

Second chance 601

Chapter 601:

The grand ballroom of the Sinclair estate had been a glittering display of power and wealth, right up until the moment the lights died. Somewhere in the hidden depths of the control room, Charla English had slammed her hand down on the master breaker, plunging the massive space into absolute, chaotic darkness. Screams erupted instantly, the orchestra's music screeching to a panicked halt. In that sudden, terrifying void, Elia's small hand had been torn from Silas's grasp by the surging crowd. She had been pushed, jostled, and spun around by unseen legs and rustling gowns until she stumbled through a set of heavy side doors, escaping the crushing panic.

The corridors of the Sinclair estate were a labyrinth of polished marble and silent, branching paths. Designed to impress, they were utterly terrifying to a lost five-year-old.

Elia clutched the skirt of her diamond-encrusted dress, the fabric heavy in her small hands. The grand ballroom, with its music and lights, felt a world away. Here, there was only the echo of her own small footsteps and the distant, muffled pulse of the party.

"Daddy?" she whispered, her voice swallowed by the high ceilings.

The only answer was her own faint echo. She took another turn, then another, each hallway looking exactly like the last. Panic began to prick at the back of her neck, cold and sharp.

She didn't know she was being watched.

Behind a large potted palm, tucked into a blind spot between two security cameras, Charla English held her breath. Her knuckles were white where she gripped a heavy iron rod, pried from a decorative fireplace set. Her original plan had been simple: wait for the girl to get separated, knock her unconscious, and drag her to a service exit.

But then the rhythmic footsteps of a security patrol had echoed down the hall.

Charla had shrunk back into the shadows, her heart hammering against her ribs — not with fear, but with pure, venomous frustration. She understood instantly that a physical abduction would leave too many traces. The Sinclair family's security apparatus would lock down the estate within minutes, and their pursuit would be swift and utterly destructive. She would never make it off the grounds with a struggling child.

As the guard passed and his footsteps faded, however, a new plan bloomed in her mind. A better plan. More vicious. More permanent. A physically broken child could be healed, her trauma eventually soothed by time and love. But a mentally shattered child? A child convinced that her own father wanted her dead? That was a wound that would fester forever — a permanent rot in the foundation of Hilliard and Cailin's reunion.

Charla quietly slid the iron rod behind a fire hydrant cabinet, the metal clinking softly against the brass. She smoothed down her cake-stained dress, drew a slow breath, and forced her face into a mask of gentle, maternal concern.

"Sweetheart? Are you lost?"

Chapter 602:

She stepped out from behind the palm tree, her voice a confection of sugar and sympathy.

Elia jumped, her small body flinching back. She recognized this woman. This was the bad lady from the big building — the one who had yelled at her, whose face had been twisted and ugly.

“Don’t be afraid,” Charla cooed, crouching down to make herself smaller, less threatening. “I’m a friend of your daddy’s. Hilliard Holloway, right? He’s so worried about you. He sent me to find you.”

The name — Hilliard Holloway — was a key turning a lock inside Elia’s chest. The tension in her small shoulders eased by half. The man with the caramel apple. He was worried about her. He had sent someone.

“Really? Daddy’s looking for me?”

“Of course he is.” Charla’s lie was seamless, practiced. “He’s in a very important meeting and can’t leave.” She pointed down a corridor leading in the completely opposite direction of the ballroom. “It’s this way.”

She held out her hand, palm up — a gesture of pure, false invitation. “Come on. I’ll take you to him. It’s quiet there. No bad people to bother you.”

Elia hesitated. A tiny flicker of instinct, a cold warning deep in her gut, told her something was wrong. But the desire to see her father — to prove that he did want her — was a tidal wave that drowned out that small, cautious voice.

She placed her small, warm hand into Charla's.

Charla's nails dug briefly into Elia's soft flesh, a sharp, fleeting pain instantly masked by the warmth of her smile. She held on tight.

She led the little girl away from the lights, away from the music, away from anyone who might see. They walked down long, service-style hallways, past closed doors and stacked chairs, the air growing colder and dustier with every step.

Finally, they stopped before a heavy wooden door at the end of a dark, narrow passage. A sign, faded and peeling, read: Storage.

"It's so dark in there," Elia said, her voice trembling. She tried to pull her hand back, a knot of pure, animal fear tightening in her stomach. "Is... is Daddy really in there?"

Charla's patience snapped.

