

Second chance 361

Chapter 361:

She shoved the cold metal into the deep pocket of her wet trench coat, slammed the car into drive, and sped back onto the highway, driving like a kamikaze pilot into the darkness.

Forty minutes later, the Porsche bumped over broken pavement and pulled into a massive, desolate lot choked with rusting shipping containers. At its center stood a decaying, windowless warehouse. The rain hammered against the corrugated metal roof like machine-gun fire.

Charla parked and left the headlights on, cutting two beams of pale light through the heavy rain.

She stepped out into the mud, her high heels sinking instantly. She kept her right hand deep in her pocket, fingers wrapped tight around the grip of the pistol.

She walked slowly toward the gaping black entrance of the warehouse. It smelled of rust, mold, and stagnant water.

"I'm here!" Charla yelled, her voice echoing through the massive, empty space. "Show yourself!"

She took two more steps into the darkness.

Suddenly, a massive arm wrapped in wet tactical nylon shot out from behind a concrete pillar. A heavy, gloved hand clamped violently over Charla's mouth, cutting off her scream.

The Mercenary jerked her backward and dragged her into the pitch-black shadows of the warehouse.

Charla was dragged backward through the dark, her high heels scraping uselessly against the rough concrete floor.

The Mercenary threw her forward. She crashed hard onto the dusty, debris-covered ground, scraping her knees.

She gasped for air and immediately reached into her trench coat pocket, fingers closing around the cold grip of the Browning pistol.

Before she could pull it free, a heavy tactical boot slammed down onto her wrist, pinning it to the concrete. Charla cried out in pain.

The Mercenary knelt beside her and pressed the cold, heavy steel barrel of a Glock 19 directly against her temple. The metal dug painfully into her skin.

"Don't be stupid, princess," he whispered. He was wearing a dark rain slicker over his tactical gear, water dripping from his hood, his eyes dead and flat. "Where is my crypto transfer?"

Charla lay on the floor with a gun pressed to her head, the absolute reality of her death staring her in the face.

But instead of crying, something twisted inside her. The sheer absurdity of her downfall — the utter destruction of everything she had built — triggered a massive short-circuit in her brain.

Charla began to laugh.

It started as a low giggle, then escalated into a shrill, hysterical, deeply unhinged laugh that echoed off the rusted metal walls of the warehouse. It was the sound of a woman who had lost her mind entirely.

The Mercenary frowned and pressed the gun harder against her skull. “Shut up. Are you stalling?”

Charla forced the laughter to stop. She looked up at him, her mascara-stained eyes wide and burning with a terrifying, manic energy.

“You want ten million dollars?” she spat, her voice raspy. “I don’t have ten dollars. But you are thinking too small. You are a fool.”

The Mercenary’s finger tightened slightly on the trigger. “Give me one reason not to blow your brains out right now.”

“Because I can give you a billion dollars,” Charla whispered.

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He paused. The sheer magnitude of the number made his greedy mind stutter. He didn't pull the trigger, but he didn't lower the gun either. "Talk."

Charla slowly pushed herself up into a sitting position, ignoring the pain in her wrist. She looked at him with a predatory gleam.

"That little girl you tried to grab — Elia?" she said, her voice dripping with venom. "I know you suspected she was valuable, but you don't know the half of it. She isn't just some random bastard. She is Hilliard Holloway's legally recognized, biological daughter. His only heir."

The Mercenary's eyes narrowed beneath his hood. "I knew the kid had leverage, but Holloway has never publicly claimed her. Give me one piece of hard proof that he'll actually liquidate for a secret street-rat."

"Because I've seen the private family trust documents," Charla continued, her voice hypnotic, feeding his greed. "She is the sole beneficiary of the Holloway primary heir trust. The trust holds over ten billion in liquid assets. It isn't insurance — it's his entire legacy. He would liquidate the planet to get her back. You can ask for a billion, and he will pay it in cash."

