

Second chance 891

Chapter 891:

Isadora's face moved through a perfect symphony of emotions. Confusion gave way to shock. Shock melted into a carefully calibrated, righteous anger.

"Cailin?" she repeated, her voice laced with disbelief. "What are you talking about? The foundation arranged for her transfer to our clinic in Florida. The flight plan is a matter of public record. Are you accusing me of something?"

She looked at their grim faces, at the armed men behind them. "You come to my home, in the middle of the night, with guns, and you make these... insane accusations?" Her voice rose, trembling with indignation. "Get off my property. Now."

It was a flawless performance. Not a single crack in the facade. She was a fortress of plausible deniability.

They had no warrant. They had no proof. They only had the certainty that she was lying.

Hilliard felt a surge of violent rage so strong it made him dizzy. He wanted to tear past her, to rip the house apart until he found Cailin.

But he forced it down. He knew that was the trap. A violent intrusion would make them the criminals, her the victim.

He grabbed Kegan's arm as his rival started to move forward.

"We're leaving," Hilliard said, his voice a low, dangerous whisper that only Kegan could hear.

Kegan stared at him, incredulous. "We can't just—"

"We pull back," Hilliard repeated, his grip tightening like a vise. "And we regroup. We do this my way."

He pulled Kegan back toward the cars. As they retreated, his eyes met Isadora's over the distance.

She was still standing there, the perfect, wronged hostess.

But in the depths of her eyes, Hilliard saw it. A flicker of cold, triumphant satisfaction.

He knew. He knew Cailin was in there. And he knew Isadora believed she had already won.

Peggy Vance woke up to the feeling of softness.

The walls were padded, covered in cream-colored silk. The floor was a thick, plush carpet that swallowed all sound. There were no windows. No sharp corners. It was a cage, but a beautiful one. A luxury asylum.

Her mind was a fog of fractured memories. Cailin's mocking smile. Hilliard's cold dismissal. The flash of cameras. The humiliation. The rage. It all swirled together, a toxic soup of shame and hatred.

The door opened without a sound.

Isadora Van Doren entered, carrying a delicate porcelain bowl on a silver tray. She wore a gentle, pitying smile.

Peggy scrambled back into a corner, her body tensing like a cornered animal. "Stay away from me."

"Hush, dear," Isadora said, her voice a soothing balm. She placed the tray on a low table. "I'm not going to hurt you. I saved you."

She sat on the edge of the ottoman, a safe distance away. "The police were coming for you. The media was painting you as a monster. I had you brought here, where you'd be safe. Where no one could find you."

Peggy stared at her, suspicion warring with a desperate need to believe.

Chapter 892:

"It wasn't your fault, you know," Isadora continued, her voice a soft, hypnotic whisper. "None of it was. You were the victim."

She began to weave her web, each word a sticky, silken thread. She spoke of Cailin's cruelty, her arrogance, her calculated destruction of Peggy's life. She painted Cailin as a predator who had stolen Hilliard, destroyed Peggy's reputation, and pushed her to the brink of insanity.

"She took everything from you, Peggy," Isadora murmured, her eyes full of deep, convincing sympathy. "Your love, your future, your sanity. It's not fair."

Peggy's breath hitched. Isadora's words were giving voice to the ugliest, most secret thoughts in her heart. It felt like absolution.

"But I have some good news," Isadora said, leaning forward slightly, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "I've brought her here. Cailin Morton is in this house."

Peggy's eyes widened, a flicker of fear mixing with hate. "Here? Why?"

"Because I believe in justice," Isadora said smoothly. "She's weak now, Peggy. Like a bird with a broken wing. The poison... it's done its work. She has no fight left in her. She's just lying there, helpless."

Isadora's voice was like a serpent's hiss, coiling around Peggy's fragile mind. "This is your chance. Your one chance to take back what she stole. To get your justice."

She described Cailin as the demon who had haunted Peggy's every waking moment. She promised that once Cailin was gone, the nightmares would end. Peggy could be whole again.

The raw, primal hatred in Peggy's soul, which had been simmering for months, finally boiled over. The last vestiges of reason were burned away. Her eyes took on a wild, feverish glaze.

Isadora saw the shift. She had her.

She reached under the soup bowl on the tray. Her fingers closed around something cold and hard. She lifted it.

A dagger. The blade was slender and sharp, catching the soft light of the room with a wicked gleam.

She held it out to Peggy.