"He's waiting," she hissed, and with a sudden, violent tug, she yanked Elia forward.

She shoved the little girl into the pitch-black room. The force of it sent Elia stumbling, dropping to her knees on the dusty floor.

Before Elia could even cry out, the heavy door slammed shut.

Click.

The sound of the lock engaging was the loudest thing Elia had ever heard. The room was swallowed in absolute darkness, save for a single thin sliver of moonlight filtering through a grimy, high window. The air smelled of mildew and old wood.

“You... you’re not my daddy’s friend!” Elia scrambled backward, her dress catching on something rough. The truth, cold and sharp, finally pierced through her hope.

Chapter 603:

A low, cruel laugh echoed in the darkness. When Charla’s face moved into the sliver of moonlight, it was no longer smiling. It was a twisted, unrecognizable mask of hatred.

“Of course I’m not,” she whispered, her voice a venomous rasp. She took a step closer, a predator cornering its prey. “I’m here to tell you a secret.”

Elia shook her head, tears finally breaking free — hot and silent on her cold cheeks.

“Do you know why you’re here, little girl?” Charla’s voice dropped to a conspiratorial hiss. “Because your daddy doesn’t want you.”

“No! You’re lying!” Elia screamed, the sound thin and desperate. “He bought me a caramel apple! He did!”

“That was an act!” Charla snarled, the lie tasting sweet on her tongue. She was going to destroy the very foundation of this child’s world. She grabbed a discarded ragdoll from a nearby crate and hurled it violently to the floor. “You’re just like this to him. Garbage. Something in his way.”

Elia was trembling uncontrollably now, small, choked sobs escaping her lips.

Charla watched her, a thrill of pure, ecstatic power surging through her veins. The child was broken. Now it was time to plant the poison.

“You’re probably too young to remember,” Charla said, her voice becoming deceptively soft — a serpent’s whisper. “But this has all happened before. Five years ago. You were thrown away then, too.”

She knelt down until her face was inches from Elia’s, her breath cold and foul.

And in the suffocating darkness of the locked room, she told the child the lie that would destroy everything.

The darkness in the storage room was a living thing. It pressed in on Elia from all sides, filled her ears, tasted of dust and fear. Her tears were hot on her cheeks, each sob a painful hitch in her chest.

Charla savored the child's terror. She reached out, her fingers like claws, and gripped Elia's thin shoulders, forcing the little girl to look at her. In the sliver of moonlight, Charla's eyes gleamed with a cruel, triumphant light.

"Want to know how your daddy threw you away five years ago?" she whispered, the words slick with poison. "He gave the order himself."

"No... that's impossible..." Elia's voice was a choked whimper. The world was tilting, the floor beneath her no longer solid.

Charla leaned closer, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial hiss, as though sharing the darkest of secrets. "He told your mother to get rid of you. The Holloway family didn't need a girl. But his mother was even worse. She had someone take you — a tiny little baby — and throw you into the cold, black ocean."

The images were too horrible. Elia's mind went blank, a white screen of pure, uncomprehending horror. It was a story from a nightmare, not from real life.

"You think he wants you now?" Charla laughed — a short, ugly sound. Then she delivered the final, fatal blow: the lie that connected the monstrous past to the terrifying present.

"Today. Just now. Your daddy gave me the order."

Chapter 604:

She began to mimic Hilliard's voice — that low, emotionless, commanding tone Elia vaguely remembered from the big building. The imitation was chillingly accurate.

"He told me to bring you here and hide you. He said he was tired of you, that you were a problem he needed gone. He told me to 'handle it.' To throw you back in the sea, and this time, make sure you never, ever came back."

Charla let the silence hang for a beat, allowing the poison to sink in.

Then, in her own voice, she hammered the final nail. "Do you hear me? He. Never. Wanted. You."

That sentence was a bolt of black lightning. It struck the very core of Elia's being and shattered everything — the hope, the caramel apple, the fragile, newborn belief that she was finally wanted. It all crumbled to dust, leaving only a jagged, bottomless abyss of terror and the soul-crushing agony of abandonment.

"NO!"

A scream of pure, primal agony tore from her throat. She shoved Charla with all her might, scrambled away, spun around, and threw herself at the locked door.

"LET ME OUT! I WANT MY MOMMY! I DON'T WANT DADDY! I NEVER WANT TO SEE HIM AGAIN!"

