

Second chance 341

Chapter 341:

Cailin looked up into his grey eyes. Her heart hammered against her ribs, but her voice was ice.

“It’s more real than your feelings for me,” Cailin whispered back.

Hilliard held her gaze for one second. He saw the unwavering certainty in her eyes — the same look she’d had when she denied her sons’ existence to save them. It was the look of a woman playing a game he didn’t understand, but one she was determined to win. He decided to bet on the player, not the cards.

He turned his back to her, facing the angry mob of New York’s elite.

“I believe my wife,” Hilliard announced. His voice wasn’t a shout, but it carried the absolute, crushing weight of a billionaire’s decree.

The crowd went quiet. Charla’s jaw tightened so hard her teeth ground together. Hilliard’s public defense of Cailin felt like a knife twisting in her gut.

Cailin stepped out from behind Hilliard’s shadow. She walked up to the microphone, her emerald dress sweeping the floor, and looked directly at Nadine.

“Since you are so confident it’s a fake, Nadine,” Cailin said, her voice dripping with lethal calm, “why don’t we bring in someone who actually knows what they’re looking at? Let’s have it appraised. Right here. Right now.”

The challenge hung in the air, heavy and electric.

Nadine let out a harsh, mocking laugh. She gripped the microphone stand, her knuckles white. “Appraised by who? The local pawn shop owner? No one in this room has the credentials to authenticate a lost Monet. We need an international master, Cailin. Someone whose word is law.”

Nadine was bluffing, trying to set an impossible standard to force Cailin to back down.

But Preston Holloway’s pride had been insulted. His face was a mask of furious red. He turned to his chief assistant, who was trembling nearby.

“Get Liam,” Preston barked, his voice echoing in the silent room. “I don’t care what he’s doing. I don’t care what it costs. Get him here now.”

A collective gasp rippled through the crowd.

Liam. The former Chief Appraiser for The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The man known in the global art syndicate as the “Eye of God.” His authentication could make or break a billion-dollar estate.

Charla swallowed hard. A cold bead of sweat rolled down her spine. She looked at Cailin, expecting to see panic. But Cailin was calmly adjusting the strap of her watch, her face an unreadable mask.

Hilliard reached out and took Cailin's hand. His palm was hot, slightly damp with tension — he was risking his entire reputation on her word. Cailin didn't pull away. She gently stroked the back of his hand with her thumb, a silent, steadying rhythm.

The wait was agonizing. The ballroom felt like a pressure cooker. Nadine paced near the stage, downing a glass of champagne in one gulp, her eyes darting nervously to the painting.

Chapter 342:

Fifteen minutes later, a low, rhythmic thumping vibrated through the floorboards. The sound grew louder, building into a deafening roar. Outside the massive floor-to-ceiling windows, the hotel's heavy velvet curtains began to whip and thrash wildly.

Preston had sent the Holloway corporate helicopter.

The heavy oak doors of the ballroom were shoved open by two security guards.

An elderly man strode into the room wearing a rumpled, old-fashioned tweed suit and carrying a silver-tipped walking cane. A gold-rimmed monocle hung from a chain around his neck.

The crowd parted instantly, like Moses splitting the Red Sea. No one dared block Liam's path.

Preston rushed forward, his arrogant posture melting into sycophantic submission. “Mr. Liam, thank you so much for coming on such short notice. We have a situation regarding a —”

Liam didn’t even look at him. He walked right past the billionaire without breaking stride.

From the moment Liam entered the room, his eyes were locked onto the canvas on the easel. His pace quickened. He dropped his cane — it clattered loudly against the hardwood floor — but he didn’t stop to pick it up. He practically sprinted up the steps to the display table.

Nadine saw her chance. She rushed up behind him. “Mr. Liam, I am a former director at Obsidian. I can assure you, the brushstrokes on the water lilies are clearly modern synthetic —”

Liam stopped dead. He didn’t turn around. He simply raised one hand, silencing her, then looked over his shoulder at Preston, his eyes cold and hard as diamonds.

“Preston,” Liam said, his voice quiet but carrying an immense weight of authority. “If you allow this person to speak another word while I work, my fee triples. And I will leave.”

Nadine recoiled as if she had been slapped. Her face burned crimson. She slunk backward into the crowd.

Liam pulled a high-powered jeweler’s loupe from his vest pocket and a specialized UV flashlight from his jacket. He leaned in, his nose inches from the canvas.

The ballroom was so quiet you could hear the ice melting in the champagne buckets.

