

Second chance 301

Chapter 301:

Hilliard assumed she meant to take the billions and rub it in his face. “Just make sure you can carry it all,” he sneered.

“Oh, don’t worry.” Cailin smiled — a sharp, dangerous smile. “It’s light. Very light.”

The elevator dinged.

Cailin stepped in and turned around. Hilliard moved to follow her.

“Take the next one,” Cailin said. She hit the Close Door button.

The doors slid shut, cutting off his face.

Hilliard stood in the hallway. He looked down at his jacket, still lying on the floor in a heap, and picked it up. It smelled like her perfume.

A sudden, crushing weight settled in his chest.

Tomorrow, it was over.

Cailin locked the door of her temporary room at the safe house and opened her laptop, engaging the VPN.

A video window popped up. Two identical faces filled the screen — messy hair, bright eyes, headsets around their necks.

“Mommy!” Davy yelled. “Are you coming home?”

“Soon, baby,” Cailin whispered, touching the screen. “Very soon.”

Aron, the quieter one, was typing furiously on a keyboard in the background.

“Mommy,” Aron said without looking up. “We found a backdoor in the courthouse security grid. We can shut down the cameras. Or turn on the sprinklers.”

Cailin smiled. Her little warriors.

“No, Aron. No hacking tomorrow.”

“But the Bad Dad is going to be there,” Davy said, making a face. “We should delete his credit score.”

“Tempting,” Cailin laughed softly. “But tomorrow isn’t about hiding. It’s about being seen.”

She glanced at the large leather tote bag on the bed. It looked deceptively normal, but its weight was immense.

“Mommy is going to settle a debt. And then we are going to disappear.”

“Is Elia coming?” Aron asked.

“Not tomorrow,” Cailin said, her heart aching. “But soon. I promise.”

“Okay,” Davy yawned. “Uncle Kegan says the helicopter is ready. It’s a blue one!”

“Go to sleep, loves. I’ll call you when it’s done.”

She closed the laptop. The room was silent.

She checked her phone. A text from Kegan: Media is confirmed. CNN, Fox, NYT. They are expecting a show. Don't disappoint them. The package you requested will be in the taxi.

Cailin walked to the mirror.

She wasn't wearing the modest clothes Hilliard liked. She wasn't wearing the elegant gowns of a socialite. She pulled out a dress she had bought with the emergency cash. It was red — blood red. Tight, short, and aggressive.

War paint.

She placed the tote bag on the dresser beside the altered divorce agreement and lay down on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

She thought about Hilliard's face in the hospital. The way he had offered her his coat. For a single second, she had almost wanted to take it.

But then she remembered the paper. \$1,000.

He was a monster — playing nice one minute and stabbing you the next.

She closed her eyes.

“Tomorrow,” she whispered. “I burn it all down.”

The next morning. 10:00 AM. The steps of the New York County Courthouse.

Chapter 302:

A swarm of reporters, officially invited by Hilliard’s PR team, waited behind the barricades. Hilliard had wanted to control the narrative — to publicly demonstrate his generosity by handing over half his empire, proving to the world, and to Cailin, that he wasn’t the monster she believed him to be.

Hilliard stood at the top of the steps with his lawyers, looking grim but resolute, the manila envelope containing the divorce agreement held firmly in his hand.

A black town car pulled up. Cailin stepped out.

She wore a dress that was blood red. Tight, short, and aggressive. War paint.

She walked up the steps, ignoring the flashing cameras.

“You brought an audience,” Cailin said, her voice dripping with disdain.

“I wanted the world to see that I take care of my own,” Hilliard said, his jaw tight. “Even when we part ways. I wanted this to be completely transparent.”

He held out a pen. “It’s already signed by me. Just sign the final page in front of the notary, and it’s done.”

Cailin didn’t take the pen. Instead, she reached into her red designer bag, pulled out a thick white envelope, and slapped it hard against Hilliard’s chest.

Hilliard caught it instinctively. “What is this?”

“Your change,” Cailin said loudly, ensuring the nearest microphones picked up every word. “Exactly one thousand dollars in cash. I’m returning your generous settlement.”