She beat her small fists against the unyielding wood, her cries hysterical and broken.

Behind her, Charla's face was illuminated by a grotesque, deeply satisfied smile. Her work was done.

The screams would bring security soon. She moved quickly to the back of the room and pulled aside a heavy, moth-eaten curtain to reveal a small, hidden service door that opened onto the gardens. Before she slipped through it, she cast one last look at the small, sobbing figure beating helplessly against the door in the dark.

"Fool," she breathed — and then she was gone.

Elia's frantic cries finally reached the ears of a passing servant. Footsteps pounded down the hallway. The crackle of a walkie-talkie broke the silence.

"Quick! There's a child in here! Get the door open!"

A key scraped in the lock. The door swung open, flooding the small, dark space with blinding light.

Elia shot out of the room like a terrified rabbit, a single thought consuming her entirely: escape. Escape this place. Escape the man who wanted to kill her.

She ran, heedless of the intricate corridors, tears and snot smearing her face, the expensive princess dress now a dirty, tangled mess. She stumbled, caught herself, and kept running, driven by a terror so profound it had replaced all other thought.

Meanwhile, on the terrace, the fragile silence that had fallen between Hilliard and Sebastian Sinclair was shattered by Julian's panicked voice crackling through the earpiece.

Inside the grand ballroom, two men spotted the small, frantic figure bursting out from the back corridors at almost the same moment.

The first was Julian Holloway, who had been anxiously searching for his niece. The second was Silas Sinclair, his face a mask of cold fury at having lost control of his own elaborate game — he had been tearing through the shadowed halls himself, enraged that his perfect pawn had slipped from his grasp.

Chapter 605:

"Elia!" Julian cried out, rushing toward her.

Seeing another man running at her, Elia screamed again and tried to swerve away.

"It's okay! It's me, your uncle!" Julian tried to soothe her, but her eyes were wide with a terror that made no distinctions.

Silas reached them a second later. He knew his perfect plan had gone horribly wrong.

In the chaos and terror, Elia recognized only one face she could attach to any semblance of safety: Silas, the man who had brought her here. She lunged forward and buried her face in his expensive suit jacket, her entire body shaking with violent, uncontrollable tremors.

Over and over, she sobbed the same words — a mantra of her new, shattered reality.

“I don’t want Daddy... I don’t want Daddy anymore...”

In the corridor, Elia clung to Silas Sinclair like a drowning child, her small body wracked with sobs that seemed too large for her frame. She buried her face in the dark wool of his suit, trying to disappear into it entirely.

Julian Holloway stood a foot away, his hands hovering uselessly in the air. He reached out, wanting to touch her shoulder, to offer some comfort.

The moment his fingers grazed her dress, Elia let out a piercing shriek and recoiled, burrowing deeper into Silas’s hold.

“Don’t touch her,” Silas snapped, his voice dangerously low. His cold gray eyes, usually so controlled, blazed with quiet fury.

“What the hell happened to her?” Julian demanded, his voice tight with a mixture of confusion and growing dread. This was far more than a child who had simply gotten lost.

As the two men faced off, a figure materialized from the shadows at the far end of the hall. He didn't walk into the light so much as coalesce from the darkness itself.

Kegan Aguirre had arrived.

He was dressed in a black tactical suit that absorbed the light around him, his face a blank canvas, his eyes holding the frozen stillness of a Siberian winter. He paid no attention to Silas or Julian. His gaze was locked on a single target at the other end of the corridor: Charla English, who was just about to slip through a service door and back into the main party.

Charla saw him at the same instant. The blood in her veins turned to ice. She knew this man. He was the ghost, the killer — the terrifying shadow that always stood behind Cailin Morton.

She turned to run.

Kegan's movement was brutally efficient, a predator closing distance with a speed and silence that seemed to defy the laws of physics. Before Charla could even process the threat, he was upon her.

She didn't have time to scream before his hand clamped around her throat. He lifted her off the ground with one arm, as easily as though she were a doll, her expensive heels kicking uselessly at the air.

"Let... me... go..." she choked, her face already turning a mottled purple as the air was cut off.

Chapter 606:

Kegan said nothing. He simply stared at her with those dead, emotionless eyes, as if examining a piece of trash he was about to dispose of. With his free hand, he moved with surgical precision, reaching into her small evening bag and extracting the spare key to the storage room's hidden door.