Liam traced the light over the signature and examined the cracking pattern of the aged oil. Then, slowly, his hands began to shake. The tremor started in his fingers and traveled up his arms. He lowered the flashlight and took off his glasses.

His eyes were bloodshot, brimming with thick, heavy tears. He let out a ragged, wheezing breath that sounded like a sob.

Cailin stood near the edge of the stage. She picked up a fresh glass of champagne. Watching the old man's trembling back, a very small, incredibly private smile touched the corners of her lips — the smile of a master chess player watching her opponent step flawlessly into a trap she had set seasons ago.

Liam suddenly straightened his back and spun around.

His eyes swept over the stunned crowd — a chaotic mix of billionaires and socialites — before slowly tracking back to the display table. He looked at the heavy titanium case, recognizing the custom European modifications. Only then did his gaze shift, locking with absolute, laser-like precision onto Cailin, the woman standing guard beside it.

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His lips parted, trembling, as he prepared to deliver the verdict that would shatter the room.

Liam's lips parted, trembling as he prepared to deliver the verdict that would shatter the room.

He slowly lowered the high-powered jeweler's loupe from his eye. His hand, usually as steady as a surgeon's, was shaking so violently that the metal casing clicked against his gold watch. He took a deep, ragged breath, his chest heaving under his rumpled tweed suit, trying to process the massive shockwave hitting his brain.

The silence in the ballroom was absolute — a heavy, suffocating quiet. The only sound was the faint clinking of ice melting in a champagne bucket near the stage.

Nadine stood a few feet away, her breathing shallow and fast. She gripped her crystal champagne flute so hard her knuckles were entirely white, her sharp manicured nails digging into her own palms, praying for the old man to declare the painting a worthless fake.

Liam did not walk toward the microphone.

Instead, he turned his body completely and shoved past Preston Holloway — not a brush, but a physical push of Preston's shoulder out of his way.

Preston stumbled backward, his expensive Italian suit wrinkling. His mouth fell open in sheer, unadulterated shock, but he didn't dare say a word of protest to the "Eye of God."

Liam marched straight toward the shadows at the edge of the display table, his eyes locked entirely on Cailin.

He stopped right in front of her. Then the elderly, highly respected art titan threw his arms wide open and pulled Cailin into a fierce, incredibly tight embrace.

“Cailin! My brilliant girl!” Liam practically shouted, his thick British accent echoing off the high ceilings. “The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s most fiercely proud, absolute genius of an alumni! You actually found it!”

The words hit the room like a physical bomb.

A deafening roar of gasps and frantic whispers erupted across the ballroom. The socialites and Wall Street titans stared in utter disbelief. Cailin wasn’t just some discarded, bankrupt housewife. She was claimed by the highest echelon of the global art academic world.

Cailin did not freeze. She smiled — a genuine, warm expression that instantly melted the ice from her face — and hugged the old professor back.

“Bonsoir, Professeur,” Cailin murmured in flawless, elegant French, her voice low and intimate. “It has been far too long.”

Standing just two feet away, Hilliard’s entire body went rigid.

His pupils contracted into tiny, dark pinpricks. The sight of another man — even an elderly professor — holding Cailin, touching her waist, smelling her perfume, sent a violent surge of physiological jealousy straight into his bloodstream. The veins on the side of his neck bulged. His jaw locked so tight his teeth ground together.

His absolute, territorial possessiveness took over.

He stepped forward, reached out with his large hand, and clamped it heavily onto Cailin's waist. His fingers dug into the emerald velvet of her dress. With one smooth, forceful motion, he pulled Cailin out of Liam's arms and tucked her flush against his side.

Chapter 344:

Liam stumbled back half a step. He frowned, glaring at Hilliard's aggressive display of ownership.

But Liam didn't have time to argue with a jealous husband. He spun on his heel to face the crowd, his eyes burning with fierce, undeniable fire. He pointed his silver-tipped cane directly at the canvas on the easel.

"This painting," Liam announced, his voice booming with absolute, terrifying authority, "is the undisputed, flawless, original masterpiece. It is The Lost Monet."

The ballroom exploded.

Nadine's face lost every single drop of blood. She looked like a corpse, her stomach violently dropping.

"No!" Nadine shrieked, her voice cracking into a hysterical pitch. "No, you are lying! You are an old fool! She paid you off! It's a fake!"

The entire room turned to look at her. The glares were lethal. Questioning the “Eye of God” in the middle of a New York high-society event was social and professional suicide.