"Go," Isadora whispered, her voice now gentle, almost motherly. "End your nightmare, my dear. I'll be right outside. I'll take care of everything after."

Peggy's hand trembled as she reached for the dagger. Her fingers closed around the hilt. The cold metal felt like an extension of her own frozen heart. The hate was all that was left.

Isadora stood up, her face a mask of serene satisfaction, and glided out of the room, the door clicking softly shut behind her. In a hidden monitoring station down the hall, she watched the screen, a small, triumphant smile playing on her lips.

The pawn was on the board.

Cailin's eyes fluttered open. She was in a bedroom, an impossibly luxurious one, with a canopy bed and silk sheets. Her life-support unit hummed quietly beside her.

Her body was a landscape of pain. The poison felt like a slow, cold fire in her veins. Her stab wound ached with a deep, throbbing rhythm. But beneath the pain, her training took over.

Survive. Assess. Escape.

Chapter 893:

Her eyes scanned the room. No phone. No windows, only heavy, drawn curtains that she knew would conceal reinforced glass. No obvious weapons.

She pushed herself up, a gasp of pain escaping her lips. Every muscle screamed in protest. She swung her legs over the side of the bed, her bare feet touching the cold marble floor. She had to find a way out.

She staggered to the heavy oak door. It was locked. An electronic keypad glowed softly beside the handle. No exit there.

Then she heard it.

A faint sound from the hallway. Soft, shuffling footsteps approaching.

Instinct took over. She scrambled back to the bed, pulling the covers up, and closed her eyes. She forced her breathing into the slow, even rhythm of deep sleep. She was unconscious. She was helpless.

Her body was curled into a defensive ball, but her right hand was not still. It slid under the pillow, her fingers searching, closing around the heavy, cut-glass base of the bedside lamp. It was solid, weighty. It would do.

The lock on the door made a soft, electronic click.

The door swung inward.

Through the thinnest slit of her eyelids, Cailin saw a silhouette she recognized. A woman whose face was burned into her memory.

Peggy Vance.

Her face was a grotesque mask of joy, a terrifying, ecstatic grin that didn't reach her dead eyes. She moved toward the bed, her steps slow, deliberate, savoring the moment.

In her hand, she held a dagger.

Peggy leaned over the bed, her breath hot and foul against Cailin's ear.

"Cailin," she whispered, the name a venomous caress. "You ruined my life. You took everything from me. Now... it's my turn."

Cailin could smell the insanity on her, a sour, metallic scent. Every muscle in her body was a tightly wound spring, ready to unleash.

Peggy raised the dagger high. The polished steel gleamed in the dim light. She aimed it directly at the spot over Cailin's heart.

The blade began its descent.

In that final, suspended moment, Cailin's eyes snapped open.

There was no fear in them.

Only the cold, clear, and absolute promise of death.

The lamp base was a blur of motion.

Cailin's arm uncoiled with a speed and ferocity that defied her weakened state. The heavy glass smashed into Peggy's wrist with a sickening crack of bone.

A high-pitched shriek of agony tore from Peggy's throat. Her fingers went numb, the dagger tumbling from her grasp and landing silently on the thick, sound-dampening carpet.

Cailin didn't wait for a second strike. This wasn't a fight; it was an escape.

She vaulted over the side of the bed, her bare feet hitting the cold marble floor. The sudden movement sent a bolt of white-hot pain through her abdomen, and black spots danced in her vision. She bit down on her lip, tasting blood, and forced herself forward.

"Get her!" Peggy screamed, clutching her shattered wrist. "Don't let her get away!"

Chapter 894:

Cailin burst out of the bedroom and into a long, gilded corridor. It was a gallery of priceless art and antique furniture. At either end, a grand staircase swept downward.

She didn't hesitate. She ran away from the sound of Peggy's hysterical shrieks, her lungs burning, her body a symphony of pain.

Two men in black suits, Van Doren's private security, appeared at the bottom of the far staircase, moving to intercept her.

Cailin's eyes darted around, searching for a weapon, a diversion. She spotted a massive, ornate porcelain vase on a pedestal.

Without breaking stride, she shoved it with all her might.

The priceless antique crashed to the marble floor, exploding into a thousand sharp-edged pieces. The sound was like a gunshot in the silent mansion.

The guards flinched, instinctively shielding their faces from the flying shards of porcelain.

It was only a second. But a second was all she needed.

Cailin shot through the gap between them, a ghost in a hospital gown. She took the stairs two at a time, her injured body screaming in protest.