Hilliard frowned. “What are you talking about? The settlement is for billions.”

“Is it?” Cailin smirked. “Read it, Hilliard. Read the paper you signed.”

Hilliard ripped open the manila envelope. He flipped to the financial compensation clause and scanned the page.

He froze.

\$1,000. In light of the recipient's demonstrable emotional instability.

The blood drained from his face. This wasn't the document he had authorized. The clauses, the assets — all of it was gone, replaced by a humiliating insult.

He understood instantly what had happened. The study. The shredded original. Charla.

He had been played. He had signed a forged document without reading it, blinded by his own grief and rage.

"You brought the press to watch you buy me off with a thousand dollars and an insult," Cailin said, her voice ringing out over the crowd. "Keep your money, Hilliard. Keep your toxic family."

She turned and walked back down the steps.

Hilliard dropped the envelope. He lunged forward.

Hilliard's fingers were a vice around Cailin's wrist.

She tried to yank her hand back, but his grip was iron — not the grip of a man who wanted to hurt her, but the grip of a man holding onto the edge of a cliff.

“Let go!” Cailin screamed over the roar of the crowd.

Flashbulbs detonated in their faces like a lightning storm. The world dissolved into a blur of shouting mouths and blinding white light. Above them, the rhythmic thwup-thwup-thwup of rotors cut through the air. Kegan. He was here. But the street was a chaotic sea of press and Hilliard’s security — a human shield that made any attempt at landing impossible. Hilliard had played it perfectly; he knew Kegan wouldn’t risk civilian casualties. He was using the media as a wall of bodies.

Chapter 303:

Hilliard didn’t look up at the helicopter descending like a dark angel. He looked at the document in his other hand. The paper was crinkled, stained with the grime of the street, but the number was still visible.

\$1,000.

Cailin saw the vein in his temple throb — a thick blue line pulsing with a dangerous rhythm.

“Get them back,” Hilliard snarled at his security detail, his voice a low rumble that vibrated through his chest and into Cailin’s arm. “Block the cameras.”

The bodyguards formed a wall of black suits.

Hilliard didn't ask. He didn't negotiate. He hauled Cailin against his chest, burying her face in the lapel of his suit. The sudden movement sent a searing flash of pain through her abdomen, and she gasped, the stitches pulling tight. He must have felt her stiffen, but he didn't loosen his hold. She smelled expensive wool, starch, and the sharp, metallic tang of his fury.

"Hilliard!" Cailin kicked at his shins.

He ignored her, moving them toward the curb with the unstoppable force of a landslide. Ideally, Cailin would have stood her ground. Realistically, he outweighed her by a hundred pounds and was running on pure adrenaline.

He shoved her into the back of the Maybach.

She tumbled onto the leather seat and scrambled to the far side immediately. Hilliard dove in after her.

"Drive," he barked.

The door slammed shut, sealing them in a vacuum of silence. The locks engaged with a heavy thunk.

"You can't do this!" Cailin gasped, pressing her back against the door. "This is kidnapping! Kegan is right there!"

“Kegan can rot,” Hilliard said.

The car lurched forward, tires screeching as they peeled away from the curb. Through the tinted rear window, Cailin watched the scattered dollar bills swirling in their wake.

The partition between them and the driver was already up. They were alone.

The air in the cabin was so thick Cailin could taste it — ozone, like a storm about to break.

Hilliard held up the crumpled document. His hand was shaking. Not with fear. With rage.

“You think I wrote this?” he asked. His voice was terrifyingly quiet.

“It has your signature,” Cailin spat. “Don’t play the victim. You signed it. You wanted to humiliate me one last time.”

“I signed a settlement for five billion dollars,” Hilliard said, staring at the paper as if it were a venomous snake. “I gave you the Hamptons. The portfolio. Half the media division.”

“Liar,” Cailin retorted.

“I don’t lie about money, Cailin.”

He looked at her then. His grey eyes were raw, stripped of all their usual arrogance.