The key clattered to the marble floor. Julian and Silas watched, stunned into silence by the sudden, brutal efficiency of it.

Kegan began to walk, dragging the still-gasping, struggling Charla behind him like dead weight. He was heading for the grand ballroom. His intention was unmistakable: he was going to deliver her into the spotlight for judgment.

Elia heard Charla's faint, strangled cries. She peeked out from the safety of Silas's arms and saw the bad lady being dragged away by a man who looked even more terrifying than everything she had already endured.

The sight triggered a fresh wave of horror. In her newly poisoned mind, the pieces snapped together with a terrible logic. This was what the bad lady had warned her about. This was the man her father had sent to "handle" people.

The thought cemented itself deep in her traumatized brain: her father didn't just abandon people. He had them hurt. He had them taken away.

The trauma deepened, metastasizing. She began to pull away from everyone she associated with him — including the man standing directly in front of her.

“Stay away from me!” she screamed at Julian, pointing a trembling finger. “You’re all bad people!”

The raw fear and hatred in her eyes struck Julian like a physical blow. He staggered back a step, utterly baffled. What had he done?

Silas tightened his hold on Elia, reading the signs clearly: the girl was on the verge of a complete psychological collapse. He had to get her out of there. Now.

He shot Julian a sharp warning look, then turned and strode quickly toward a private suite reserved for her — a secure room deep within the estate.

Julian was left alone in the corridor, watching Kegan drag Charla around the corner until they both disappeared from sight. A deep, unsettling feeling settled in his stomach. He raised a hand to his earpiece.

“Hilliard, I’ve found Elia. But it’s bad. She’s terrified, and she’s... hostile. Toward us.”

On the terrace, still locked in his confrontation with the Sinclair brothers, Hilliard heard those words. His world went white.

“What do you mean, hostile to us?” His voice cracked with a panic he could no longer contain.

He no longer cared about business deals, about family honor, about any of it. He shoved Sterling Sinclair aside with a force that sent the man stumbling, then charged from the terrace back into the ballroom like a man possessed.

A reunion that should have been a moment of tearful joy was now hurtling, unstoppably, toward tragedy.

Hilliard tore through the ballroom like a force of nature. He shoved aside Wall Street titans and society dames with a brutal lack of ceremony, his eyes locked on the small figure in Silas Sinclair's arms.

"He's coming! He's coming!"

Chapter 607:

Seeing Hilliard charge toward her, Elia let out a scream of pure terror. She thrashed in Silas's arms, her small body rigid with panic. Charla's poisoned words echoed in her mind in a hellish, unrelenting loop — he told me to throw you back in the sea.

In Elia's eyes, the man rushing toward her was not a father. He was an executioner, coming to carry out her sentence.

"Elia! My Elia!" Hilliard's voice was raw and trembling, thick with a joy so fierce it bordered on pain. His eyes were already red, brimming with tears. Here she was. Alive. Real.

He threw his arms open wide, his face a twisted, beautiful wreck of tears and ecstatic relief, ready to finally hold his daughter.

“DON’T COME NEAR ME!” Elia’s shriek was the most hateful sound Hilliard had ever heard. “YOU’RE A MONSTER! GET AWAY!”

She flailed wildly, her small hands clawing at the air. Her fingernails raked across the back of Hilliard’s outstretched hand, leaving four thin red lines that welled with blood.

Hilliard’s arms froze in mid-air.

The ecstatic smile on his face didn’t fade. It shattered — like glass, breaking apart into a mask of utter, uncomprehending shock.

A collective gasp swept through the ballroom. The music had stopped. Every guest stood frozen, staring at the brutal, bizarre tragedy unfolding before them.

Monster?

He looked into his daughter’s eyes and saw it. Not just fear — something deeper. A primal, instinctive loathing. The way a person looks at the most horrific thing they can possibly imagine.

His heart, which had been soaring moments before, felt as though it had been run through with a white-hot, poisoned blade. The pain was physical — a tearing sensation in his chest that stole the air from his lungs.

“Why...?” Hilliard’s voice was a strangled whisper. “Elia, it’s me. It’s Daddy.”

“You’re not my daddy! I don’t have a daddy!” Her voice rose to a hysterical scream. “I HATE YOU!”

Each word landed like a whip across his soul.

