

Second chance 351

Chapter 351:

Jakobe stood frozen. His brain could not process the violence he had just witnessed. His legs began to shake violently. He took a step backward, then another, until his spine hit the cold stone wall of the hotel.

Davy slowly turned his head and locked eyes with Jakobe.

He reached down to the tactical pouch strapped to his thigh. With a smooth, practiced motion, he drew a custom-made, non-lethal tactical flash-pellet encased in heavy tungsten, flipped it once in his hand, and took two steps forward.

He pulled his arm back and threw it with terrifying velocity.

The heavy pellet sliced through the air and slammed into the mortar of the stone wall right beside Jakobe's head, detonating instantly with a blinding burst of light and a deafening, high-decibel sonic crack. The concussive wave vibrated right next to Jakobe's ear.

Jakobe stopped breathing. His eyes rolled back slightly. A warm, humiliating dampness spread down the inside of his expensive tailored trousers. He had wet himself in pure, unadulterated terror.

The frantic slapping of bare feet against cobblestones echoed from the pathway.

“Elia!” Cailin’s voice ripped through the night, raw and panicked.

Aron and Davy exchanged a rapid, silent glance. Kegan’s number one rule for their infiltration was absolute: do not compromise your existence to the mother.

Aron reached back and quickly squeezed Elia’s uninjured hand.

“We are here,” Aron whispered, his voice barely a breath.

He threw up two fingers in a quick tactical signal. In perfect synchronization, the twins sprinted toward the high iron fence at the edge of the garden. They scrambled up the ornate metalwork like spiders and vanished over the top into the dark city streets, just as Cailin rounded the corner.

Cailin slid to a stop, her chest heaving, her lungs burning.

She saw the boys groaning on the ground. She saw Jakobe pressed against the wall. And then she saw Elia sitting on the stones, holding her bleeding hands up.

Cailin’s heart shattered.

She dropped to her knees, sliding across the rough stones, and pulled Elia into her chest. She wrapped her arms around her daughter, buried her face in Elia's hair, and shook with a mixture of profound relief and explosive, murderous rage.

Seeing Cailin arrive, Jakobe's manipulative instincts rebooted. He realized the scary masked boys were gone.

Jakobe burst into loud, theatrical tears and pointed a shaking finger at Elia.

"She did it!" Jakobe wailed, trying to flip the narrative. "Elia called her street gang friends! They attacked us! They tried to kill me!"

Cailin slowly pulled back from Elia. She looked at the blood on her daughter's palms. Then she stood.

She walked toward Jakobe. Not fast. With the slow, terrifying purpose of an executioner.

"Cailin, stay away from me! I'm telling Grandma!" Jakobe shrieked, pressing himself harder against the wall.

Cailin didn't say a single word. She didn't argue.

She raised her right hand, pulled it back, and swung with every ounce of strength in her body.

Smack.

The slap was deafening. The force of Cailin's palm hitting Jakobe's cheek was so violent that his head snapped to the side. His body spun and he collapsed hard onto the cobblestones, his ear ringing with a high-pitched whine.

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Cailin stood over him, her chest rising and falling, her eyes burning with a dark, lethal fire.

"If you ever breathe near my daughter again," Cailin whispered, her voice vibrating with pure malice, "I will not slap you. I will bury you."

The sharp, explosive crack of the slap echoed through the quiet garden, followed instantly by Jakobe's piercing, hysterical scream. He clutched his rapidly swelling, bright red cheek, rolling on the cobblestones.

The noise finally shattered the perimeter security.

Heavy boots pounded against the pavement. A dozen hotel security guards, accompanied by Hilliard's personal detail, swarmed into the garden. Blinding beams from heavy tactical flashlights crisscrossed the dark space, turning the night into harsh, chaotic daylight.

Jeraldine Holloway pushed through the wall of guards, panting, her heavy diamond necklace heaving against her chest.