“I didn’t write this,” he repeated. “But I know who did.”

He didn’t need to say the name. They both felt her presence in the car. Charla.

“She was in the hallway,” Hilliard muttered, his eyes unfocused. “Last night. She was listening.”

“And you let her,” Cailin said. “You let her into your house. You let her into your life. This is on you.”

Hilliard’s jaw tightened until Cailin thought his teeth might shatter.

Chapter 304:

He looked at the paper one last time. Then, with a sudden, violent motion, he ripped it in half. The sound of tearing paper was loud in the quiet car. He pressed the halves together and tore again. And again. And again — his movements jerky, savage — until the legal document that was supposed to end their marriage was nothing but a pile of confetti on the floor mat.

He brushed his hands off.

"There," he said.

"That doesn't change anything," Cailin said, her voice trembling. "Tearing it up doesn't make us married."

"Actually," Hilliard leaned forward, placing a hand on the leather seat beside her head and boxing her in, "it does."

Cailin stopped breathing.

"The divorce papers are gone," he whispered. "The agreement is void. You are still my wife."

"I'll get a lawyer. I'll file again," she declared.

"Try." His eyes dropped to her lips, then back to her eyes.

"You're crazy," Cailin whispered.

"I'm motivated," Hilliard said. "Nobody plays me, Cailin. Nobody makes me look like a fool. And nobody takes what is mine."

He wasn't talking about the money.

"No lawyer in this city will touch you. Not when they see what I'm about to do to the person who forged my signature."

The iron gates of Holloway Manor swung shut behind them. It sounded like a prison cell closing.

"Let me out," Cailin said. Her voice was calm, but her hands were shaking in her lap. "Hilliard, this isn't a game. Kegan will come for me."

"Let him try," Hilliard said, not even looking at her as he typed on his phone. "If his helicopter enters my airspace, my security team has authorization to ground it."

The car stopped at the front steps.

Cailin didn't move.

Hilliard got out, walked around to her side, and opened the door.

"I'm not going in there," Cailin said.

He didn't argue. He didn't plead. He simply reached in, unbuckled her seatbelt, and pulled her out.

She stumbled, her heels scraping against the pavement. He caught her, swinging her up into his arms before she could regain her balance.

"Put me down!" Cailin hammered her fists against his chest. It was like hitting a brick wall. Each blow sent a dull, throbbing ache through her incision, but she didn't stop.

The staff were lined up in the foyer, heads down. They had seen too much in this house. They knew better than to witness the master's breakdown.

Hilliard carried Cailin straight to his study, kicked the door open, and deposited her on the leather sofa. He turned and locked the door.

"You are illegally detaining me," Cailin said, standing up. "I will press charges."

"This is a domestic dispute," Hilliard said, walking to his desk. "Sit down."

"No," she insisted.

He ignored her. He picked up the landline. "Gavin. Get in here. Now."

A moment later, a pale, sweating Gavin knocked on the door. Hilliard unlocked it, let him in, and locked it again.

“Sir?” Gavin looked between them — at the confetti on Hilliard’s suit, at Cailin’s furious face.

“Pull the security logs,” Hilliard said, his voice like ice. “Last night. 2:00 AM to 3:00 AM. The hallway outside this room.”

Gavin’s fingers flew across the keyboard of the desktop computer.

“Project it,” Hilliard ordered.

The massive screen on the wall flickered to life.

Chapter 305:

Grainy black-and-white footage. The timestamp read 02:14 AM. The hallway was empty. Then a door opened down the hall, and a figure stepped out — wearing a silk nightgown, blonde hair loose, pausing to look around and check for witnesses.

Charla.

Cailin felt a cold knot form in her stomach. Even knowing Charla was capable of anything, seeing it was different.

On screen, Charla crept toward the study and waited. Then Gavin walked out, turned toward the kitchen, and the moment he was gone, Charla slipped inside.

Hilliard watched the screen without moving. He looked like a statue carved out of hate.

Minutes ticked by on the timestamp.

