

Second chance 11

Chapter 11:

Hilliard held the blackened, smoking remains of the child's smartwatch in his hand. The plastic was still warm against his palm.

He played the audio file on his phone again — the recording of the distorted voice that had screamed "Deadbeat" through the car speakers just moments ago.

He didn't listen to the insult. He listened to the static underneath it.

He pressed the phone hard against his ear until it hurt. There was a low, rhythmic hum in the background of the audio.

"It's a fan," Hilliard whispered. "A server cooling fan. High velocity."

He looked at Gavin, who was frantically tapping on a tablet in the front seat of the backup SUV that had just pulled up alongside them.

"That wasn't a pre-recording," Hilliard said, his voice low and dangerous. "That was a live stream. Someone was broadcasting into the car."

He closed his eyes and replayed the memory of the voice from the watch. Run, Elia!

The pitch. The cadence. It clawed at the back of his throat. It sounded like Cailin — like Cailin when she was panicked and breathless. But that was impossible. Cailin was dead. Cailin had terminated their child.

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“Sir,” Gavin said, opening the door of the SUV. “The police are setting up a perimeter three blocks down. We need to move.”

Hilliard stepped out of the dead Maybach, dropped the ruined watch onto the asphalt, and crushed it under his heel.

“Forget the police,” he commanded, sliding into the backseat of the SUV. “Track the motorcycle’s thermal signature. Use the satellite feed.”

“The rider is moving fast, sir. Heading north,” Gavin said, tilting the screen toward him. A bright red streak wove through the grey grid of the city streets.

Hilliard watched the dot. “Don’t lose them.”

The wind whipped against Cailin's face, stinging her eyes. She hadn't brought a helmet for herself — only the oversized one she had jammed onto Elia's head. She leaned into the turn, the Ducati scraping the pavement, her heart hammering against her ribs.

"Hold on tight, baby," she yelled over the roar of the engine.

Elia's small arms were locked around Cailin's waist in a death grip. The child was shaking — Cailin could feel the tremors through her leather jacket.

Her earpiece buzzed. Kegan.

"They have air support," Kegan's voice was tight. "Drone incoming. ETA two minutes. You can't lead them to the safe house, Cali. You'll burn the location."

Cailin cursed. She swerved around a taxi, earning a blare of horns. She couldn't go home. She couldn't go to Kegan.

She spotted the sign ahead. The Grand Hotel.

A neutral zone. High civilian density. Tourists. Chaos.

"Elia," Cailin shouted, tilting her head back slightly. "We're playing the Invisible Game. Do you remember the rules?"

She felt Elia nod against her back.

“I’m going to drop you at the hotel,” Cailin said, her voice cracking. “You have to be brave.”