When she saw Jakobe sobbing on the ground and the four wealthy boys groaning in pain, Jeraldine let out a dramatic gasp of horror. She rushed forward, dropping to her knees despite her expensive gown, and pulled Jakobe into her arms.

“My sweet boy! What happened?” Jeraldine cried.

Jakobe buried his face in Jeraldine’s shoulder. “She hit me!” he sobbed, pointing a trembling finger at Cailin. “Elia had her thug friends attack us, and then Cailin hit me for no reason!”

Jeraldine’s head snapped up. Her eyes locked onto Cailin with a look of pure, unhinged hatred.

“You psychotic animal!” Jeraldine shrieked, her voice cracking. She turned to the head of security. “Arrest her! Put her in handcuffs right now! She is a violent menace! I want her in a police precinct!”

The security guards hesitated. They shifted uncomfortably, looking at each other, but no one moved toward Cailin.

Because stepping out from the shadows of the arched stone pathway was Hilliard.

He had taken off his tuxedo jacket. He walked slowly, his posture radiating a dark, suffocating wave of violence. He looked like the grim reaper stepping onto a battlefield.

The garden fell dead silent. Even Jakobe's sobs choked in his throat.

Hilliard's cold grey eyes swept over the scene — the boys on the ground, his mother holding Jakobe. Then his eyes landed on Cailin. She was kneeling, holding Elia tightly against her side. Hilliard saw the bright red blood smeared across Elia's small, pale palms.

A muscle in his jaw jumped. His hands curled into massive fists at his sides.

Jakobe saw Hilliard looking. He scrambled out of Jeraldine's arms and crawled across the stones, reaching out desperately to grab the fabric of Hilliard's trousers.

"Uncle Hilliard, please," Jakobe begged, tears streaming down his face. "Cailin is crazy. She set us up."

Hilliard did not look down at him. He simply took a step to the side, letting Jakobe's hand grasp empty air.

He walked straight toward Cailin. His eyes dropped for a fraction of a second, catching the faint, dark crimson smudges her bare feet were leaving on the pale cobblestones. He reached out, his large hands moving to gently inspect Elia's bleeding palms.

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Cailin reacted like a wild animal protecting its cub. She jerked backward violently, pulling Elia out of his reach. Her eyes burned with absolute distrust and disgust.

"Do not touch her," Cailin hissed, her voice dripping with venom. "Your family has done enough."

Hilliard's hand froze mid-air. The rejection hit him like a physical blow to the sternum. He realized, with sickening clarity, that his failure to protect them had completely severed whatever fragile truce they had managed to build.

He slowly lowered his hand and turned his back to Cailin, facing his security chief.

"Bring up the thermal imaging feed for this sector," Hilliard ordered, his voice a low, terrifying monotone. "The last ten minutes."

Jeraldine froze. "Thermal?" she stammered. "There are no cameras in this part of the garden."

"I own the hotel, Mother," Hilliard said coldly. "I installed military-grade thermal optics on the roof last year."

Jakobe's breath hitched. The blood drained completely from his face.

The security chief pulled a heavy, ruggedized tablet from his tactical vest, tapped the screen, and connected it to a portable holographic projector he placed on a stone bench.

A massive, glowing blue and red image projected into the dark air.

The thermal footage was undeniable. It didn't show faces — only heat signatures. The entire garden watched as the small heat signature of Elia was violently pushed to the ground by a taller one. They watched Jakobe's signature cover Elia's mouth. They watched the boys pick her up and swing her toward the bushes.

And then the footage showed something that made Hilliard's brow furrow in deep, analytical confusion. Two incredibly fast, small heat signatures dropped from the trees. But the heavy, thorny canopy of the rosebushes and the sudden ambient temperature drop from the incoming storm severely distorted the thermal feed. The signatures flickered and blurred, appearing completely formless — moving with a speed and kinetic efficiency that made them look less like human beings and more like compact, low-profile tactical drones or highly trained attack dogs deployed by a rival security firm.