Then Gavin came running back, eyes fixed on his phone, and hurried past the study. A moment later, Charla slipped out. She was holding papers. She shoved them into the shredder bin in the hallway — the one meant for non-confidential waste — then went back inside.

“Stop,” Hilliard said.

The image froze on Charla’s face as she re-entered the room. She was smiling — a small, triumphant, ugly smile.

Hilliard slammed his fist onto the desk. The sound was like a gunshot. Gavin jumped.

“She played us,” Hilliard said, turning to Cailin. “She played both of us.”

“She played you,” Cailin corrected. “I knew what she was from the beginning.”

Hilliard looked at her. There was no defense in his eyes — only a terrifying clarity.

“You were right,” he said.

He walked to the shredder bin in the corner of the room and kicked it over.

“Gavin,” Hilliard said. “Bring her to me.”

“She... she is in the guest wing, sir. With her parents.”

“Bring them all,” Hilliard said. “And bring the paper cutter.”

“I’m leaving,” Cailin said.

Hilliard was busy on the phone, barking orders at his security team. He looked up, his eyes narrowing.
“We aren’t done here.”

“You aren’t done,” Cailin said. “I am. You caught your rat. Congratulations. Now unlock the door.”

“Cailin —”

She didn’t wait. She grabbed a heavy brass bookend from the shelf and smashed it against the glass of the French doors.

The glass shattered.

“Cailin!” Hilliard dropped the phone.

She was already through the hole. She didn’t care about the glass shards. She didn’t care that she was barefoot. She hit the grass and ran.

She knew this estate. She knew the blind spots in the cameras. She knew that the delivery gate by the kitchens was usually left open for the produce trucks until noon.

She sprinted, her lungs burning, and made it to the street.

A city bus was rumbling toward the stop. A miracle.

Cailin waved her arms frantically. The bus screeched to a halt. She scrambled on board, ignoring the driver's confused look at her dress and bare feet.

"Just drive," she gasped, fumbling in her pocket for the cash she still had.

She collapsed into a seat at the back. She was safe. She was out.

Two blocks later, the bus slammed on its brakes. Passengers screamed as they were thrown forward.

Cailin looked out the window.

Chapter 306:

A black sports car was parked diagonally across both lanes of traffic. Hilliard's car. Behind it, two SUVs sealed off any retreat. His men, dressed in dark suits that screamed private security, swarmed the vehicle and directed traffic with an air of cold authority.

"What is going on?" the driver yelled over the intercom.

The doors of the bus were pried open from the outside.

Hilliard stepped on board.

He wasn't wearing his jacket. His tie was gone. His shirt was unbuttoned at the collar, revealing a sheen of sweat. He looked like a man who had run through hell.

The passengers went silent. They didn't need to know who he was to know he was dangerous.

He walked down the aisle, his eyes locked on Cailin.

"Get off the bus," he said.

"No." Cailin gripped the metal rail of the seat in front of her. "This is public transport. You have no authority here."

"There has been a security alert involving a vehicle matching this bus's description," Hilliard announced, his voice cold and loud enough for everyone to hear. "Cooperate, and this will be over quickly. Resist, and every passenger will be detained as a person of interest. Your choice."

He didn't wait for her to comply. He reached down, grabbed her by the waist — his grip firm but deliberately avoiding the front of her abdomen — and hoisted her over his shoulder.

"Put me down!" Cailin screamed, hammering on his back. The awkward position sent a wave of agony through her side, and she let out a choked cry.

He carried her off the bus, past the stunned driver, past the gathering crowd on the sidewalk, and set her down on the pavement beside his car.

The moment her feet touched the ground, Cailin spun around and slapped him.

Crack.

The sound echoed off the buildings. Her hand stung.

Hilliard's head snapped to the side. A red mark bloomed instantly on his cheekbone.

The crowd gasped. Phones were out. Recording.

Hilliard slowly turned his head back to face her. He ran his tongue over his teeth and tasted blood.

He didn't look angry.

He smiled — a dark, twisted smile that made Cailin's knees weak.

"Feel better?" he asked.

"No," Cailin hissed. She raised her hand again.