The Mercenary let out a harsh scoff. "It's a pipe dream. The Holloway estate is locked down tighter than Fort Knox. After tonight, he'll have ex-military guarding every inch. I can't get in."

Charla smiled. It was an ugly, terrifying smile.

She reached out with her uninjured hand and wiped a patch of dust from the concrete floor. Using her fingernail, she began to draw a rough square.

"I lived in that house," she whispered. "I know every secret."

She drew a line cutting through the square. "The thermal cameras and motion sensors cover the entire perimeter. But there is a blind spot — the old underground wine cellar on the southwest corner. Hilliard halted renovations there three years ago. The ventilation shafts connect directly to the sub-basement, and they are not wired to the main alarm grid."

The Mercenary stared at the crude map scratched in the dust. His tactical mind was already calculating the infiltration route.

"I know the guard shift rotations," Charla added, sealing it. "I know exactly when the cameras run their diagnostic reset. It gives you a four-minute window."

The Mercenary slowly lowered the Glock. He studied Charla for a long moment, reassessing her — realizing that the pampered socialite was, in fact, a highly functional psychopath.

"What's your cut?" he asked quietly.

"We split the money fifty-fifty," Charla said, her eyes burning with a hellish fire. "And when you get the money — you kill Cailin. You put a bullet right between her eyes."

The Mercenary held her gaze. Outside, thunder crashed and shook the warehouse walls.

He reached into his tactical vest, pulled out a small encrypted burner phone, and tossed it onto Charla's lap.

"Send me the exact schematics," he said. "We have a deal."

Chapter 363:

Across the river, in a high-rise suite of a Manhattan hotel, Cailin sat on the edge of the bed with a sleeping Elia held tightly in her arms, her chin resting on her daughter's soft hair.

She stared out the window at the lightning tearing across the sky. Her heart beat in a slow, heavy rhythm, and the air in the room felt suffocatingly tight. She didn't know how, and she didn't know when — but her instincts were screaming that the nightmare was far from over.

The interior of the armored Maybach was completely silent — a tense, suffocating vacuum. This was a supervised visit, a rare and highly restricted hour that Cailin had reluctantly permitted under the watchful eyes of Kegan's private security force, whose black SUVs trailed closely behind them through the Manhattan traffic. The only sound was the low, sterile voice coming from the radio.

"Breaking news this morning. Intel sources report that the covert transport moving disgraced socialite Charla English to a classified Alaskan black site was ambushed overnight. English is currently at large, and authorities suspect she had outside mercenary assistance."

Hilliard reached out and twisted the volume dial to zero.

His jaw locked so tight his teeth ground together. The muscles in his neck strained against the collar of his custom dress shirt. Charla was out. The woman who had sold his security blueprints to a hitman was walking the streets, having escaped the absolute hell he had condemned her to.

He glanced in the rearview mirror.

Elia was strapped into the heavy leather child seat in the back, staring out the bulletproof window at the Manhattan traffic. Her small hands gripped the stuffed bunny Cailin had given her, knuckles white.

She had not spoken a single word since he picked her up from the neutral exchange point thirty minutes ago.

Hilliard's chest physically ached. The silence between them was a thick, suffocating wall. He only had thirty minutes left before he had to return her to Kegan's guards, and the distance between them felt like an ocean he couldn't cross.

"Did you enjoy the park earlier, Elia?" Hilliard asked. His voice came out rough, too loud in the quiet car.

Elia did not turn her head. She gave a tiny, stiff nod.

It was a polite, mechanical response — the way an employee answered a boss, not a daughter answering a father. The rejection hit Hilliard right in the sternum.

The motorcade turned onto Fifth Avenue, passing the dense, green tree line of Central Park.

Hilliard stared out the window, his mind churning through security protocols and kill orders for Charla — until a flash of bright cherry red caught his eye.