Hilliard stared at those two fast blurs. His analytical mind raced, a deep, unsettling suspicion taking root.

He turned off the projector and looked down at Jakobe.

"You are stripped of your security clearance to the main estate," Hilliard stated, his voice devoid of any mercy. "You will be moved to the outer annex. You are no longer permitted to eat at the main table."

Jeraldine gasped, clutching her chest. "Hilliard! You cannot exile him!"

Hilliard ignored his mother. He turned to the parents of the four boys, who had just arrived looking terrified.

“All trust fund contracts and business partnerships with your families are frozen, effective immediately,” Hilliard declared.

A chorus of desperate begging and crying erupted, but Hilliard was deaf to it. He turned around, wanting to look at Cailin — wanting to show her he had handled it.

But the space behind him was empty.

Cailin had already picked Elia up. Surrounded by Kegan’s undercover guards, she was walking away, her back straight, not looking back even once.

Chapter 354:

Hilliard stood alone in the garden, the screams of the ruined families fading into background noise. He turned his head, his gaze falling on his security chief, and his voice dropped to a dangerous quiet.

“I want every frame of that thermal footage analyzed. I want to know what those two blurs were. Use every resource. Now.”

The medical suite inside the Plaza Hotel was sterile and blindingly bright.

Elia sat on the edge of the examination table, her small legs dangling. The private concierge doctor carefully swabbed the deep scrapes on her palms with antiseptic. On a stool beside her, Cailin gritted her teeth as the same doctor carefully extracted slivers of stone and grit from the soles of her feet. The antiseptic stung like fire, but the physical pain was a dull echo compared to the agonizing guilt twisting in her stomach.

The chemical burned, but Elia didn't shed a single tear. She kept her jaw locked tight. With her uninjured hand, she reached out and gently patted Cailin's knee — a silent gesture telling her mother not to worry.

Cailin sat in the chair beside the table, her stomach twisted into painful knots. Seeing her five-year-old daughter display the stoicism of a war veteran broke her heart into a thousand jagged pieces. She had failed to protect her.

After the doctor bandaged Elia's hands and administered a mild sedative to help her sleep, Cailin tucked her daughter into the bed in their secure suite.

She stood by the window, looking out at the dark city. The adrenaline from the garden was fading, leaving behind a cold, hyper-vigilant paranoia. Her instincts, honed by five years in the European underground, were screaming at her. Something was wrong. The air felt too heavy.

"I need to get her security blanket from the SUV," Cailin told the nanny, her voice tight. "Lock the door behind me. Do not open it for anyone."

She stepped out of the suite. She didn't go to the underground parking garage. Instead, she took the service elevator to the ground floor and slipped out a side exit into the cold, damp night air.

She walked along the perimeter of the hotel's private driveway, her eyes scanning the shadows.

Near a blind spot in the security cameras, behind a row of thick hedges, she stopped.

She crouched down. Her fingers brushed against the damp concrete.

There, half-crushed in the dirt, was a cigarette butt. Cailin picked it up and brought it to her nose. The harsh, acrid smell of cheap, unfiltered Russian tobacco hit her senses. It was contraband — no valet or hotel staff would smoke this.

She looked closer at the mud near the hedge. A partial footprint was pressed into the dirt. The deep, aggressive tread pattern was unmistakable: a military-grade tactical boot.

Cailin's heart slammed against her ribs. Her breath caught.

The Mercenary. The man Charla had hired to kidnap Elia — the one who had escaped the FBI raid. He was here. He was tracking them.

Chapter 355:

Without a second thought, she reached under her trench coat. She unsnapped the hidden holster strapped to her inner thigh and drew the flat, matte-black ceramic combat knife — invisible to metal detectors.

She gripped the handle tightly, her knuckles white, and slipped silently into the thick line of oak trees bordering the property. She moved like a ghost, her bare feet making zero sound on the damp grass. She tracked the crushed leaves and snapped twigs for fifty yards, moving deeper into the dark, unlit section of the park adjacent to the hotel.

