you have to be fast — before the bad man comes back.”

Footsteps sounded in the hallway.

Charla straightened immediately and stepped back. Her face rearranged itself in an instant — the concerned, soft-spoken visitor returning as if it had never left.

A nurse came in.

“Oh, the poor thing,” Charla said, pressing a hand to her chest and dabbing at a tear that wasn’t there. “She misses her mother terribly.”

The nurse looked at Elia — curled in a tight ball, shaking — with an expression of genuine sympathy.

“I’ll let her rest,” Charla said.

She moved toward the door. At the threshold, she glanced back at Elia.

She mouthed one word.

Run.

The plane touched down on a runway lined with emergency vehicles, their lights strobing in the dark.

Before the engines had fully spooled down, the mobile stairs were already rolling into position.

Hilliard didn't wait for the jet bridge. He ran up the stairs with his security team flanking him, bypassed the passenger cabin without a glance at the terrified flight attendants, and went directly to the cargo access panel in the belly of the aircraft.

"Open it," he ordered the ground crew.