It was a small, vintage wooden cart parked on the edge of the park sidewalk. An old man was selling handmade caramel apples, their glossy red coating gleaming under the morning sun. It looked exactly like the cart Hilliard's grandfather used to take him to when he was a boy, before the Holloway family money had completely sterilized his childhood.

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A sudden impulse seized him. He needed to break the ice. He needed to see her smile. He needed to prove to himself that he wasn't completely dead to her.

"Pull over," Hilliard ordered.

Gavin Thorne turned around from the passenger seat in barely concealed shock. "Sir? We are not on a secure route. The protocol — and Kegan's men will not allow a deviation —"

"Pull the damn car over, Gavin," Hilliard growled.

The heavy Maybach swerved toward the curb. The two black SUVs behind them slammed on their brakes, while Kegan's trailing vehicles aggressively boxed them in, drawing a chorus of angry honks from the surrounding traffic.

Hilliard unbuckled his seatbelt, stepped out onto the sidewalk, and opened the rear door. He leaned into the car, his massive frame blocking the sun, and looked at Elia. He held out his large, calloused hand.

"Do you want to try something?" he asked, his voice suddenly soft — almost clumsy.

Elia looked at his hand. Then she looked past him at the four heavily armed men stepping out of the SUVs, hands resting on their tactical vests, and at Kegan's guards forming a tense perimeter on the sidewalk. Her small body stiffened. She pressed herself deeper into the leather seat.

Hilliard felt a sharp pain in his gut. He was terrifying her.

He let out a slow breath. "Just you and me," he promised, keeping his hand perfectly still. "The guards stay at the cars. I swear."

Elia glanced at the bright red apples on the cart. The sugar was a powerful magnet for a five-year-old.

Slowly, she uncurled her fingers from the bunny. She reached out.

Her tiny, warm hand slipped into Hilliard's massive palm. The moment her skin touched his, time seemed to dilate. He felt the fragile, bird-like bones of her fingers, the warmth radiating from her small palm — a stark contrast to the cold, metallic world he inhabited. The contact sent a jolt of pure, unfiltered electricity straight into his chest.

He closed his fingers around her hand with extreme, careful tenderness, as though he were holding a piece of spun glass that would shatter at the wrong breath. His thumb brushed gently across her knuckles — a silent, desperate plea for connection.

He helped her out of the car.

They walked the twenty feet to the cart. The SEAL team and Kegan's men watched with hawkish eyes but stayed by the vehicles.

Hilliard pulled a hundred-dollar bill from his money clip, didn't ask for change, and took the two largest, brightest caramel apples from the vendor.

He knelt down on the concrete sidewalk so he was eye-level with Elia and held out the heavy wooden stick.

Elia studied the glossy red candy. She swallowed.

"Mommy says eating too much candy will rot my teeth," she whispered. Her voice was so small that Hilliard had to lean in to hear it.

A rare, genuine smile touched the corners of his mouth. It changed his entire face — making him look younger, less dangerous.

“Then let’s make it our secret,” he whispered back. “We won’t tell anyone. Not even Mommy. Okay?”

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Elia’s eyes widened. The word “secret” held enormous, undeniable power.

She looked at Hilliard — really looked at him — for the first time. The dead, defensive wall in her eyes cracked.

She gave a firm nod, leaned forward, and took a tiny, cautious lick of the red candy coating.

The pure, concentrated sugar exploded on her tongue.

Elia’s face lit up. A massive, brilliant, completely uninhibited smile broke across her face, her eyes crinkling at the corners.

Hilliard stared at that smile.

The thick, heavy ice that had encased his heart for five years shattered. A wave of pure, absolute joy swept over him — so intense it made his eyes burn. He had billions of dollars, but he had never felt anything as valuable as this single moment.

They sat down on a green wooden park bench. Hilliard, the ruthless CEO of the Holloway empire, sat in his five-thousand-dollar suit, eating a sticky caramel apple beside his daughter while the morning sun warmed their faces.

Ten minutes later, Elia finished the apple, her cheeks covered in sticky red sugar. She leaned her small body against Hilliard's leg and looked up at him.