Then she heard it — a faint, metallic clink.

Cailin pressed her back against the rough bark of a massive oak and peeked around the trunk.

Fifty feet away, a massive silhouette crouched near the hotel's external power junction box, wearing a heavy tactical vest and using wire cutters to bypass the alarm sensors.

Cailin's grip on the knife tightened. She prepared to step out and photograph him for Kegan's hit squad.

Suddenly, a hand clamped down hard on her shoulder from behind.

Her combat reflexes took over instantly. She didn't scream. She spun around, dropping her center of gravity, and slashed the ceramic blade upward in a lethal, practiced arc.

The blade stopped exactly one millimeter from the intruder's carotid artery.

“Whoa, easy there, cousin-in-law. It’s just me,” a smooth, highly amused voice whispered in the dark.

Cailin blinked. Standing in front of her, hands raised in mock surrender, was Julian Holloway. She had seen him across the room at the reception — Hilliard’s notorious playboy cousin, known for his decadent lifestyle and for treating the family fortune like a personal casino. A vulture circling the edges of the family, always watching, always looking for an angle. He was wearing a silk shirt unbuttoned halfway down his chest.

Cailin’s eyes blazed with fury. She kept the knife at his throat.

“What the hell are you doing creeping around in the dark, Julian?” Cailin hissed, her voice barely a breath.

Julian smirked, his eyes darting to the incredibly professional way she held the blade. “I was just out for a smoke. Saw you sneaking into the bushes looking like a trained assassin. Thought I’d see what you were hunting.”

Their whispers were quiet, but in the dead silence of the park, it was enough.

The massive silhouette at the power box froze. The man whipped his head around. The faint red glow of his night-vision goggles locked onto their position.

The Mercenary realized he was compromised. He didn’t hesitate — he dropped the wire cutters, vaulted over the low stone wall with terrifying agility, and vanished into the dark streets of Manhattan.

Cailin cursed under her breath. She lowered the knife and shoved Julian backward. She pulled out her encrypted phone, her thumbs flying across the screen, sending the exact GPS coordinates and a threat-level red alert directly to Kegan's European server and an anonymous FBI tip line.

Julian leaned against the tree and crossed his arms. He looked at Cailin, his playboy facade dropping completely, replaced by a sharp, calculating intelligence.

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"You know, Cailin," Julian murmured, his eyes narrowing. "You handle a blade a lot better than a grieving widow should. Just how many secrets are you hiding from my dear cousin?"

Cailin didn't flinch at Julian's probing question. She slid the ceramic knife back into her thigh holster with a smooth, practiced motion that only deepened his suspicion.

She stepped close to him, her eyes as cold and hard as glacial ice.

"If you want to live long enough to spend your trust fund, Julian," Cailin whispered, her voice carrying a very real, very physical threat, "you will keep your mouth shut and go back to playing the idiot."

Julian raised his hands again, a slow smirk spreading across his face. "I hate getting involved in family drama anyway. Have a good night, assassin." He turned and sauntered off toward the valet stand.

Cailin didn't wait to watch him leave. She turned and sprinted back toward the hotel.

She bypassed the elevators and took the stairs, climbing them two at a time. Her lungs burned, but the image of the Mercenary tampering with the power box fueled her adrenaline.

She reached the penthouse level, ignored her own suite, and marched directly toward Hilliard's temporary office at the end of the hall.

She didn't knock. She kicked the heavy mahogany door open.

The door slammed against the wall with a deafening crack. Hilliard, who had been sitting behind the desk reviewing security protocols, snapped his head up.

Before he could speak, Cailin marched to the desk, pulled the ceramic knife from her thigh holster, and slammed it down onto the polished wood. The blade bit into the expensive mahogany and stood straight up.

"Your perimeter is a joke," Cailin snarled, her chest heaving.

Hilliard rose slowly. His eyes flicked from the knife to her furious face. "I just banished Jakobe and cut off four families. The garden is secure."

