

Second chance 261

Chapter 261:

The hydraulic whine was deafening. The massive door lifted with agonizing slowness, revealing the cavernous, dimly lit hold.

Cold air rushed out, carrying the smell of animals and stale ozone.

Hilliard vaulted onto the platform.

He swept the hold with his eyes. Dogs barked in their crates. Somewhere in the dark, a cat hissed.

And there, in the far corner, wedged behind a pallet of suitcases — a figure.

Cailin.

She was curled into a ball, her face pale as moonlight. Her lips had gone blue. Her clothes were drenched in blood from the fall into the culvert.

Hilliard's heart stopped.

For a single, terrible second, he thought she was dead.

Then her eyes opened.

They were dull and glazed with pain, but they found his immediately — and locked on with a ferocity that made him flinch.

“You lose,” Hilliard said, his voice cracking on the words. He glanced at his watch. “11:58 PM. You’re still in New York.”

Cailin tried to push herself upright. Her arms shook violently beneath her.

“You cheated,” she rasped. The sound was wet and labored, each word costing her something.

“I won,” Hilliard said, stepping closer. He reached out his hand. “Come here, Cailin. It’s over.”

She slapped his hand away. It was a weak, pathetic strike, but the defiance behind it was absolute.

“Don’t touch me.”

She gripped the dog crate and hauled herself to her feet, swaying dangerously.

"I'd rather die," she whispered.

"You're not going to die," Hilliard said, his voice cracking with a fear that eclipsed his anger entirely.
"You're coming home. I'll fix this. I'll fix us."

Cailin smiled. It was a gruesome sight — her teeth stained dark with blood.

"There is no us," she said. "There's only you and the monster you see in the mirror."

Her knees buckled.

She pitched forward.

Hilliard caught her before she hit the metal floor. She was light — too light — and burning hot beneath his hands.

"Cailin?"

She convulsed in his arms, and then a wave of violent tremors wracked her body. A low groan escaped her lips, and Hilliard watched in horror as a dark, wet stain spread rapidly across the front of his white dress shirt, seeping outward from where he held her against him.

He stared at the blood. There was too much of it.

“Cailin!”

Her head lolled back. Her eyes rolled up into her head.

The triumph he had felt moments ago evaporated, leaving only a cold, hollow terror in its wake.

“MEDIC!” Hilliard screamed, his voice echoing through the steel belly of the plane. “GET A MEDIC IN HERE NOW!”

The ambulance siren was a scream that wouldn’t stop.

Hilliard sat in the back, his hand gripping Cailin’s limp fingers so hard his knuckles had gone white.

“BP is dropping — 60 over 40!” the paramedic shouted, cutting Cailin’s shirt open with shears. “We’re losing her!”

Hilliard stared at her chest.

There, just above her bikini line, was a scar.

Chapter 262:

He had seen the intricate tattoo that covered her lower abdomen before — a swirling pattern of ink he had dismissed as a way to hide her past. But now, a deep, angry gash from her fall had torn right through the artistry. The force of the impact had ripped the tattooed skin away from the tissue beneath, revealing what it was designed to conceal: a jagged, raised line of pink scar tissue. An unmistakable C-section scar.

He knew immediately what it meant. This was no neat, cosmetic incision made by a Park Avenue surgeon. It was rough. Hurried.

She had been cut open. Alone. Scared. To bring his children into the world.

While he was at a gala with Charla.

The guilt hit him like a fist to the stomach. He doubled over, gasping.

“No, no, no,” Cailin moaned, thrashing against the stretcher. Her eyes were closed, lost somewhere deep in a nightmare.

Hilliard leaned close to her. "I'm here, Cailin. I've got you."

"Run, Elia," she whimpered. "Run from the bad man. Hide."

Hilliard recoiled.

She wasn't fleeing some faceless monster. She was fleeing him. Even in her dying dreams, he was the villain.

"I'm not the bad man," he whispered, tears cutting through the blood drying on his face. "I'm trying to save you."

"She's crashing!" the paramedic yelled. "Charging paddles — clear!"

Thump.

Cailin's body arched violently off the stretcher.