Hilliard’s legs gave out beneath him. He staggered, nearly collapsing to his knees right there on the marble floor. This was a thousand times worse than hearing she was dead. Death was an ending. This — this living rejection, being seen as a monster by his own flesh and blood — was a torture without end. A slow, public flaying.

He clutched his chest, right over the old scar where Cailin’s knife had gone in. It burned with phantom pain, mirroring the new and deeper wound that had just been carved into him.

From the entrance to the terrace, Cailin had seen it all.

She had watched with her heart a block of ice. But as she saw Hilliard’s face drain of all color — as she saw the utter devastation in his eyes — a strange, complex flicker of something stirred within her. Not pity, exactly, but something like it, something she couldn’t name.

She had assumed Elia’s reaction was PTSD, a subconscious defense against the man and the family who had caused her so much pain. She had no idea it was being fed by a fresh, venomous lie.

Chapter 608:

Silas held the terrified Elia tighter, his voice a cold blade aimed directly at Hilliard. “Mr. Holloway. It seems your presence is having a profoundly negative effect on the child’s mental health.”

He sauntered forward, a smug, mocking smile playing at the corners of his mouth. “What a touching father-daughter reunion.”

Sebastian Sinclair watched from a distance, his expression unreadable — a theater critic observing a particularly satisfying drama.

Hilliard heard none of it. He saw nothing but his daughter’s eyes, filled with a terror and hatred that was annihilating him from the inside out. He wanted to explain, to ask why, but his throat had closed around a knot of fire. He could not speak.

Julian rushed to his side and grabbed his arm to steady him. “Brother, calm down. She’s just scared. Something happened to her.”

Elia, having spent the last of her adrenaline, dissolved into a new wave of desperate sobs.

“Mommy... I want my Mommy...”

The words were an arrow — flying straight and true across the silent, cavernous room — and they found their mark in Cailin's chest with unerring precision.

She could not stand by any longer.

Still draped in Hilliard's oversized suit jacket, she pushed through the stunned crowd, moving step by step into the eye of the storm.

Hilliard saw her coming. His eyes, bloodshot and broken, found hers — and in them was a look of desperate, silent pleading.

He needed her to tell him what was happening. He needed her to tell him why their daughter hated him.

Cailin moved through the parted crowd, her gaze fixed on her daughter. She walked right past Hilliard, ignoring the raw, pleading desperation in his bloodshot eyes as though he were nothing more than a statue.

"Mommy..." Elia whimpered, her sobs growing louder as Cailin approached. She reached out her small, trembling arms.

Silas Sinclair hesitated for a fraction of a second, his gray eyes assessing Cailin, before he carefully transferred the shaking child into her mother's arms.

Cailin pulled her daughter close, her own body trembling as she felt the violent shudders of fear racking Elia's small frame. This was not simply a child who was scared. This was a child who was broken.

"It's okay, baby. Mommy's here," Cailin whispered, her voice hoarse. She rocked Elia gently, patting her back, trying to pour a calm she did not feel into the girl.

She pulled back slightly, cupping Elia's tear-stained face in both hands. She looked into her daughter's eyes, her own heart swollen with pent-up hope and aching love.

"Elia," she said softly. "It's me. It's Mommy. Cailin Morton. Do you remember me?"

Elia stared back, her eyes wide. There was a flicker of something deep within them — a hazy recognition battling against the fresh terror. This face, this scent... it felt safe. Like a distant, warm dream. But Charla's venomous lies had poisoned everything, turning the world into a nightmare where even hope could be a weapon. Was this another trick? Was this woman sent to take her to the dark ocean?

Chapter 609:

She flinched back, trembling violently. "Who... who are you?" she whispered. "Did he send you to get me, too?"

The words were an icicle driven directly into Cailin's heart.

She had imagined this moment a million times — reunion, tears of joy, relief. Not once, in even her most terrifying nightmares, had she imagined this: that her daughter, her reason for living, would look at her and see a stranger.

The dam broke.

It all came rushing back in a single, overwhelming wave.

Cailin's legs buckled. She sank to the cold marble floor, clutching her daughter, a kneeling figure in a torn dress with nothing left to hold back.

"No... Elia, I'm your mommy..." The words dissolved into a choked, desperate sob. "How can you not remember me...?"

Her carefully constructed walls — the ice-queen fortress of "Cali" — crumbled into dust. She was no longer the master of the underground art world. She was just a mother, heartbroken and lost, who had found her child only to lose her all over again.