“I don’t care about the garden!” Cailin yelled, slamming her hands flat on the desk. “The man who kidnapped Elia — the Mercenary — was just outside! He was cutting the wires to your external power grid not three minutes ago!”

The air in the room vanished.

Hilliard’s face went completely slack. The color drained from his skin, leaving him pale and terrifying. The reaction was instantaneous — his heart rate spiked, and a cold, sickening dread pooled in his stomach.

The monster that had almost killed his daughter was hunting them.

Hilliard’s eyes darkened to pitch black. He slammed his fist down on the red panic button installed beneath the lip of the desk.

Instantly, a low, vibrating klaxon alarm began to sound throughout the entire penthouse floor.

Hilliard grabbed the secure comms radio from his desk. “Code Red. Full lockdown,” he barked, his voice a guttural roar. “Deploy the SEAL contractors. Seal every exit. Nothing gets in or out. Scramble the helicopters.”

Outside the window, the hotel’s massive floodlights snapped on, illuminating the streets below. The heavy thud of helicopter rotors began to vibrate against the glass.

Hilliard threw the radio down and walked around the desk, closing the distance between them in two massive strides.

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He grabbed Cailin by the shoulders. His grip was bruising, his large hands trembling with a mixture of pure terror and explosive rage.

“Why didn’t you call security?” Hilliard demanded, his voice cracking. “Why did you go out there alone? He could have killed you!”

Cailin glared up at him, refusing to show fear. “Because your security is blind, Hilliard! They were watching the front door while he was cutting the throat of your power grid!”

The accusation hit Hilliard like a physical blow. His pride, his absolute need to be the protector, was being shredded.

He pulled her against his chest, wrapping his arms around her so tightly she could barely breathe. He buried his face in her hair, his heart hammering against her ribs.

“I swear to you,” Hilliard whispered fiercely, his voice vibrating against her skin. “I will burn this city to the ground. I will spend every cent of the Holloway fortune. He will never touch Elia again.”

Cailin felt the heat of his body, the desperate, raw honesty in his vow. For a fraction of a second, the thick ice around her heart cracked. A dangerous urge rose in her — to lean into him, to let him carry the weight.

But the memory of the last five years was too strong. She shoved her hands against his chest, forcing him to step back.

“He knew the exact blind spot of the cameras, Hilliard,” Cailin said coldly, her analytical mind taking over. “He knew exactly which junction box to hit. He has the blueprints.”

Hilliard froze. His mind raced, processing the implication.

The security blueprints for Holloway properties were highly classified. Only a handful of people had ever had access.

Suddenly, a name clicked into place.

Charla.

During their brief, staged engagement, Charla had demanded access to the security layouts, claiming she needed to plan the garden renovations safely.

Hilliard’s fists clenched so hard his knuckles popped. A murderous, cold-blooded aura radiated from him.

The office door burst open. The security chief ran in, panting. “Sir, we found the cut wires. The perimeter was breached. He’s gone.”

Hilliard didn’t look at the guard. He stared straight ahead, his eyes completely dead.

“Put a global bounty on the Mercenary,” Hilliard ordered softly. “And find Charla English. Right now.”

The klaxon alarms finally fell silent, but the tension in the penthouse was thick enough to choke on. The entire floor swarmed with heavily armed, ex-military contractors.

Hilliard stood in the center of the hallway and looked at Cailin, his tone brooking no argument.

“You and Elia are sleeping in the panic room tonight,” Hilliard commanded. “It has ten-inch steel walls and an independent air supply. I will stand outside the door.”

Cailin looked at him. She didn’t argue. She simply turned and walked into her suite.

Ten minutes later, the door opened.

Cailin stepped out — not in pajamas, but in her trench coat. In one hand she held a small, packed leather duffel bag. With the other, she held a groggy, half-asleep Elia, who was clutching her blanket.

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Hilliard's eyes widened. He stepped forward, using his massive frame to physically block the hallway.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, his voice dropping to a dangerous growl. "Get back in the room."