Hilliard fixed his eyes on the monitor. A flat line. Then a blip. Then another.

“We have a rhythm,” the paramedic said, dragging the back of his hand across his forehead. “Drive faster!”

Hilliard looked down at his hands. They were covered in her blood.

He had chased her. He had cornered her. He had forced her onto that highway, into that ditch, into that cargo hold. He hadn’t saved her — he had hunted her to the very brink of death.

The ambulance screeched to a halt at the emergency bay. The doors flew open and a team of doctors swarmed inside, surrounding her in an instant.

Hilliard was pushed back. He stood on the cold pavement, watching them wheel her away until she disappeared behind the doors.

“Save her,” he whispered to the empty air. “Please. Take everything I have. Just save her.”

The waiting room was sterile and white — a purgatory of fluorescent light.

Hilliard sat with his head in his hands. He hadn’t washed the blood off. He couldn’t. The dried, cracking film on his skin was a penance, a physical sacrament to his failure. To wash it away would be to grant himself a forgiveness he hadn’t earned.

A nurse appeared with a clipboard.

“Mr. Holloway? We need consent for emergency surgery — splenectomy and exploratory laparotomy.”

Hilliard grabbed the pen. His signature was a jagged scrawl.

“Do whatever you have to do.”

Vance Holloway came running down the hall, his bespoke suit rumpled from the urgency of his arrival.

“Hilliard!” He stopped, taking in his cousin’s blood-soaked clothes. “Jesus. Is she...?”

“She’s alive,” Hilliard said, his voice hollow. “Barely.”

“You did this.” Vance didn’t shout. He simply stated it like a fact. “You pushed her until she broke.”

“I know,” Hilliard said.

Gavin approached, holding a phone. He looked reluctant to interrupt, but the gravity on his face allowed no delay.

“Sir. The truck driver.”

Hilliard looked up. His eyes were dead. “What about him?”

Chapter 263:

“We traced the payment,” Gavin said. “Fifty thousand dollars in crypto. It originated from a shell company registered in the Caymans.”

“I don’t care about shell companies,” Hilliard snapped. “Who owns it?”

“It’s a subsidiary of English Holdings,” Gavin said. “Specifically, an account linked to Charla’s personal trust.”

The air in the room seemed to drop ten degrees.

Hilliard rose slowly to his feet.

“Charla.” The name tasted like poison on his tongue.

“She paid the driver to hit Cailin,” Gavin said. “It wasn’t an accident. It was a hit.”

Hilliard’s hands curled into fists. He had let that snake live in his house. He had almost married her.

Then a thought struck him — cold and terrifying, stopping his heart cold.

“Where is Elia?” Hilliard asked.

Vance frowned. “She’s at the hospital. In the pediatric wing. You put guards on her.”

“Charla knows she’s here,” Hilliard said. “If she tried to kill Cailin...”

He didn’t finish the sentence. He turned and ran.

Hilliard didn’t take the elevator. He took the stairs, three at a time, his expensive shoes hammering against the concrete.

He burst into the basement security office first.

The truck driver was there, handcuffed to a chair and guarded by two of Hilliard's men. Hilliard didn't ask questions. He walked straight up to the man and backhanded him across the face. The sound cracked through the room like a pistol shot.

"Did she tell you to kill the child too?" Hilliard roared.

The driver spat blood. "I don't know what you're talking about. It was just a job!"

"Play the tape," Hilliard ordered Gavin, who had followed him down.

Gavin played the audio file recovered from the driver's phone.

"The target is the woman on the bike. Make sure she is... neutralized. No witnesses, no loose ends. Erase the problem completely."

The voice was distorted, but the cadence was unmistakable — the deliberate weight she placed on the word "completely." It was Charla. And her command was absolute. She hadn't just wanted Cailin hurt; she had wanted her erased entirely. And if Elia had been with her...

Hilliard's vision went red. He grabbed a heavy metal flashlight from the desk and raised it.

"Sir!" Gavin caught his arm. "Vance is on the line. It's urgent."

Hilliard pressed the phone to his ear, breathing hard.

“Hilliard.” Vance’s voice was panicked. “She’s gone.”