He caught her wrist in mid-air.

"Careful, Cailin," he whispered, stepping closer until his chest brushed hers. "Do that again, and I might forget we have an audience."

"I hate you," Cailin said.

"Good," Hilliard said. "Hate is passion. I can work with hate."

He opened the car door and shoved her inside.

"Buckle up," he said. "We have an execution to attend."

The atmosphere in the main hall of the Manor was suffocating.

Hilliard sat in the high-backed armchair at the head of the room. Cailin sat to his right, forced into the role of the silent queen.

Opposite them stood the English family.

Gregg English was sweating through his suit. His wife clutched her pearls. And Charla — Charla was on the floor, weeping into her hands.

“Hilliard, please,” Gregg stammered. “There must be a misunderstanding. Charla would never —”

“Shut up,” Hilliard said. He didn’t raise his voice. He didn’t have to.

He gestured to Gavin.

Chapter 307:

The video played on the large screen Hilliard had ordered brought in. They watched Charla creep down the hall. They watched her enter the study. They watched her tamper with the printer.

When it ended, the silence was absolute.

“Well?” Hilliard looked at Gregg.

Gregg turned to his daughter. "Charla? Is this true?"

Charla looked up. Mascara ran down her face in black streaks.

"I did it for you, Hilliard!" she screamed. "She doesn't deserve your money! She's trash! She abandoned you!"

Hilliard stood and walked toward her — slowly, deliberately. He crouched down in front of her.

"You made me look weak," Hilliard said. "You made me look cheap."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver letter opener.

Charla gasped and scrambled back. "Hilliard, no!"

"Give me your hand," he said.

"No! Daddy, help me!"

Gregg didn't move. Two of Hilliard's bodyguards stepped up behind him, their hands resting on their holsters.

Hilliard grabbed Charla's right hand and slammed it onto the coffee table.

Cailin flinched. She wanted to look away, but she couldn't.

"This hand," Hilliard said, tapping the blade against her knuckles. "This is the hand that forged my signature."

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Charla wailed.

"Sorry doesn't fix my reputation," Hilliard said. "And it doesn't bring back my wife."

He pressed the blade into her skin. A single drop of blood welled up.

"Hilliard," Cailin said. Her voice was small. "Don't."

He paused and looked at her.

"She tried to destroy you, Cailin."

"I know," Cailin said. "But if you hurt her like that, you're no better than she is."

Hilliard looked back at Charla. Disgust rippled across his face. He stood, releasing her hand. She cradled it to her chest, sobbing.

"You're right," Hilliard said to Cailin. "Physical pain is too temporary."

He turned to Gregg. "Send her to that mining operation you have. The Congo."

Gregg went pale. "Hilliard, be reasonable..."

"Reasonable?" Hilliard laughed. It was a terrifying sound. "I am being merciful."

"The Congo?" Charla shrieked. "No! I won't go!"

"Then you go to prison for fraud and forgery," Hilliard said. "Your choice."

Gregg grabbed his daughter's arm. "We're leaving. Thank you, Hilliard. Thank you."

They dragged Charla toward the door. She fought them, twisting her head around to fix her eyes on Cailin. They were full of madness.

“You think you won?” she screamed. “You’re both going to burn in hell! I hope you destroy each other!”

“Get her out,” Hilliard said, his voice lethally calm.

The bodyguards dragged her through the double doors, her screams echoing down the hall until the heavy oak slammed shut.

“I want her gone,” Hilliard said. “Out of the country by midnight. If she is on American soil when the sun rises, I will liquidate English Industries. I will bankrupt you, Gregg. I will leave you with nothing but the clothes on your back.”

The room cleared. They were alone.

Hilliard walked to the mini-bar and poured a drink. His hands were steady now.

“You saved her,” he said.

"I saved you," Cailin replied. "I didn't want you going to jail for assault."

"I wouldn't go to jail," Hilliard said. "I own the jail."

Chapter 308:

He took a sip of the amber liquid.

"So," he said. "We are back to square one."

"There is no square one," Cailin said. "I want to leave, Hilliard."