She reached the ground floor. The main entrance was a fortress of carved wood and reinforced steel, obviously locked. No escape there.

Her eyes scanned the vast hall and locked onto a set of tall French doors, their glass panes showing the dark silhouette of a garden beyond.

She changed direction, sprinting across the polished floor.

“She’s going for the garden!” she heard one of the guards yell from behind her.

The footsteps were closing in.

She didn’t try the handle. She lowered her shoulder and slammed her full body weight into the glass.

The door burst open with a crash of shattering panes. Cold night air, sharp with the scent of pine and damp earth, flooded her lungs. It was a shock to her system, clearing her head for a precious moment.

Her bare feet hit the freezing flagstones of the terrace. She didn’t slow down. She ran, a desperate, stumbling gait, across the manicured lawn, toward the dark, looming shape of the forest at the edge of the property.

Searchlight beams cut through the darkness, sweeping across the garden, hunting for her.

She weaved between marble statues and sculpted hedges, using the landscape as cover. She was a shadow, a flicker of white against the darkness.

Her strength was failing. The poison was a lead weight in her limbs. Her vision was starting to tunnel, the edges blurring into a gray haze.

She knew she couldn't outrun them. She had to hide.

The formal garden gave way to a wild, untamed stretch of woods, the estate's natural border.

With the last of her energy, she plunged into the treeline, the darkness swallowing her whole.

Branches whipped at her face, tearing at her thin gown. The soft, muddy ground sucked at her bare feet. She stumbled over unseen roots, her breath coming in ragged, painful gasps.

Behind her, the shouting stopped at the edge of the forest. The guards were hesitating. They were men of order and light, and this was a place of chaos and shadow.

Chapter 895:

She heard Peggy's voice, thin and shrill with rage, screaming at them. "Get in there! Find her! I want her found!"

Cailin couldn't stop. She pushed herself deeper into the woods, moving away from the sounds, away from the lights.

She saw it then. An ancient, gnarled oak, its base hollowed out by time, creating a dark, narrow cavity.

It was a tomb. A sanctuary.

She crawled inside, pulling herself into the tight, earthy space. She curled into a ball, her body shaking uncontrollably from cold and pain and fear. With her hands, she clawed at the damp soil and fallen leaves, pulling them over herself, trying to erase herself from the world.

She held her breath.

The powerful beams of flashlights cut through the trees. They were coming. The search had begun.

A beam swept across the opening of her hiding spot, a blade of light that missed her by inches.

She squeezed her eyes shut, her heart a frantic drum against her ribs. She was an animal gone to ground, praying the hunters would pass her by.

From her hiding place, Cailin heard Peggy's voice, a hysterical shriek that cut through the night. "Spread out! I want every inch of this forest searched! Find her!"

She couldn't stay here. They would find her. It was only a matter of time.

Waiting for the sweeping flashlight beams to pass, she crawled silently from the other side of the hollow tree. She moved low to the ground, using the dense undergrowth for cover, putting as much distance as she could between herself and the sounds of the search party.

Her hand brushed against something hard and sharp in the leaf litter. A rock, split by frost, with a jagged edge. She closed her fingers around it, the cold, rough stone a small, solid comfort. It was her only weapon.

A twig snapped behind her.

She froze.

"Target spotted! Sector four!" a voice barked into a radio.

She'd been made.

She scrambled to her feet and ran, her injured ankle screaming in protest. The guard was crashing through the brush behind her, his heavy footsteps closing the distance with terrifying speed.

The ground fell away abruptly. She was at the edge of a small, rocky cliff, a sheer drop of thirty feet to the forest floor below. A dead end.

The guard emerged from the trees, a large, confident man with a smug grin. He slowed his pace, savoring the moment. He had her cornered.

“Nowhere to run, little bird,” he grunted, reaching for her arm.

In that instant, Cailin spun.

She wasn’t a bird. She was a viper.

She brought the rock up in a vicious arc, putting every last ounce of her failing strength into the blow. The sharp edge connected with his temple with a dull, wet thud.

The man’s eyes went wide with surprise. A soft grunt escaped his lips. His body went slack, and he crumpled to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

Chapter 896:

Cailin didn’t waste a second. She knelt beside the unconscious man, her fingers fumbling at his belt. She ripped the radio from its clip and found a plastic key card in his pocket.

The radio crackled to life. “Unit four, what’s your status? Do you have the target?” It was Peggy’s impatient voice.