“Who?”

“Elia. The guards said Charla came to visit. She sent them for coffee. When they came back, the room was empty.”

Hilliard let the flashlight drop. It clattered against the floor.

He turned and sprinted out of the room.

He ran through the labyrinthine corridors of the hospital basement, his mind replaying every moment he had left Elia vulnerable — every time he had underestimated the depth of Charla’s malice.

He reached the pediatric floor. The door to Room 302 stood open.

The bed was neatly made. The fruit basket sat untouched on the table, mocking him with its stillness.

“Where is she?!” Hilliard screamed at the two guards standing in the doorway, pale with fear.

Chapter 264:

“We... we don’t know, sir. Charla said she took her for a walk...”

“Charla took her?” Hilliard seized the guard by the lapels and slammed him into the wall. “You let that woman walk out with my daughter?”

“She had a pass! She said Mrs. Holloway sent her!”

Hilliard shoved the guard aside.

“Find her,” he whispered. His voice was trembling — not with grief, but with a rage quiet enough to burn the world to the ground. “If she has so much as a scratch on her, I will kill you all.”

“Security! Now!”

Hilliard kicked open the door to the hospital’s main security hub. The guards inside scrambled to their feet.

“Pull up the cameras for the pediatric wing. Last thirty minutes.”

The screens flickered to life.

There was Charla, walking into the room. Smiling.

Ten minutes later, she walked back out alone. Her expression had shifted — sorrowful now, practiced. She raised a hand to her face and wiped away a tear that wasn't there.

Five minutes after that, a small figure slipped out of the same room.

Elia.

She looked terrified. She was hugging the wall, glancing over her shoulder with every step.

“Where is she going?” Hilliard leaned closer to the screen.

Elia bypassed the exit. She moved to the service elevator bank at the far end of the hall, stretched up on her tiptoes, and pressed a button.

"Zoom in," Hilliard ordered.

The image was grainy, but the illuminated floor indicator was unmistakable. B2.

"What's on B2?" Hilliard asked the security chief.

The chief swallowed. "The morgue, sir. And the incinerator room."

The blood drained from Hilliard's face.

The morgue.

"Why would she go to the morgue?" Gavin asked.

"Because someone told her to," Hilliard said. "Someone told her that her mother was dead." He turned sharply. "Lock down B2. Nobody in or out."

He ran into the hallway.

Ahead, near the elevators, he spotted a small group. Jeraldine. And Charla.

Charla was pressing a tissue to her nose, her face arranged into an expression of helpless distress.

“I just don’t know where she went,” she was saying to Jeraldine. “I turned my back for one second...”

Hilliard didn’t slow down.

“Hilliard?” Jeraldine caught sight of him. “Hilliard, you’re bleeding — what happened?”

He ignored his mother entirely. He walked straight up to Charla.

Charla looked up, her eyes widening. “Hilliard, thank God. That poor child ran off and I—”

Hilliard’s hand shot out.

He grabbed Charla by the throat.

He didn’t simply grab her — he slammed her backward into the wall with enough force to crack the plaster, and lifted her clean off her feet.

“Hilliard!” Jeraldine screamed.

Charla clawed at his hand, legs kicking uselessly in the air. Her face went red, then deepened toward purple.

“What did you tell her?” Hilliard snarled, his face inches from hers. “What did you tell my daughter?”

Charla couldn’t speak. She gagged, her eyes bulging wide.

“Did you send her to the morgue?” His grip tightened. “Did you send her to die in the dark?”

Chapter 265:

“Let her go! You’re killing her!”

Jeraldine threw herself at Hilliard’s arm, pulling with all her strength.

Victoria English, Charla’s mother, came running from the waiting area, swinging her designer handbag at Hilliard’s head.

“Get off my daughter! Help! Murder!”

Hilliard didn't flinch. He didn't even glance at them. His eyes stayed locked on Charla's.

"Where. Is. She."

Charla's eyes were rolling back. She was losing consciousness.

"Sir!" Gavin and two bodyguards rushed in, pulling Jeraldine and Victoria away, though neither dared lay a hand on Hilliard himself.