Liam slowly turned his head. He looked at Nadine with a level of disgust so profound it made the air turn cold.

“And what third-rate, back-alley auction house did you learn your authentication skills from, little girl?” Liam sneered, his tone dripping with pure acid. “The brushwork, the aging of the cadmium yellow, the specific weave of the nineteenth-century French canvas — it is undeniable. You are a disgrace to the profession.”

Nadine’s knees physically buckled. She swayed, her vision darkening around the edges.

She turned wildly, looking for her boyfriend. “Zach! Zach, tell them!”

Zach was already backing away. He took three large steps backward, putting deliberate distance between himself and the radioactive woman. He adjusted his tie and looked at the ceiling, pretending he had never met her in his life.

Total panic set in. Nadine’s lungs seized. She lunged forward, throwing herself toward the most powerful man in the room — aimed for Hilliard, reaching out with both hands, trying to grab his arm in a pathetic, submissive display of begging.

Hilliard saw her coming. His lip curled in absolute revulsion. He stepped back so fast it was a blur, dodging her touch as if she were covered in a deadly plague.

Nadine grabbed empty air. Her momentum carried her forward. Her high heels twisted violently on the floor, and she crashed hard onto the thick carpet, landing on her hands and knees in her cheap red dress.

Hilliard looked down at her. His grey eyes were devoid of any human empathy.

“You do not even qualify to be the dirt on the bottom of my family’s shoes,” Hilliard stated, his voice a low, cruel rumble that cut through the noise.

In the crowd, Charla saw Nadine hit the floor. Her heart hammered against her ribs. She instantly raised her white silk fan, covering the lower half of her face, and physically shrank behind a large floral arrangement, terrified that Hilliard’s wrath would turn to her next.

Preston, realizing he had almost thrown away a hundred-million-dollar asset, instantly pivoted. His face flushed red as he slapped a greasy, sycophantic smile onto it and rushed over.

Chapter 345:

“Cailin! My brilliant niece!” Preston practically cheered. “I always knew you had an incredible eye! What a triumph for the Holloway family!”

Cailin looked at Preston. Her eyes were dead, flat, and freezing cold.

“Ten minutes ago, you told me I was living on scraps, Preston,” Cailin said, her voice slicing through his fake joy like a razor blade. “Do not pretend we are family.”

Preston’s face burned. He coughed awkwardly and spun around, snapping his fingers at a terrified waiter. “Bring the vintage Dom Pérignon! Only the best for Cailin!”

Liam ignored Preston. He grabbed Cailin’s hand and began pulling her toward a group of European banking billionaires.

“You all need to hire her,” Liam demanded of the tycoons. “The restoration work she has been doing in Europe under the radar is nothing short of miraculous. She is the best in the world.”

The billionaires swarmed. They circled Cailin like sharks smelling fresh blood, shoving their platinum business cards toward her, desperate to get into her good graces.

Cailin stood in the center of the frenzy. She accepted the cards with a polite nod, but her posture remained rigid, her eyes distant and completely unbothered by their wealth.

Hilliard stood on the outside of the circle.

He watched his wife. She was glowing under the chandeliers, commanding the room, entirely independent of his money and his name.

A dark, terrifying sense of powerlessness washed over him. His chest felt tight. He suddenly realized that the life Cailin had built over the last five years was a massive, impenetrable fortress. She didn't need him. She didn't need his protection.

He couldn't stand it. He needed to touch her — to remind everyone she belonged to him.

Hilliard took a step forward, preparing to push through the billionaires and drag Cailin out of the room.

Before he could reach her, Liam reached into the inner breast pocket of his tweed suit. He pulled out a pristine sheet of heavy, watermarked parchment bearing the official embossed letterhead of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, along with a gold-plated Montblanc fountain pen.

Liam held the blank, heavy parchment high in the air. The harsh light of the chandeliers caught the metallic sheen of the museum's crest. With a few swift, decisive strokes of his fountain pen, he scrawled his signature across the bottom.

The chatter among the billionaires instantly died. Everyone stared at the paper in the old man's hand.

"This," Liam announced, his voice carrying the heavy, undeniable weight of a judge delivering a final verdict, "will serve as my legally binding, temporary guarantee. I have drafted a provisional letter of authentication right here, right now, backed by my personal honor, my entire career, and the full institutional weight of the museum. The formal, irrevocable certificate will be issued within twenty-four hours."

The statement was absolute. In the high-stakes world of fine art, that piece of paper was a supreme legal judgment — it instantly turned the canvas on the easel into a liquid asset worth over a hundred million dollars.