"Thank you, Daddy," she said softly.

The word hit him like a bullet to the chest.

Daddy.

His entire body went rigid. He stopped breathing. He looked down at her, his vision blurring slightly. A massive internal war raged inside him — the ruthless logic of his upbringing screaming that attachments were weaknesses, while his very soul wept at the sound of that single word. He wanted to freeze time, to build a fortress around this park bench and never let her leave.

He reached out and gently wiped a smudge of sugar from her cheek with his thumb.

“You are welcome, sweetheart,” Hilliard said, his voice barely holding.

He picked her up. She rested her head on his broad shoulder, eyes growing heavy with a sudden sugar crash, the bare wooden stick still gripped loosely in her hand.

Hilliard carried her back to the Maybach, laid her gently in the seat, and draped his suit jacket over her small body. He stood there a moment, looking at her sleeping face. A fierce, violent surge of protective instinct flooded his veins. He swore to himself, right then and there, that he would burn the world to ash before he let Charla or anyone else hurt her.

He closed the door.

His phone vibrated in his pocket.

He pulled it out. A push notification from his highly encrypted private email server. The subject line contained only one word.

CHOICE.

Hilliard’s blood ran cold. The warmth of the sun vanished. His eyes darkened to a lethal, predatory grey.

He got into the car. “Drive,” he ordered Gavin. “Get us to the estate. Now. Override Kegan’s convoy. We are taking her with us.”

The motorcade sped through the gates of the massive Holloway estate, leaving Kegan's furious security detail locked outside the perimeter. The stone mansion loomed ahead, dark and fortress-like.

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The tires screeched to a halt at the foot of the main steps.

Hilliard opened the door, carefully scooped the sleeping Elia into his arms, and kept his jacket wrapped around her as he walked up the marble steps. The heavy oak doors swung open before he reached them.

Jeraldine Holloway stood in the foyer. She was not wearing her usual perfect makeup. Her face was a sickly, pale white, and her hands were shaking violently. She looked at Elia in Hilliard's arms, her eyes filled with a frantic, terrifying panic.

"Put her upstairs," Jeraldine gasped, her voice cracking. "Right now."

Hilliard stopped. His stomach dropped. "What is it?"

Jeraldine grabbed his arm, her manicured nails digging painfully through his shirt into his bicep.

"It's Jakobe," Jeraldine sobbed, her voice echoing through the massive foyer. "He's gone. Something terrible has happened."

Hilliard handed the sleeping Elia to the head housekeeper.

“Take her to my private quarters. Lock the door. Two guards outside,” he ordered, his voice a low, mechanical rumble.

He turned and practically dragged Jeraldine by the arm into his mahogany-paneled study, then slammed the heavy double doors shut behind them.

Gavin Thorne was already standing behind the desk, his face grim.

“What happened?” Hilliard demanded, marching toward him.

Jeraldine collapsed into a leather armchair and buried her face in her hands. “The estate’s annex!” she sobbed. “They just called! The entire security grid went dark for ten minutes. When it came back online, Jakobe’s room was empty. His bodyguards were found unconscious in the hallway!”

A cold sweat broke out on the back of Hilliard’s neck. To breach the annex, they had bypassed the outer wall, the thermal sensors, and a dozen armed patrols. The enemy was inside his walls.

Gavin pushed a heavy, encrypted tactical tablet across the polished surface of the desk. “Sir, this video was sent to your private server three minutes ago. It bypassed all our firewalls. It was routed through the Dark Web.”

Hilliard picked up the tablet and tapped the screen.

The video was grainy, shot in a dark concrete room. Jakobe was tied to a metal chair, his expensive designer clothes torn and soaked in blood. His face was heavily bruised, one eye swollen completely shut. He was crying — a pathetic, terrified whimper.

Hilliard's jaw clenched. He didn't love Jakobe, but the boy was under his family's protection. This was a direct and violent insult to the Holloway name.