"We are leaving," Cailin said, her voice flat and absolute. "I am not keeping my daughter in a building where the security blueprints have been sold to a hitman."

"I said no!" Hilliard roared, his temper snapping. He took a step closer, towering over her. "You are not walking out that door. It is not safe!"

Cailin didn't flinch. She looked up into his angry grey eyes, her expression filled with a profound, exhausting pity.

"Your protection is always too late, Hilliard," she whispered. The words were quiet, but they cut deeper than any knife. "You were too late five years ago. And you are too late now. I protect my own."

Hilliard staggered back half a step. The words struck him in his deepest, most agonizing wound. His chest caved in. The fight drained out of him, replaced by a suffocating wave of guilt.

Cailin didn't wait for him to recover. She pulled Elia past him and walked straight toward the private elevator.

When the elevator doors opened in the underground garage, Hilliard — who had followed them down — understood immediately why she had been so confident.

Waiting beside a massive, black armored SUV were four men in unmarked tactical gear, automatic weapons held across their chests. They were Kegan's elite European strike team.

Hilliard stopped walking. His hands balled into fists. He watched his wife and his daughter climb into a vehicle owned by another man, protected by another man's army. The jealousy and powerlessness burned his throat like acid, but he couldn't stop her. He knew that if he forced her to stay, she would hate him forever.

The SUV's heavy doors slammed shut. The engine roared, and the vehicle sped out of the garage, leaving Hilliard standing alone in the cold concrete cavern.

He took the elevator back up to the penthouse — a ticking time bomb of rage and self-hatred.

As he stepped out into the hallway, a door opened.

Charla stepped out of her guest suite in a sheer white silk nightgown that clung to her body. She looked terrified, her eyes wide and watery.

"Hilliard?" Charla whimpered, taking small, hesitant steps toward him. "The alarms... I was so scared. What is happening? Why did Cailin leave?"

She reached out, her delicate fingers brushing against the lapel of his shirt, playing the role of the comforting, innocent victim.

The moment her skin touched his, Hilliard snapped.

His hand shot out with terrifying speed. He grabbed Charla by the throat.

He didn't merely hold her — he lifted her entirely off her feet and slammed her backward. Her spine struck the heavy marble pillar in the hallway with a sickening thud.

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Charla's eyes bulged. Her hands flew up, frantically clawing at his thick wrist. Her feet kicked wildly in the air, her silk nightgown fluttering. She couldn't breathe. Her face began to turn a dark, mottled purple.

Hilliard leaned in close, his face a mask of pure, demonic wrath.

"You think I am stupid?" he hissed, his voice like grinding stone. "You gave him the blueprints. You sold my daughter to a killer."

Charla tried to shake her head, her mouth opening in a silent, desperate gasp for air. Tears of genuine, agonizing panic streamed down her face.

Hilliard held her there for three more seconds, watching the light begin to fade from her eyes.

Then he opened his hand.

Charla crashed to the floor, collapsing onto her hands and knees, coughing violently and gagging as she greedily sucked oxygen into her burning lungs.

Hilliard stood over her, regarding her as if she were something to be scraped off the bottom of his shoe.

“You have ten minutes to pack your bags,” he said, his voice dropping to a terrifying, deadened whisper. He turned his head slightly toward the security chief standing in the doorway. “Do not take her to the street. Take her to the family’s private facility in Alaska. I don’t want her leaving this city on a commercial flight. She is going to completely disappear.”

Charla looked up, her face smeared with tears and makeup. “Hilliard, please! No! Not the black site! I have nowhere to go!”

Hilliard turned his back on her and walked into his office, slamming the door shut.

Charla sat alone on the cold marble floor. The security chief nodded, his face a stone mask. “You have ten minutes to pack, under supervision.” He gestured, and two guards stepped forward, flanking her — a suffocating promise that there was no escape.