Chapter 346:

Liam slowly lowered his arm. He turned his head and looked down at Nadine, who was still trembling on her hands and knees on the carpet.

His eyes were filled with cold, clinical disgust.

“To falsely accuse a masterpiece of forgery for your own petty, vindictive agenda is a crime against history,” Liam spat, his words hitting Nadine like physical blows. “I will personally make sure that every auction house, every gallery, and every private collector in the world knows your name. You are blacklisted. You will never work in this industry again.”

Nadine stopped breathing.

The word blacklisted echoed in her ears. Her face turned the color of wet ash. Her fingers dug so violently into the expensive hotel carpet that two of her acrylic nails snapped off, but she didn’t feel the pain. Her entire life — her career, her social climbing — was instantly incinerated.

Her mind snapped. The sheer terror of losing everything pushed her into a corner of pure, feral desperation.

Nadine scrambled to her feet. Her hair was a mess. She wildly scanned the crowd until her crazed eyes locked onto the white silk dress hiding behind the floral arrangement.

Nadine pointed a shaking, accusatory finger directly at Charla.

“It was her!” Nadine screamed, her voice tearing through the silent ballroom. “Charla English told me to do it! She set me up! She wanted to humiliate Cailin!”

The crowd gasped. Hundreds of eyes instantly shifted like searchlights, pinning Charla against the wall with heavy suspicion and aristocratic judgment.

Charla’s heart skipped a beat, but her survival instincts were terrifyingly sharp.

In a fraction of a second, her face contorted into a mask of pure, devastating shock. Her lower lip began to quiver perfectly. Tears instantly welled in her large eyes and spilled over her lashes.

Charla pressed both hands against her chest, right over her heart, looking like a wounded dove.

“Nadine... how could you?” Charla cried out, her voice breaking with exactly the right amount of betrayal. “I only warned you to be careful because I was worried about the family’s reputation! I never, ever told you to make such a horrible, baseless accusation!”

She took a step forward, her wide, pleading eyes sweeping the crowd. “She is just trying to drag an innocent friend down with her because she got caught. It is sick!”

Nadine’s entire body shook with violent rage. The sheer audacity of Charla’s lie made her see red.

“You lying bitch!” Nadine shrieked. She lunged forward, hands outstretched, fully intending to rip Charla’s perfect blonde hair out by the roots.

Before she could take three steps, two massive hotel security guards in black suits intercepted her. They grabbed her arms and pinned them behind her back. Nadine thrashed wildly, kicking her legs, screaming obscenities at Charla.

Hilliard stood watching the pathetic display. His jaw was locked tight. He was utterly exhausted by the toxic, screaming women that seemed to constantly orbit his life.

He raised his hand and snapped his fingers once. The sound was sharp, like a gunshot.

The head of his personal security detail stepped forward instantly.

Chapter 347:

“Get this trash off the carpet,” Hilliard ordered, his voice devoid of emotion. “Throw her out the back door.”

The security guards didn't hesitate. They hooked their arms under Nadine's armpits and dragged her — they didn't walk her out, they dragged her. Her feet left the floor. She kicked and thrashed. One of her cheap red high heels flew off and clattered against a marble pillar. The fabric of her dress caught on a chair leg and ripped with a loud, tearing sound.

"Hilliard! Please! Charla is lying!" Nadine screamed, her voice echoing down the long hallway as she was hauled backward.

Not a single person in the ballroom moved to help her. The billionaires and socialites simply watched with cold, dead eyes, sipping their champagne — a brutal display of how the elite disposed of their broken toys.

The heavy oak doors at the back of the ballroom slammed shut. Nadine's screams were instantly cut off. The room returned to its suffocating, fake elegance.

Hilliard slowly turned and swept his cold, predatory gaze across the entire room.

"Let me make this perfectly clear," Hilliard stated, his voice a low, dangerous threat that made the hair on the back of people's necks stand up. "If anyone in this city ever questions my wife again, you will not just lose your career. You will lose everything."

The guests quickly looked down at their shoes. No one dared meet his eyes.

Cailin stood perfectly still. She looked at Hilliard's broad back as he defended her. Five years ago, this display of absolute protection would have made her heart race with love. Now, it only made her feel a cold, bitter irony. He was protecting a version of her that no longer existed.

She calmly pulled her hand out of his loose grip.

Hilliard's palm felt instantly empty. He looked down at his hand, then up at her face. A dark, dangerous flicker of panic crossed his eyes.