A voice spoke from behind the camera, heavily distorted by a digital scrambler and sounding like grinding metal.

"Good morning, Hilliard. I have your little heir. He screams very loudly."

Hilliard's fingers tightened around the edges of the tablet until the plastic casing creaked.

"The price for his life is one hundred million dollars," the voice continued. "Transferred in untraceable Monero cryptocurrency to the cold wallet address attached to this file. You have twenty-four hours."

Hilliard exhaled sharply. Money. It was always about money.

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He looked at Gavin. "Liquidate the shadow accounts. Get the crypto ready. Trace the IP address — use the NSA backdoor if you have to."

"Wait!" Jeraldine shrieked, jumping up from the chair. She pointed a shaking finger at the screen. "Watch the rest! Watch the end!"

Hilliard frowned and looked back at the tablet.

"But money is boring, Hilliard," the distorted voice continued. "I want to test your priorities."

A hand wearing a black tactical glove reached into the frame, holding a glossy eight-by-ten photograph. It dropped the photo onto Jakobe's bleeding lap. The camera zoomed in.

It was a photo of Elia. Taken that morning. She was sitting in the back of the Maybach, holding her stuffed bunny.

Hilliard's heart stopped. The blood drained from his face. A wave of pure, absolute nausea hit his stomach.

"The money," the voice sneered, "and the girl. Bring her to the coordinates I send you. You trade the bastard for the heir. One for one. Very fair."

The screen went black.

Hilliard stood perfectly still. The silence in the study was deafening.

Then a feral, animalistic roar ripped from his throat.

He raised the tablet above his head and slammed it down onto the edge of the mahogany desk with terrifying force. The glass screen shattered into a thousand pieces, the metal casing bent and sparked. He swept his arm across the desk, sending heavy crystal decanters, laptops, and files crashing to the floor in a violent explosion of glass and paper.

“No!” Hilliard roared, his chest heaving. “No!”

The realization hit him all at once. Charla hadn’t just sold the blueprints to kill Cailin. She had sold information about Elia to the Mercenary. She had weaponized his daughter.

The next morning, the sun rose over New York — bright and mocking.

Hilliard had not slept a single second. His eyes were bloodshot, his face pale and drawn.

He walked out to the driveway where the armored SUV was waiting. He was taking Elia to the deepest, most secure underground panic room within the Holloway estate — a desperate attempt to maintain a facade of normalcy, to put her behind three feet of reinforced steel while he figured out how to slaughter the men who had taken Jakobe. He couldn't send her back to Cailin now; the transport route was too vulnerable.

Elia sat in the back seat in the same soft sweater and jeans from the day before. She studied Hilliard's face in the rearview mirror, sensing the dark, heavy energy radiating from him.

She unzipped her small backpack, reached inside, and pulled out the bare wooden stick from the caramel apple.

She leaned forward and poked Hilliard's shoulder.

He turned around.

Elia held out the sticky wooden stick. "Our secret," she whispered, her eyes wide and trusting.

Hilliard looked at the piece of wood. It felt as though someone had shoved a serrated knife into his ribs and twisted it. The physical pain of his guilt was agonizing.

He reached out with a trembling hand and took the stick. "Our secret," he choked out, forcing a rigid smile onto his face.

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The SUV pulled up to the hidden entrance of the subterranean bunker at the edge of the estate grounds. Hilliard stepped out, opened Elia's door, and knelt down on the pavement — ignoring the stares of the elite tactical guards securing the perimeter.

He adjusted the collar of her sweater. His hands were shaking so badly he could barely manage it.

"Listen to me, Elia," he said, his voice thick with unshed tears. "My security team will be right outside your door all day. Do not go anywhere with anyone else. Do you understand?"

Elia nodded. She looked at his red eyes.

Then she leaned forward and pressed her small lips against his cheek.

It was a soft, innocent kiss. It tasted faintly of caramel.