Cailin raised the radio and brought it down hard against a rock, smashing the device into silence.

She limped along the cliff’s edge, scanning the darkness below. There had to be a vehicle nearby.

And then she saw it. Tucked away on a hidden, reinforced platform built into the cliffside, almost completely concealed by the trees.

It wasn’t a truck or an SUV.

It was a helicopter. A sleek, black Bell 505 Jet Ranger, the kind of executive transport the ultra-rich used to hop between their estates and the city, bypassing traffic entirely.

A wild, impossible thought ignited in her mind.

She was going to steal it.

Her past life, the one before Hilliard, before the children, came rushing back. The training. The simulations. She had learned the basics of piloting, a skill she never thought she'd use again. She had never flown this specific model, but the principles were the same.

It was a long shot. A suicidal gamble. But staying on the ground was certain death.

She scrambled down the rough path to the platform. The key card she'd taken from the guard beeped, and the helicopter's cabin door unlocked. She pulled herself inside, her body screaming with every movement.

Up on the cliff, Peggy arrived with the rest of her team. She saw her downed man and the empty cliff edge.

"Where is she?" she shrieked, her voice cracking with fury.

And then they heard it.

A low whine, then a cough, then the building roar of a turbine engine spooling to life.

They all stared down in stunned disbelief.

The helicopter's rotors began to turn, slowly at first, then faster, blurring into a transparent disk that whipped the air into a frenzy.

Inside the cockpit, Cailin was drenched in a cold sweat. The instrument panel was a bewildering galaxy of lights and gauges. She forced herself to breathe, to remember her training. Fuel pump on. Battery on. Throttle. Collective.

The pain in her abdomen was a roaring fire. Her vision swam, the edges turning dark. She fought it, focusing on the artificial horizon display.

The helicopter shuddered, then lifted off the pad, clumsy and unstable.

Peggy's face contorted from shock into a mask of pure, murderous rage. How? How could this be happening?

"She's getting away!" she screamed at her head of security. "Shoot it down! Use anything you have! I want it out of the sky!"

The security chief's voice was a clipped, urgent bark into his radio, activating the estate's perimeter defense systems.

Cailin finally wrestled the helicopter above the cliff line. The entire Van Doren estate spread out below her, a glittering jewel in the dark wilderness.

She pushed the cyclic stick forward, trying to gain speed, to get away. The aircraft responded sluggishly, lurching through the air.

Chapter 897:

On the ground, she saw them. Three points of angry red light, turning to track her movement.

The automated anti-aircraft turrets were locking on.

Peggy stood on the edge of the cliff, her hair whipping in the rotor wash, her face lit by the helicopter's navigation lights. She threw her head back and laughed, a wild, unhinged sound that was lost in the roar of the engine.

"Fly, little bird!" she screamed into the wind. "Let's see you escape this!"

The red warning lights on the instrument panel flashed in a terrifying chorus. TARGET LOCK.

Cailin didn't think. She reacted.

She yanked the collective, pulling the helicopter into a steep, sickening climb, then slammed the cyclic stick to the side. The aircraft banked violently, a clumsy, desperate maneuver that sent a wave of nausea and agony through her.

A stream of red tracer rounds stitched the air where she had been a second before, their deadly light painting a fleeting pattern against the black sky.

The violent lurch tore something deep inside her. A fresh wave of heat spread from her abdominal wound. She let out a choked gasp, her knuckles white on the controls. Cold sweat poured down her face, stinging her eyes.

She had to get help. Now.

Her trembling fingers found the communication panel. She flipped the switches, activating the radio, and spun the dial to the universal emergency frequency.

She grabbed the microphone. "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday," she gasped, her voice a raw, shredded whisper. "This is an unidentified Bell 505, under fire from ground-based automatic weapons..."

In a blacked-out command vehicle parked on a logging road two miles from the Van Doren estate, a communications specialist's head snapped up.

"Sir, I've got a weak signal. Mayday call. Civilian band."

Hilliard and Kegan, who had been staring grimly at a satellite map, were instantly on their feet.

"Put it on speaker," Hilliard commanded.

The specialist worked his console, and Cailin's voice, faint and full of static and pain, filled the small space. "...approximate location ten miles north of Lake Placid... I am losing altitude..."

It was her.

Hilliard felt his heart stop, then restart with a painful, hammering jolt. He snatched the headset from the specialist.