"Hilliard, stop!" Vance came running from the direction of the ICU. "Cailin's out of surgery — she's asking for you!"

The name cut clean through the red haze.

Cailin.

Hilliard's grip loosened. Charla dropped to the floor, gasping, both hands flying to her throat. She coughed violently, retching against the wall.

Hilliard looked at his hands. They were shaking.

“She’s asking for Elia,” Vance said, still breathless. “She’s in post-op recovery — delirious, but she keeps saying her name. Her heart rate is spiking. The doctors say if she gets too agitated, she’ll start bleeding again.”

Hilliard’s gaze drifted to the elevator doors. B2.

He couldn’t go to Cailin. Not without Elia. If he walked in there and told her he had lost their daughter again, it would kill her.

“Tell her she’s safe,” Hilliard said, his voice a raw rasp. “Tell her Elia is with me. Lie to her, Vance.”

“I can’t—”

“Do it!” Hilliard roared. “Buy me ten minutes.”

He turned and hit the elevator button. It was too slow. He kicked the stairwell door open and ran.

Behind him, Charla was sobbing.

“He’s insane,” she shrieked. “I’m calling the police!”

Jeraldine stood very still, studying Charla. She saw the bruises already blooming along her neck. But she had also seen the look in Hilliard's eyes — and she had seen things like it before.

"Charla," Jeraldine said quietly. "Did you send that child to the basement?"

Charla looked away. "I... I don't know what you're talking about."

Downstairs, Hilliard reached the heavy steel doors of the morgue.

Locked. Keycard access only.

He didn't have a card.

He stepped back, drew the gun he had taken from his bodyguard, and fired two shots into the electronic lock. Sparks scattered across the floor.

He kicked the door. It swung open with a groan.

Darkness. Cold air. The sharp, chemical bite of formaldehyde.

"Elia!" Hilliard shouted.

Silence.

Cailin opened her eyes.

The light was blinding. Pain radiated from her abdomen in waves, sharp and relentless, spreading outward like a starburst with every shallow breath.

"Elia..." Her voice was barely a whisper.

Vance was there, holding her hand. He looked pale. Sweaty.

"She's okay," he said quickly. Too quickly. "Hilliard has her. She's safe."

Cailin looked at him. She saw the tremor in his jaw. The way his eyes refused to meet hers.

"Liar," she whispered.

Chapter 266:

She tried to shift — a movement so small it was barely a twitch — but a bolt of agony tore through her, sending the monitor beside her bed into a frantic cascade of beeps.

“Cailin, stop! You’ll tear your stitches!”

“Where... is... my daughter?” she gritted out, each word a monumental effort, fighting the dark, rolling waves of anesthesia that threatened to drag her back under.

In the morgue, Hilliard was running.

He checked the autopsy room. Empty.

He checked the viewing room. Empty.

“Elia!”

Then he saw it.

At the far end of the corridor stood the walk-in freezer for long-term storage. The heavy insulated door was slightly ajar — not fully sealed. And on the floor, wedged in the gap beneath it, was a small pink hair clip.

Elia's.

Hilliard ran to the door and seized the handle. It was stiff with ice. He pulled harder, bracing his foot flat against the wall, and with a roar of effort, wrenched it open.

A cloud of white mist rolled out over his feet.

He stepped inside. It was twenty degrees below zero.

There, in the far corner, huddled between two body bags, was a tiny figure.

She was blue. Her eyelashes were frosted with ice. She wasn't moving.

"No!"

Hilliard scooped her up. She was rigid. Cold as stone.

He tore off his jacket and wrapped it around her, his other hand fumbling along the wall until he found an emergency alarm button and drove his palm into it. A klaxon began to blare throughout the basement. He pressed his hand to her chest.

A faint, fluttery beat.

She was alive. Barely.

He turned and ran.

He didn't wait for the elevator. He took the stairs, carrying her, his lungs burning with every flight.

He burst onto the ICU floor.

"Help! I need a warming unit! Hypothermia!" He sprinted down the hall.

The door to Cailin's room was open. Vance was trying to calm her as she thrashed weakly against the bed, her eyes wild with panic.