The kiss burned his skin like a branding iron. He closed his eyes, his breathing ragged. He felt like a monster — sending her into a vault while pretending she was safe, a timer already ticking down on her life.

He watched her small back disappear through the heavy blast doors of the bunker.

Hilliard stood. The forced smile vanished, and his face settled into a mask of pure, lethal ice.

He got back into the SUV and pulled out his encrypted phone. “Do you have a location?” he asked the moment Gavin answered.

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“No, sir,” Gavin replied, his voice tight with panic. “The Dark Web routing is too complex. We can’t find the signal.”

Hilliard’s phone beeped.

He pulled it from his ear. A new message had appeared on his secure messaging app, the sender ID a string of random numbers. He opened it.

Hilliard, your old friend Charla sends her regards. She said it’s time to pay for your choices.

Hilliard’s pupils dilated.

This wasn’t just a mercenary acting alone. This was a coordinated strike, funded by the woman who wanted to watch his world burn.

He hit dial on the unknown number.

It rang once, then disconnected.

A new message appeared. It was a digital timer.

10:59:59

The countdown had started.

Hilliard pulled his arm back and drove his fist into the bulletproof glass of the SUV window with everything he had. The glass spider-webbed beneath his knuckles. His skin tore, smearing blood across the cracks. He didn't feel the pain. He was trapped in a cage, and the walls were closing in around his daughter.

The elevator doors slid open, revealing the massive, open-plan living space of the Holloway estate's penthouse suite.

Hilliard stepped out, his bleeding knuckles wrapped in a hasty bandage. The air in the room was thick and suffocating.

He found Jeraldine standing by the floor-to-ceiling windows, staring out at the sprawling grounds, her posture rigid. Hearing his footsteps, she spun around. Her eyes were wild, bloodshot, and completely devoid of reason.

She didn't speak. She lunged at him.

Jeraldine slammed her fists against Hilliard's chest, her diamond rings scraping against the fabric of his suit.

"Where is the money?" Jeraldine shrieked, her voice tearing from her throat. "Why aren't you at the drop point? They are going to kill Jakobe!"

Hilliard grabbed her wrists, his grip iron-tight, forcing her to stop.

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"Listen to me," he said, his voice a low, dangerous rumble. "They don't just want the money. They want Elia. It's a trap. I think Charla set this up with the mercenary who attacked the hotel."

Jeraldine stopped struggling. She stared at him, her chest heaving.

Then a horrible, high-pitched laugh burst from her lips.

“Charla?” Jeraldine mocked, her eyes wide and manic. “I don’t care if the devil himself set it up! Jakobe is the heir! He is the future of this family! He is what your father wanted!”

She ripped her wrists free and pointed a shaking finger directly at Hilliard’s face.

“And what is that girl?” Jeraldine spat, the words dripping with pure, toxic venom. “She is a bastard. A mistake you made with that psychotic whore Cailin. She is a stain on our bloodline!”

The words hit Hilliard like a physical blow to the head. The sheer, unadulterated cruelty in his mother’s voice made his stomach churn.

“Shut your mouth,” Hilliard snarled, his eyes flashing with violent rage. He took a step toward her, his massive frame towering over her. “She is my daughter.”

Jeraldine didn’t back down. The terror for Jakobe had completely overridden her survival instincts.

She took three rapid steps backward, moving toward the massive glass doors that led out to the penthouse’s open-air balcony.

“You are going to let the Holloway legacy die for a stray?” Jeraldine screamed.

Hilliard’s secure phone vibrated violently in his pocket.

He froze. He pulled it out — the scrambled number. He accepted the call and put it on speaker.

“Tick tock, Hilliard,” the distorted, metallic voice echoed through the room. “I’m getting bored.”

Hilliard’s jaw locked. “If you touch one hair on that boy’s head, I will hunt you to the ends of the earth and peel your skin off while you breathe.”

The voice chuckled — a wet, sickening sound.