"I need to go to the powder room to fix my lipstick," Cailin said. Her voice was flat, completely devoid of gratitude.

Before leaving, her gaze flicked to the far corner of the ballroom. Elia was sitting quietly at a small, velvet-draped table, coloring a napkin while the nanny hovered nearby. A momentary pang of guilt hit Cailin for bringing her five-year-old to such a toxic event, but Elia gave her a tiny, reassuring nod. Cailin let out a breath, her hand unconsciously drifting down to smooth the fabric of her dress over her thigh — a fleeting, habitual check of the hidden, matte-black ceramic combat knife strapped to her leg, an insurance policy from a past she never spoke of.

She didn't wait for his response. She turned and walked away. The socialites parted for her instantly, stepping back as if she were royalty.

Chapter 348:

Cailin walked out of the ballroom and down the long, quiet, carpeted corridor. As soon as she turned the corner and was out of sight, her shoulders dropped. She leaned her back against the cool, patterned wallpaper and let out a long, shaky exhale. The battle mask slipped off.

Her phone buzzed in her clutch. She pulled it out — an encrypted text from Kegan.

Did the bomb go off as planned, my Queen?

Cailin stared at the screen. A genuine, soft smile touched her lips. She typed back quickly.

Flawless execution. Thank you for the painting.

She hit send and prepared to put the phone away.

Suddenly, from the far end of the corridor near the service elevators, a sound pierced the quiet — a very faint, high-pitched gasp. A child's voice, filled with sudden, sharp terror.

Cailin's blood turned to ice. Her maternal instinct recognized the pitch instantly. It was Elia.

She didn't think. She dropped her phone into her purse, kicked off her heavy diamond-encrusted Jimmy Choo stilettos, and left them abandoned on the carpet.

Barefoot, Cailin sprinted down the hallway like a mother panther charging toward a threat. She burst through the side doors and hit the rough, jagged cobblestones of the garden. Her bare feet screamed in agonizing protest as the sharp edges sliced into her tender soles — a searing pain she completely ignored. Her heart hammered a frantic, terrifying rhythm against her ribs.

Ten minutes earlier, the air inside the grand ballroom had felt thick and unbreathable to Elia. The heavy perfume, the loud classical music, and the constant staring of strange adults made her chest feel tight.

While Cailin was surrounded by the billionaires, Elia had quietly slipped her small hand out of the nanny's loose grip. She ducked under a velvet rope and pushed through a heavy side door, escaping into the cool night air.

She wandered down a winding cobblestone path that led to the Plaza's private, enclosed rose garden at the back of the property. It was dark and quiet, illuminated only by a few low-lying landscape lights.

Elia took a deep breath and felt the tension leave her small shoulders.

From the shadows of a stone balcony above, Jakobe watched her.

Jeraldine's adopted golden boy had been seething all night. He hated Elia. He hated that she had Hilliard's eyes. He hated that she was the real bloodline.

His eyes flashed with toxic, vicious excitement. He turned and gestured to a group of four boys standing nearby — trust-fund kids, sons of Hilliard's minor business partners, all around ten years old in miniature tuxedos. They followed Jakobe around like obedient lapdogs, desperate to stay in the Holloway family's good graces.

“Look at her,” Jakobe whispered, pointing down at Elia. He manufactured a fake, watery sniffle. “She is such a little thief. She stole my diamond lapel pin in the bathroom earlier. My grandma Jeraldine says she is just a dirty stray.”

The boys puffed out their chests, eager to play the heroes for the wealthy boy.

“Let’s go teach the stray a lesson,” the tallest boy, wearing a custom Rolex, sneered.

Chapter 349:

Down in the garden, Elia crouched near a rare bush of black roses. She reached out, her small fingers gently touching the velvety texture of the dark petals, fascinated by the color.

Suddenly, a heavy hand shoved her hard between the shoulder blades.

The force was violent. Elia gasped as she was thrown forward, throwing her hands out to catch herself.

Her small palms slammed into the rough, jagged cobblestones. A sharp, burning pain shot up her arms. The skin on the heels of her hands tore open instantly. Warm blood welled up, mixing with the dirt on the stones.

Elia pushed herself up onto her knees, her breath hitching from the sudden shock. She turned her head.

Jakobe and the four older boys had formed a tight, intimidating half-circle around her, blocking her only path back to the hotel.

Jakobe stood in the center, looking down at her with a sickening, triumphant smirk.

“Aww, look at the little rat,” Jakobe mocked, his voice dripping with sugary poison. “You belong down there in the dirt. That’s where people with bad blood stay.”