"Why?" Cailin shouted. "Why are you doing this? You don't love me! You just want to win!"

"Maybe," Hilliard said. He walked toward her and reached out, touching a strand of hair that had fallen across her face. "Or maybe I just realized that the house is too quiet without you."

Cailin slapped his hand away.

"I am not a pet. I am not a decoration."

"I know," Hilliard said. "You are a pain in my ass. But you are my pain in the ass."

He grabbed her chin, forcing her to look at him.

"You signed that paper today," he said. "The one with the thousand dollars."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to be done with you."

"No," Hilliard said softly. "You signed it because you don't care about the money. You never did. That's what scares me, Cailin. I can't buy you."

He let go of her chin.

"Go to your room," he said, his voice dropping to a low command.

"I'm thirty years old!"

“And you are my wife, in my house,” Hilliard countered, his tone leaving no room for argument. “Go to your room before I decide that door needs a lock on the outside.”

Cailin glared at him. She wanted to scream. She wanted to fight. But she saw the look in his eyes — he was on the edge, and pushing him now would be dangerous.

She turned and marched up the stairs. Behind her, she heard him sigh.

Cailin went into the master bedroom — their old bedroom — and locked the door.

She went straight to the window. It was locked. Reinforced glass. She checked the balcony. Three stories down, no trellis, no tree.

She was trapped.

But she wouldn't be his prisoner in a gown. She tore through the back of the walk-in closet to the section she hadn't touched in years. Tucked away were the clothes from before she was Mrs. Holloway. She pulled on a pair of old, soft black cargo pants and a long-sleeved shirt. The pants were looser at the waist than she remembered — a subtle, permanent reminder of how her body had changed.

Dressed in her own skin again, she felt less like a victim and more like a soldier.

Cailin waited until the house was asleep.

The grandfather clock in the hall chimed midnight.

She crept to the door and pressed her ear against the wood. Silence. But she knew there was a guard outside. There always was.

She needed a distraction.

Her eyes swept the room and landed on the tablet Hilliard kept on the nightstand. She picked it up. Locked.

She tried his birthday. Incorrect.

She tried their anniversary. Incorrect.

Chapter 309:

Cailin closed her eyes. Think. What does Hilliard care about most? Not his company. Not his name. Something he thinks is his alone. The coordinates. The tiny, uninhabited island in the Aegean where he had first told her he loved her — a place no one else knew about, a secret he would assume Cailin had long forgotten.

She typed in the string of numbers.

The screen unlocked.

Cailin almost laughed. Predictable narcissist.

She opened the browser, logged into her encrypted email, and typed one message to Kegan.

Subject: Laundry. Body: The service entrance. 2 AM. Bring the garbage truck.

She deleted the sent message, wiped the history, and put the tablet back.

Now she had to get to the service entrance.

She went to the bathroom, grabbed a bottle of Hilliard's cologne, and smashed it on the floor. The glass shattered. The smell was overpowering.

Cailin screamed.

“Help! I’m hurt!”

The bedroom door burst open. The guard rushed in, gun drawn. “Mrs. Holloway?”

“I dropped a bottle,” Cailin sobbed, clutching her foot. “There’s glass everywhere! I’m bleeding!”

The guard lowered his weapon and surveyed the mess. “I’ll call housekeeping,” he said, reaching for his radio.

“No!” Cailin cried. “Just help me to the chair. Please.”

He hesitated, then holstered his gun and walked toward her.

As he bent down, Cailin spotted the laundry cart sitting in the hallway behind him. The night maid must have left it there.

“Actually,” Cailin said, “I think I’m fine.”

She shoved him. Hard.

He stumbled back, his boots slipping on the cologne-slicked tiles. His training kicked in and he fought for balance, but the floor offered no purchase. His arms flailed and he went down with a heavy thud, his head cracking against the porcelain tub.

He didn't move.

Cailin knelt quickly and pressed two fingers to his neck. A steady pulse — just unconscious. She couldn't have a death on her conscience.

She ran.