She stared at the closed door. The fake tears stopped. Her expression slowly morphed, twisting into a mask of absolute, psychotic panic and hatred. She knew what the Alaska facility meant. It meant a lightless cell for the rest of her life.

She had to run. Now. Drawing on her intimate knowledge of the penthouse's servant corridors, she began plotting her escape before the guards could close in.

The midnight sky over New York ripped open, unleashing a torrential, freezing downpour.

Charla's silver Porsche Panamera tore down the slick, black asphalt of the FDR Drive. The tires hydroplaned slightly, but she didn't lift her foot from the gas. She gripped the leather steering wheel so hard her knuckles had gone bone-white.

Inside the car, the heavy, aggressive bass of a death metal song blasted from the speakers at maximum volume. Charla needed the noise. She needed it to drown out the screaming inside her own head.

She had been thrown out of the Plaza Hotel with nothing but two suitcases and no umbrella. Her expensive blonde hair was plastered to her skull, dripping cold water down her neck. Her mascara had run, leaving dark, ugly streaks down her pale cheeks. She looked like a drowned ghost.

Then the music cut out.

Chapter 360:

A sharp, insistent buzzing vibrated from the glove compartment. Her burner phone — the one she reserved for only the darkest of dealings. The screen flashed with a blocked, untraceable number.

Charla's stomach dropped. A cold, sickening dread washed over her. Her hand trembled as she reached out and synced the call to the car's speakers.

"Good evening, Miss English," a voice rasped through the speakers.

It was heavily distorted by a voice scrambler, giving it a metallic, robotic edge, but Charla recognized the underlying cadence instantly. It was the Mercenary.

Charla slammed her foot on the brake. The Porsche fishtailed violently on the wet road, the anti-lock brakes grinding as she narrowly missed the concrete median. She wrenched the car onto the shoulder, her chest heaving.

"Why are you calling me?!" Charla shrieked, her voice cracking with hysteria. "The deal is off! Hilliard knows! You ruined everything!"

A low, cruel chuckle echoed through the speakers.

"I didn't ruin anything, princess," the Mercenary sneered. "But your little stunt at the hotel just put Kegan's hit squad and the FBI right on my tail. I need to leave the country tonight. And you are going to pay for my ticket."

Charla's eyes widened in terror. "I don't have any money! Hilliard froze my family's accounts! I have nothing!"

"You better find something." The Mercenary's voice dropped to a lethal murmur. "I want ten million dollars in untraceable Monero crypto transferred to my wallet in two hours. If I don't see the transfer, I am sending the audio recordings of you hiring me to kidnap the kid directly to the New York Times and the NYPD."

Charla stopped breathing. The blood froze in her veins.

Audio recordings. If those leaked, she wouldn't just be broke — she would spend the rest of her life in a federal penitentiary.

"Please," Charla begged, her voice collapsing into a pathetic sob. "I can't get ten million. Let me check my offshore accounts. Just give me a minute."

She grabbed her phone with shaking hands and opened a secure banking app, logging into her secret Cayman Islands account.

The screen loaded. A red error message appeared: ACCOUNT FROZEN BY PRIMARY TRUSTEE.

Her parents. They had cut her off to save themselves from Hilliard's wrath. She was entirely, completely broke. The balance read \$0.00.

Charla stared at the zero. Something inside her mind snapped. The last thread of her sanity unraveled.

She let out a sound that wasn't human — a feral, agonizing scream of pure rage. She slammed her fists against the steering wheel again and again until her hands bruised.

"I don't have it!" she screamed at the dashboard.

"Then you better come meet me," the Mercenary replied coldly. "I just sent you coordinates. Come alone. Or you go to prison."

The line went dead.

Charla stared at the GPS coordinates glowing on the screen. The location was an abandoned industrial zone on the far edge of Brooklyn.

She opened the center console of the Porsche. Underneath a pile of napkins and expensive sunglasses sat a small, heavy object wrapped in velvet cloth. She unwrapped it: a compact, silver Browning .22 caliber pistol.