Elia’s palms throbbed with agonizing pain. Her eyes watered, but she bit down on the inside of her cheek so hard she tasted copper. She refused to cry. She tilted her chin up and glared at Jakobe with a freezing, dead-eyed stare — a perfect, terrifying mirror of Cailin’s.

The tall boy with the Rolex hated that look. It showed no fear.

“Don’t look at us like that, you freak,” he snarled. He pulled his leg back, the hard leather toe of his expensive dress shoe aiming directly for Elia’s ribs.

Before he could swing, the heavy crunch of boots on gravel echoed from the main path. A hotel security guard was walking his patrol route, swinging a heavy flashlight.

Elia opened her mouth to scream for help.

Jakobe moved with terrifying speed. He dropped to his knees, clamped his hand violently over Elia's mouth, and shoved the five-year-old flat against the dark earth, pinning her behind the thick rosebush.

The beam of the flashlight swept over the garden, illuminating the boys.

"Hey! What are you kids doing out here in the dark?" the guard called out.

Jakobe popped his head up from behind the bush, instantly plastering a bright, innocent smile on his face.

"Hi, officer!" Jakobe chirped sweetly. "We are just playing hide and seek! But I think I saw a scary man jump over the fence over there!" He pointed toward the far east wall — the complete opposite direction.

The guard recognized Jakobe from the VIP list. He didn't question the innocent-looking boy in the miniature tuxedo. He unclipped his radio and jogged toward the east wall.

As soon as the heavy footsteps faded, the garden fell back into a dead, oppressive silence.

Jakobe took his hand off Elia's mouth. He stood and wiped his palm on his tailored trousers with a look of extreme disgust. He looked at the boys and gave a sharp nod.

Two of them stepped forward, grabbed Elia by her upper arms, and hauled her roughly to her feet.

Chapter 350:

Elia kicked and twisted, her small boots scraping against the stones, but she was five years old. She couldn't break the grip of two ten-year-old boys.

Jakobe pointed to the massive, overgrown rosebush behind them. The branches were thick, covered in vicious, inch-long thorns that looked like rusted nails.

"Throw her in there," Jakobe ordered, his voice cold and completely devoid of empathy. "Let's see if her face looks so pretty when it's shredded."

The boys laughed — a cruel, ugly sound. They swung Elia backward, building momentum, preparing to launch her small body face-first into the wall of thorns.

They threw her.

Elia flew through the dark air. She squeezed her eyes shut and let out a short, terrified gasp, bracing for the agonizing impact of thorns tearing into her skin.

The impact never came.

Instead, the shadows above the rosebush suddenly exploded. Two incredibly fast, dark blurs dropped from the thick branches of the oak tree above, descending like silent, lethal predators.

The first shadow hit the ground without a sound.

It was a boy, dressed entirely in black tactical gear, his face obscured by a tight black neoprene mask. He intercepted Elia's trajectory perfectly — catching her small body against his chest and instantly executing a flawless tactical roll across the cobblestones, absorbing all the kinetic energy of the throw.

Aron came up on one knee, holding his sister safely behind him.

Simultaneously, the second shadow — Davy — landed directly in the center of the four older boys.

The tall boy with the Rolex didn't even have time to blink.

Davy didn't throw a wild, childish punch. He moved with the terrifying, mechanical precision of a trained operative. He dropped his weight and snapped his leg out in a brutal Krav Maga sweep.

His heavy tactical boot slammed directly into the side of the tall boy's knee joint.

Crack.

A sickening popping sound echoed through the quiet garden. The tall boy let out a blood-curdling, high-pitched scream as his leg gave out. He collapsed onto the stones, clutching his knee, sobbing in agony.

The other three boys froze in absolute terror, staring at the two masked children who had materialized out of the darkness.

One panicked and lunged at Aron, swinging his fists wildly.

Aron's eyes behind the mask were dead and cold. He didn't flinch. He stepped inside the boy's guard, grabbed his wrist, and twisted his entire body weight into a brutal joint lock. The boy shrieked as his shoulder was wrenched to its absolute limit. Aron didn't stop — he drove his knee straight up, burying it into the boy's solar plexus. All the air rushed out in a wet gasp, and the boy dropped to the ground, curling into a fetal position, crying hysterically, his mind unable to comprehend the impossible speed of his tiny, masked assailants.

The entire fight lasted less than four seconds. Three ten-year-old boys lay incapacitated on the ground — brought down by two five-year-olds.