"Cailin!" he shouted into the microphone, his voice raw with a desperate, terrified hope. "Cailin, it's me! It's Hilliard! Answer me!"

Inside the shuddering cockpit, Hilliard's voice cut through the roar of the engine and the fog of her pain. It was an anchor in the storm. For the first time since she woke up in that locked room, tears pricked her eyes.

"Hilliard," she breathed, her voice breaking. "They're trying to shoot me down."

"I see you," he said, his own voice thick with emotion. "I see you. Just keep flying. We're coming."

He turned to his tactical commander. "Jam their fire control radar! Now! And get our birds in the air!"

A sliver of hope, bright and sharp, pierced through Cailin's despair. She could do this. She could hold on.

She fought to level the helicopter, to keep it flying straight and true.

Chapter 898:

That's when a new alarm, higher and more piercing than the others, screamed through the cockpit.

A message flashed across the main display in bold, red letters: CONTROL OVERRIDE INITIATED. REMOTE FLIGHT SYSTEM ENGAGED.

Cailin stared in horror. She moved the cyclic. Nothing. She pulled on the collective. The controls were dead, limp and useless in her hands.

The helicopter stopped its desperate flight away from the estate. It hung in the air for a moment, then began a slow, automated turn, heading back toward the mansion.

They had her. It was another trap. A technological cage she had flown into herself.

"Hilliard!" she screamed into the radio, her voice cracking with pure terror. "They've taken control! The plane is flying itself! I can't... I can't get out!"

In the command vehicle, Hilliard heard her words, and the fragile hope that had bloomed in his chest withered and died. He understood immediately. The helicopter was a leash, and they were pulling her back.

Cailin knew what awaited her if she went back to that house. She would not die in Isadora Van Doren's dungeon.

Her eyes darted around the cockpit, a wild, frantic search.

There. Under the copilot's seat. An orange emergency survival pack.

She unbuckled herself, her body screaming in protest, and lunged for it, tearing it open. Inside was a flare gun, a medical kit, and a compact, vacuum-sealed bundle.

A parachute.

Without a second's hesitation, she began pulling it on, her fingers clumsy and weak, her movements hampered by the pain and the cramped space. The helicopter was descending, the remote system bringing it lower, closer to the ground, making her escape impossible.

She grabbed the microphone one last time.

"Hilliard," she choked out, "take care of..."

The words were lost as she threw her full weight against the cockpit's side door, kicking it open.

A deafening roar of wind and engine noise flooded the cabin, ripping the microphone from her hand.

In the command vehicle, Hilliard heard only a violent bang, a rush of static, and then... silence. A profound, heart-stopping silence.

Cailin stood in the open doorway, the wind tearing at her. She looked down at the dark, rushing trees below. She looked back at the warm, inviting lights of the mansion that was now her prison.

She closed her eyes.

And jumped.

The communication line was dead. Hilliard stood frozen, the silent headset pressed to his ear, feeling the entire world fall away beneath him.

The freefall was a dizzying, terrifying chaos. The wind roared in Cailin's ears as she tumbled through the black sky. Her body, already broken, was a ragdoll in the storm.

With a surge of pure, primal will, she found the ripcord and pulled.

The parachute opened with a violent crack, a brutal jolt that felt like being ripped in half. A scream was torn from her lungs, but it was lost in the wind. The pain was immense, a white-hot nova that threatened to swallow her consciousness.

Chapter 899:

She fought it. She looked down, grabbing the toggles, trying to steer herself away from the glittering lights of the Van Doren estate, toward the deepest, most anonymous darkness she could find.

On the ground, Peggy and the security team watched in stunned silence as the stolen helicopter, now pilotless, completed its automated flight and settled gracefully back onto its landing pad.

Then, one of the guards pointed to the sky. "Look!"

A small, dark shape was descending under a canopy of black silk.

"She jumped," Peggy whispered, her voice a mixture of disbelief and renewed, venomous rage. "After her! All of you! Get the dogs! I want her found!"

Cailin's descent ended abruptly as the parachute snagged on the high branches of a towering pine tree. She was left dangling twenty feet above the forest floor, swinging gently in the wind.

She fumbled for the small tactical knife she had taken from the unconscious guard—a lifetime ago, it seemed. Her fingers were numb with cold, but she managed to saw through the tough nylon straps.

She fell, landing with a sickening crunch on the bed of pine needles and earth below. A sharp, electric pain shot up her leg. Her ankle. It was broken or badly sprained.