Hilliard ran past the door.

Cailin looked up.

She saw him. She saw the bundle in his arms. She saw the small, blue, lifeless hand dangling from the edge of his jacket.

Time stopped.

The lie shattered.

Cailin's eyes went wide, her pupils dilating until they were nothing but black. A sound tore from her throat — not a scream, but a raw, guttural gasp of pure agony that arched her whole body against the bed. The heart monitor shrieked into a frantic, staccato alarm as the lines on the screen dissolved into chaos.

“ELIA!”

Hilliard didn't stop.

But Cailin's shattered cry echoed in his ears long after he had passed — a sound that carried, beneath its grief, the weight of a hatred that would never, ever die.

The scream didn't sound human. It was the sound of a soul being torn out through the throat.

Chapter 267:

Cailin ripped the IV line from her arm, blood spraying across the pristine white sheets. She didn't feel the needle tear through her vein. She didn't feel the fresh stitches in her abdomen screaming in protest as she threw her legs over the side of the bed. The military-grade cocktail Kegan had given her was a devil's bargain — it dulled the agony to a distant, throbbing fire, but did nothing to stop the physical damage she was inflicting on herself. She knew she was tearing apart from the inside.

She only saw the blue hand. The tiny, lifeless blue hand dangling from Hilliard's jacket as he ran past her door.

"You killed her!"

She hit the floor hard, her knees buckling, but adrenaline — pure, toxic, maternal adrenaline — forced her back up. She dragged herself into the hallway, a searing pain shooting from her incision with every inch, leaving a trail of red droplets on the linoleum.

Hilliard had already disappeared behind the swinging doors of the trauma unit.

"Let me through!" Cailin shrieked, clawing at the nurse who moved to block her path.

"Mrs. Holloway, you're bleeding — you need to lie down—"

Cailin shoved the woman. It was a weak shove, but the desperation behind it was terrifying. She stumbled toward the trauma room doors just as Hilliard emerged from the other side.

He wasn't holding Elia anymore. His hands were empty. His shirt was a map of blood and melted frost.

Cailin collided with him. She didn't hug him. She attacked him.

Her fists hammered against his chest — weak, frantic blows that wouldn't have bruised a peach — but she poured every ounce of her remaining strength into them.

"Where is she? What did you do to her?"

Hilliard didn't defend himself. He didn't catch her wrists. He simply wrapped his arms around her thrashing body and pulled her into him, absorbing every blow.

"She's with the doctors," he said, his voice a broken rasp against her ear. "They're warming her up. Her heart is beating, Cailin. It's beating."

"Liar!" Cailin screamed into his chest. "I saw her! She was blue! You let her die! You let that monster kill her!"

She couldn't breathe. The pain in her stomach was a hot knife twisting with every movement, but the pain in her chest was worse.

She pulled back, her eyes wild and feral. She saw the pulse beating in Hilliard's neck. The source of all her pain.

She lunged.

She sank her teeth into the muscle where his neck met his shoulder, biting down hard and tasting the salt of his sweat and the metallic sting of copper as her teeth broke the skin.

Hilliard grunted — a low, pained sound — but he didn't push her away. He held her tighter. He took it. He stood there like an anchor in the storm of her grief, letting her mark him, letting her tear him apart, because he knew without question that he deserved it. He deserved every shred of this.

"Sedative!" a doctor shouted from behind them. "She's going into shock — BP is crashing!"

Cailin felt the prick of a needle in her thigh.

No. She couldn't sleep. She had to save Elia.

"Don't..." she mumbled, her jaw slackening. Her teeth released Hilliard's shoulder. A bloom of red spread across the white collar of his shirt.

“I’ve got you,” Hilliard whispered, lifting her as her legs gave out entirely. “I’ve got you both.”

Chapter 268:

The world tilted. The lights blurred into long white streaks. The last thing Cailin saw before the darkness swallowed her was Hilliard’s face — wet with tears, fixed on the trauma room door with the expression of a man watching his own heart being operated on.

Hilliard carried Cailin back to her bed. He laid her down and watched the nurses reattach the monitors, watched the fresh bandages bloom red over her incision.