She sprinted into the hallway and dove into the large canvas laundry cart, burying herself under a pile of towels.

A moment later, she heard footsteps. The maid.

"What was that noise?" she muttered, grabbing the handle of the cart and pushing.

Cailin held her breath as the cart began to move. The wheels rumbled over carpet, then hardwood. They descended in the service elevator, the smell of stale linen suffocating in the tight space.

The cart stopped.

“Hey, load this up,” the maid said. “Truck’s here.”

Cailin felt the cart tipping. She braced herself and tumbled out onto a pile of garbage bags in the back of a truck. The smell was horrific.

But it smelled like freedom.

“Go! Go! Go!” a voice whispered.

Cailin looked up. The driver wore a sanitation uniform, but she recognized the eyes. One of Kegan’s men.

The truck roared to life and sped away from the Manor.

Cailin lay back on the garbage bags and laughed.

The truck dropped Cailin off three blocks from the hospital.

A black sedan was waiting. Kegan was in the driver’s seat.

“You smell terrible,” he said as Cailin climbed in.

“Drive,” Cailin said. “We need to get Elia.”

He floored it.

Chapter 310:

They reached the private hospital in ten minutes. Cailin didn’t wait for him to park. She jumped out and ran into the lobby, ignoring the receptionist and heading straight for the elevators.

Fourth floor. Pediatric ICU.

She burst through the double doors. “Elia!”

Cailin ran to Room 402 and threw the door open.

The bed was empty. The sheets were stripped. The monitors were dark. The little stuffed rabbit Elia slept with was gone.

“No,” Cailin whispered. “No, no, no.”

She spun around. A nurse was walking by with a chart. Cailin grabbed her by the scrubs.

“Where is she? Where is my daughter?”

The nurse looked terrified. “Mrs. Holloway? You... you aren’t supposed to be here.”

“Where is she?!”

“Mr. Holloway’s private medical team came,” the nurse stammered. “About an hour ago. They had the transfer papers signed by the board. They took her.”

“Took her where?”

“They didn’t say. The lead physician just said she would be safer at home.”

Cailin let go of the nurse. Her vision tunneled. Rage — cold and sharp — flooded her. As she stumbled back, her eyes caught a mobile supply cart left in the hallway. On the top tray, gleaming under the fluorescent lights, was a sterile pack containing a single-use scalpel. Without thinking, she palmed it, the crinkle of the foil a venomous promise, and shoved it deep into her cargo pants pocket.

She slid down the wall until she hit the floor.

He knew. He knew Cailin would run. He had let her escape — because he knew she would come straight here. And he knew that as long as he had Elia, Cailin was on a leash.

Kegan ran up to her. “Cailin? Is she here?”

Cailin shook her head. She couldn’t speak.

Kegan looked at the empty room and cursed. He pulled out his tablet. “I’m tracking the ambulance. Hilliard’s private fleet.”

He tapped the screen. “Got it. They’re heading north. Toward the coast.”

“The Cliffside Villa,” Cailin whispered.

It was Hilliard’s fortress — a glass and concrete box perched on the edge of a cliff overlooking the Atlantic. One way in, one way out.

“Take me there,” Cailin said, standing.

“Cailin, that place is a bunker,” Kegan said. “We can’t just knock on the door.”

“I’m not knocking,” Cailin said. “I’ll burn it down if I have to.”

The wind whipped Cailin’s hair across her face as she stood before the massive steel gates of the Villa. The ocean crashed against the rocks hundreds of feet below, the sound deafening.

“I’m going in with you,” Kegan said, checking the clip of his handgun.

“No,” Cailin said. “If he sees a gun, he’ll lock the place down. I won’t be able to get to Elia.”

“He’s dangerous, Cailin.”

“So am I.”

Cailin pressed the intercom button. “Let me in, Hilliard.”

A pause. Then the heavy gates groaned and began to slide open.

She walked up the long driveway. The house loomed ahead, dark and jagged against the night sky. The front door was open.

Hilliard was waiting in the living room, a glass of whiskey in hand. A fire crackled in the fireplace.