“By the time you find me, Jakobe will be fish food at the bottom of the harbor. You better worry about your mother right now.”

The call disconnected.

Hilliard’s head snapped up.

Jeraldine had pushed the heavy glass doors open. The violent wind from the incoming storm whipped her silk robe around her legs. She stepped out onto the balcony.

Hilliard’s heart slammed against his ribs. “Mother, step back inside.”

Jeraldine didn't listen. She walked straight to the edge.

The penthouse balcony had a low glass railing. Jeraldine grabbed the top edge and swung one leg over. Then the other. She was standing on the narrow, six-inch concrete ledge on the outside of the glass.

Fifty stories below, the concrete driveway looked like a grey ribbon.

Hilliard stopped breathing. The blood rushed from his head, leaving him lightheaded.

"Mother!" he roared, sprinting toward the open doors.

"Stop right there!" Jeraldine screamed over the howling wind.

She released the glass with one hand and leaned her weight backward over the abyss.

Hilliard slammed to a halt, his expensive leather shoes skidding on the hardwood floor. He threw his hands up, his chest heaving.

"Okay! Okay, I'm stopped," he gasped. "Just come back over the glass."

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Jeraldine looked at him. Her face was soaked with tears, but her eyes held a sick, triumphant gleam. She had found his ultimate weakness.

“You are going to call Gavin right now,” Jeraldine ordered, her voice shrill and absolute. “You are going to tell him to put that bastard girl in a car and take her to the exchange point.”

A wave of pure, physical nausea hit Hilliard’s gut.

“I can’t do that,” he pleaded, his voice cracking. “She is five years old. They will kill her.”

“Then watch me die!” Jeraldine shrieked.

She leaned further back. Her silk robe billowed out over the fifty-story drop.

“Your father made sacrifices for this family!” Jeraldine yelled, wielding the deepest, most toxic weapon she had. “He cut out his own heart to build this empire! Are you weaker than him? Are you going to be the son who let his mother jump to her death because you couldn’t make the hard choice?”

Hilliard closed his eyes. The pain in his chest was agonizing — the feeling of being physically torn in half by two massive, opposing forces.

He pulled out his phone. His thumb hovered over Gavin's contact.

He was desperately calculating a third option. A sniper. A tactical breach. Anything.

Jeraldine saw his hesitation.

She released the glass railing completely. She stood on the six-inch ledge with nothing but her feet and the wind, balanced over the void.

"I am going to count to three, Hilliard," Jeraldine screamed, her voice cutting through the wind like a razor.

"One!"

Hilliard's eyes snapped open. He stared at his mother — the woman who had raised him — teetering on the edge of death.

He looked down at his phone.

The air left the room. He was trapped inside a nightmare, and there was no way to wake up.

“Two!”

Jeraldine’s voice was a ragged shriek. She swayed backward, her arms pinwheeling as a strong gust of wind struck her. Her heel slipped a fraction of an inch off the concrete ledge.

Hilliard’s brain short-circuited. The primal, biological imperative to save his mother clashed violently with the instinct to protect his child. His vision tunneled.

At that exact moment, his phone vibrated in his palm.

Not a call. A video file.

His thumb instinctively tapped the screen.

The video opened — no digital scrambling this time. It was a tight, high-definition close-up of Jakobe’s face. The boy was screaming, a raw, guttural sound of absolute terror.

A hand in a black tactical glove entered the frame, holding a combat knife. The blade was dull, rusted, and terrifying. The gloved hand seized Jakobe by the hair, yanking his head back. The tip of the rusted blade pressed directly against the corner of Jakobe’s right eye.

The metallic voice spoke from behind the camera. "Time's up, Hilliard. We start with the eye."

"Uncle Hilliard!" Jakobe shrieked. "Please! Please!"

The blade pressed harder. A tiny drop of blood welled up beside the boy's tear duct.

The image bypassed all logic and hit Hilliard's nervous system like a high-voltage shock.