He touched his shoulder. His fingers came away bloody.

“Mr. Holloway, you need that looked at,” a nurse said, eyeing the bite mark. “It needs to be cleaned and stitched immediately.”

“Don’t touch it,” Hilliard said, his voice so sharp the nurse flinched back. “Leave it.”

He walked out. The physical pain was grounding — the only thing keeping him from putting a bullet in his own head.

He stood guard outside the ICU doors.

Ten minutes later, the elevator dinged.

Jeraldine Holloway stepped out, her heels clicking purposefully on the floor. Behind her, clinging to Jeraldine's arm like a frightened child, was Charla. A silk scarf was wound around her neck, concealing the bruises Hilliard had left there an hour ago. Her eyes were red and swollen — a perfect performance.

Hilliard felt the temperature in his veins drop to absolute zero.

He stepped into the middle of the hallway, blocking their path. He was a wall of blood-soaked linen and barely contained violence.

"Hilliard," Jeraldine began, her voice trembling slightly. "We heard — is the child...?"

"Hilliard," Charla squeaked, stepping out from behind Jeraldine. "I was so worried. I didn't mean for her to run off, I just—"

Hilliard didn't blink. He looked at Charla. He looked at the woman he had almost married. The woman who had sent a five-year-old child into a freezer to die.

"Get out," Hilliard said.

It was not a shout. It was a command delivered with the quiet authority of an executioner.

"Hilliard, be reasonable," Jeraldine said, placing a hand on his arm. "Charla is family. She's distraught."

Hilliard looked at his mother's hand until she removed it.

"If she is not on that elevator in five seconds," he said to Jeraldine, his voice never rising, "I will finish what I started in the lobby. And I don't care who is watching."

Charla flinched. She looked into his eyes and found no anger there. Only murder.

"Mom, let's go," Charla whispered, tugging at Jeraldine's sleeve. "Please."

Jeraldine looked at her son. She saw the blood on his shirt, the bite mark on his neck, the absolute stranger standing in his place.

"We'll be downstairs," she said stiffly.

They retreated.

Hilliard watched the elevator doors close.

He pulled out his phone. His thumb left a smear of blood across the screen as he dialed Gavin.

“Lock it down,” Hilliard said. “Tell the press Cailin is critical. Tell them Elia’s status is unconfirmed. I want silence. Total silence.”

He turned back to the glass window of the trauma room. Inside, a team of doctors was huddled around a tiny body on a warming table.

“Live,” Hilliard told the glass. “Don’t you dare die on me.”

The beep of the heart monitor was the only clock that mattered.

Chapter 269:

It was 3:00 AM. The hospital had settled into the deep, heavy silence of the graveyard shift.

Hilliard sat in a chair wedged between two beds. On his left, Cailin slept, sedated, her breathing shallow and slow. On his right, Elia lay in a tangle of warming blankets and tubes.

Her core temperature was up. The frostbite on her fingers was superficial. But she hadn’t woken up.

Until now.

A small hand twitched against the sheet.

Hilliard was out of his chair instantly, leaning over the rail.

“Elia?”

Her eyelids fluttered — heavy, swollen. Slowly, agonizingly, they opened.

Green eyes looked up at him. Foggy. Confused.

Then recognition hit.

Elia gasped, shrinking back into the pillows and pulling her knees to her chest.

“No... cold...”

"It's okay," Hilliard said, his voice cracking. He reached out a hand, then stopped short of touching her, afraid he might shatter her. "You're not in the cold anymore. I turned the heat up. Can you feel it?"

Elia shivered. Her eyes moved slowly around the room until they landed on Cailin in the next bed.

"Mommy?"

"She's sleeping," Hilliard said. "She's hurt, but she's okay."

Elia looked back at him. "The Bad Lady said she was dead. She showed me the picture. The red grass."

Hilliard gripped the bed rail until his knuckles turned white.

"The Bad Lady lied," he said. "Who is the Bad Lady, Elia?" He needed to hear it. He needed the nail in the coffin.

Elia sniffled. "Charla."

Hilliard reached into his pocket and pressed the record button on his phone. "What did Charla tell you?"