She buried her face in the crook of Elia's small neck and wept.

It was not a quiet cry. It was a raw, keening wail of pure, undiluted agony — a sound suppressed for half a decade, finally breaking free. A sound of such profound despair and regret that it silenced the entire ballroom.

Hilliard squeezed his eyes shut. Every sob was a new turn of the knife in his own flesh.

Elia, held tight in her mother's embrace, went still. She felt the hot tears splashing onto her neck. She heard the sound of a heart breaking — a sound so pure and powerful it seemed to shake the very air around them.

The terror, the lies, the fear of her father — all of it was momentarily washed away by something older and more primal. The unbreakable bond between a mother and her child.

"Don't cry..." Elia whispered. She lifted a small, clumsy hand and tried to wipe the tears streaming down Cailin's face.

The hot, wet feel of her mother's skin, the sound of her desperate sobs, seemed to unlock something buried deep inside her. A flicker. A warm, hazy memory of a lullaby, of a gentle touch, of this very same scent.

"Mommy..." she asked, her own voice thick with tears — the word both a question and a prayer.

Cailin's head shot up. She stared at her daughter, breath catching in her throat, not daring to believe what she had heard.

"Elia...? You remember?"

Elia was still confused, the world still a frightening and tilted place, but she nodded. Then she wrapped her arms around Cailin's neck and held on with all her might.

“Mommy,” she sobbed into Cailin’s shoulder, finally — finally — finding the one safe harbor in the storm. “I missed you.”

In the center of the grand ballroom, beneath the weight of a hundred silent stares, mother and daughter clung to each other, their shared tears completing a reunion that was equal parts found and broken.

Chapter 610:

Hilliard stood a few feet away, watching them. A wave of relief washed over him, so intense it nearly brought him to his knees. But it was followed immediately by a bitter, aching loneliness. He was the outsider. The monster. The man locked out of their circle of love and grief.

Cailin held Elia as if she were the only solid thing in a collapsing world. The little girl clung to her like a koala, her face buried in Cailin’s neck, refusing to let go. The storm of her tears had subsided into quiet, hiccuping sobs.

Hilliard took a hesitant step forward. “Cailin... Elia...” he began, his voice a raw rasp.

“Don’t come closer!” Elia’s head snapped up. She glared at Hilliard, her eyes wide with a fear that was still sharp and real. Her small hands tightened their grip on Cailin’s dress.

Cailin felt her daughter’s tremor. She looked up, and the gaze she fixed on Hilliard was glacial — a look of pure, undiluted warning mixed with a disgust so profound it carried physical weight. It said, without a single word: Stay back.

The look pierced Hilliard's heart all over again. He froze, a man trapped behind an invisible wall, watching the family he had broken and could not mend.

It was at that moment of tense, painful silence that a commotion erupted from the grand entrance of the ballroom. A woman screamed.

Every head in the room turned.

Kegan Aguirre strode into the spotlight — a specter of vengeance in a black suit — dragging a disheveled, frantic woman by one arm.

It was Charla English.

With a motion of casual, utter contempt, Kegan flung her forward. She landed in a heap on the polished marble floor, like a bag of trash tossed onto a curb.

Charla let out a pained groan. Her expensive gold sequin dress was smeared with dirt, her hair a tangled ruin, her makeup a grotesque smear across her face. She looked like a madwoman.

The ballroom erupted in a wave of shocked whispers. No one could believe it. The woman Hilliard had publicly disowned was back — and in an even more humiliating fashion than before.

“Who... who are you? What do you want?” Charla stammered, scrambling backward on her hands and knees, eyes wide with terror as she looked up at Kegan.

Kegan ignored her entirely. His gaze went straight to Cailin and the small girl in her arms. His eyes asked a silent question: Was it her?

Elia saw Charla, and her body went rigid with a fresh wave of trembling.

“It was her!” she shrieked, pointing a small, shaking finger. “She’s the one! She told me Daddy didn’t want me!”

The sentence was fractured and childish, but the words Daddy didn’t want me detonated like a bomb in the minds of both Hilliard and Cailin.

Hilliard understood instantly. He whipped his head toward Charla, and every trace of confusion and agony in his eyes was vaporized, replaced by a murderous rage so pure it was terrifying to witness.

Cailin went still as the final piece of the puzzle clicked into place. Elia’s terror wasn’t simply rooted in the past. It was new. It had been deliberately planted.