She couldn't run.

The baying of hounds echoed through the woods, closer now. They were coming.

She pushed herself up, biting back a cry of pain, and began to move, dragging her useless leg behind her. She was a wounded animal, leaving a clear trail for the hunters.

She had to find a place to make a stand.

Through the trees, she saw a dark, jagged silhouette against the sky. A building. An old, abandoned villa, its Victorian spires like skeletal fingers reaching for the moon. Ivy choked its walls, and its windows were black, shattered eyes.

It was better than the open woods. It had walls. It had choke points.

She found a low, broken window and hauled her broken body through it, collapsing onto a floor thick with dust and decay. The air was heavy with the smell of rot and forgotten time.

Her eyes, now accustomed to the dark, scanned the derelict space. A grand staircase, half-collapsed. A cavernous ballroom. And there, a narrow, winding set of service stairs leading up. To the attic. To the roof.

The roof was the high ground. It was defensible. It was an end point.

She began to climb, each step a fresh wave of agony. The old wood groaned and creaked under her weight.

She finally pushed open a heavy trapdoor and emerged onto a wide, flat rooftop terrace.

Below, the woods came alive with lights and noise. Peggy, flanked by her guards and a pack of snarling Dobermans, had surrounded the villa.

"She's in here!" Peggy shrieked. "Search every room!"

The guards stormed the building. Cailin could hear them crashing through the decaying rooms below, their voices echoing up the stairwell. Soon, they found her trail.

A few moments later, the trapdoor opened again.

Peggy stepped onto the roof, alone. Her face, illuminated by the moonlight, was a mask of triumphant cruelty. She wanted this kill for herself.

Chapter 900:

“Nowhere left to run, Cailin,” she sneered, advancing slowly. “Cornered. Like the rat you are.”

Cailin stood at the very edge of the roof, the black abyss of the forest floor yawning behind her. She didn’t look scared. She looked tired. Resigned.

And then she smiled, a small, chilling curve of her lips.

She raised a trembling hand and pointed out into the darkness, toward the distant edge of the forest. “You’re wrong, Peggy,” she said, her voice surprisingly steady. “You’re the one who’s trapped.”

Peggy followed her gaze, squinting into the night, but saw nothing but trees.

“I sent Hilliard my coordinates before I jumped,” Cailin said, her voice a calm, convincing lie. “His private tactical team, ex-SEALs, they’ve had this forest surrounded for the last ten minutes. The dogs you hear?” She let out a small, humorless laugh. “Those aren’t your pets, Peggy. Those are military-grade K-9 units.”

Peggy froze. The lie was audacious, but it was plausible. Hilliard had that kind of power. That kind of reach. Doubt began to poison her triumph.

Cailin pressed her advantage, her voice dropping, becoming colder, more menacing. "Their orders are simple. If I am harmed in any way, they've been instructed to use lethal force. No arrests. No questions. Just a clean-up. You can try your luck. You can gamble that they'll get to you before you get to me. Or you can walk away from this roof, right now, and live."

The bluff was a masterpiece of psychological warfare, born of desperation and a deep understanding of her enemy's fear. It was delivered with the dead-eyed calm of a woman who had already accepted her own death.

And it worked.

Fear, cold and sharp, pierced through Peggy's rage. She hesitated, her advance stalled, her mind racing, caught in the web of Cailin's final, desperate lie.

Peggy's face was a canvas of warring emotions. The seed of fear Cailin had planted was blooming, its thorny vines choking her rage. She fumbled for her radio, her hand shaking, wanting to call her security chief for confirmation, but terrified that Cailin was right, that every frequency was being monitored.

Cailin saw the hesitation and twisted the knife.

"Go on, Peggy," she whispered, her voice a cold wisp of sound on the wind. "Make your call. Let's see who answers first. Your men, or his."

The taunt, the sheer audacity of it, pushed Peggy over the edge.

Her fear didn't subside. It combusted. It transformed into a final, suicidal burst of hysterical rage.

She threw the radio to the ground, where it skittered across the rooftop.

"I don't care!" she screamed, her voice a raw, unhinged shriek. "I don't care if he's here! I'll kill you, and I'll kill him too! I want you dead!"

Hate won.

She launched herself at Cailin, a blur of motion, her hands outstretched like claws, aiming to shove Cailin off the roof and into the black abyss below.

Cailin had been waiting for this. Her body was a coiled spring of pure instinct.