“She said...” Elia’s voice trembled. “She said Mommy was in the basement. In the cold room. She said if I didn’t go find her, the rats would eat Mommy’s body.”

Hilliard closed his eyes. A tear slipped out — hot and silent and furious.

“And she said... if I came back up... the Bad Man would kill me.” Elia studied him with wide, terrified eyes. “Are you the Bad Man?”

The question hit him harder than Cailin’s fists had.

“No,” Hilliard whispered. He knelt beside the bed until he was level with her. “I am the man who is going to make sure the Bad Lady never hurts you again. I promise.”

“Pinky promise?” Elia held out a trembling hand, her little finger wrapped in gauze.

Hilliard hooked his large finger around hers. “Pinky promise.”

Elia’s eyes drooped. The medication was pulling her back under.

“Okay,” she whispered. “Knight.”

Her hand went limp. Her breathing evened out.

Hilliard stood. He saved the recording and uploaded it to three different secure servers.

Vance appeared in the doorway, holding two coffees.

“She wake up?” Vance whispered.

“Yeah.” Hilliard’s voice was stripped of everything human — a machine running on cold purpose. “She confirmed it. Charla sent her down there.”

“Jesus,” Vance breathed. He looked at Hilliard, who was staring into the middle distance. “Hilliard. Are you okay?”

Chapter 270:

“The scar,” Hilliard said, his voice barely audible. “The C-section scar. It was rough. An emergency.” His gaze hardened. “The files Kegan had — ‘Asset 1, 2, 3.’ Elia is one. Find the other two.” He gave the command into his phone without looking at it. “Use every resource. I want to know where my other children are.”

Before Vance could react to the bombshell, Hilliard’s focus snapped back to the immediate threat.

“Get our tech team on Charla’s cloud accounts. I want the original image she showed Elia — the metadata, the edit history. I want a digital noose.”

“We call the cops?” Vance asked, still reeling.

“No,” Hilliard said. “Cops means lawyers. Lawyers means plea deals. An insanity defense. A comfortable stay in a private facility until the heat dies down.”

“Then what?”

“I’m going to destroy her,” Hilliard said. “Strip her of her money, her name, her sanity. I’m going to leave her with nothing but the clothes on her back and the memory of what she did.”

“Hilliard, that’s war with the English family.”

“Good,” Hilliard said. “I’ve been looking for a reason to burn that bridge.”

He took the coffee from Vance and walked out of the room.

In the bed to the left, Cailin’s breathing hitched.

She hadn't been asleep.

The sedative had worn off an hour ago. She had lain there, paralyzed by exhaustion, listening to every word.

She heard Elia's voice. She heard the fear in it.

And she heard Hilliard.

I am the man who is going to make sure the Bad Lady never hurts you again.

A cold clarity washed over her, chilling her more deeply than any freezer could. His rage was a wildfire — impressive and destructive — but it was still his game, played by his rules. He would burn their world down with money and power, the very tools that had built this prison in the first place.

A single tear slid from the corner of Cailin's eye and tracked silently into her hair.

She believed his anger. She believed his hatred of Charla.

But she didn't believe he could save them. He was part of the world that had created Charla. He was the reason they were in this room at all.

Hilliard wanted to destroy Charla financially.

Cailin opened her eyes. They were dry and hard as flint.

Money wasn't enough.

She needed blood.

The Director of Mount Sinai Hospital was sweating. He dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief, staring at the man who had settled himself into his own leather chair.

Hilliard Holloway looked as though he had walked out of a war zone. The blood dried into his shirt had gone stiff and brown. The bite mark on his neck was purple and livid.

"Mr. Holloway, I can't just... falsify a medical report," the Director stammered. "It's unethical. It's illegal."

Hilliard didn't blink. He slid a check across the mahogany desk.

"This is a donation for your new pediatric oncology wing. Five million dollars."

The Director looked at the check. Then at Hilliard.

“And if I refuse?”

“Then I buy the board of directors and have you fired by lunch,” Hilliard said. “Release the statement.”

Ten minutes later, the notification detonated across every gossip blog and news outlet in New York.