

Second chance 371

Chapter 371:

His fingers went numb. The phone slipped from his grasp and clattered onto the hardwood floor.

He looked up.

Jeraldine had seen the video playing on the large screen. The color drained completely from her face, leaving her looking like a corpse.

“Three!” she screamed, her voice breaking into a sob.

She closed her eyes and threw her weight backward into the empty air.

Hilliard didn’t think. The human body reacts faster than the mind.

He exploded forward, his powerful legs driving him across the room like a missile. He hit the glass doors, shattering the remaining panes, and dove over the low railing.

Jeraldine was already falling.

He thrust his arm down over the edge.

His large hand clamped around Jeraldine's thin wrist just as she dropped past the concrete ledge.

The sudden, violent arrest of her entire body weight hit Hilliard's shoulder like a sledgehammer. A sickening tearing sound echoed in his own ears, followed by a blinding flash of agony that nearly made him black out. The muscles and tendons in his right rotator cuff ripped under the massive kinetic force — he felt the fibers snap one by one, a fiery, excruciating severing of tissue that left his arm dead and burning simultaneously. White-hot pain shot down his arm and detonated in his brain.

Hilliard let out a guttural roar. His chest slammed hard against the top of the glass railing, knocking the wind from him.

He was hanging halfway over the edge of a fifty-story building, his right arm screaming in agony, holding his mother's dangling body over the abyss.

"Pull me up!" Jeraldine shrieked, staring down at the tiny cars far below, her suicidal resolve instantly replaced by pure terror.

Hilliard gritted his teeth. The veins on his forehead bulged. Blood dripped from his knuckles where he had struck the car window hours before.

He pulled. He summoned every ounce of strength in his massive frame and ignored the tearing in his shoulder. Every millimeter he dragged her upward felt like a serrated blade sawing through bone.

He hauled Jeraldine over the glass railing, and they both collapsed onto the balcony floor.

Jeraldine curled into a fetal position, sobbing hysterically, gasping for air.

Hilliard rolled onto his back and stared up at the grey, stormy sky. His right arm hung completely numb and useless at his side. His chest heaved.

He had saved her.

But as he lay there and the adrenaline began to recede, the video came back to him — the knife pressed against Jakobe's eye. And then Elia's small, sticky hand holding the caramel apple. Her trusting smile.

The realization of what he had to do crashed down on him like a collapsing building.

He slowly sat up. The physical pain in his shoulder was nothing compared to the absolute, crushing despair in his soul. He looked at his mother crying on the floor and felt no love — nothing but a cold, dead emptiness.

Chapter 372:

He stood, his right arm hanging limp, and walked back into the penthouse. He picked up his phone from the floor. The screen was cracked, but it still worked.

He dialed Gavin.

“Sir?” Gavin answered instantly.

Hilliard stared at his own reflection in the shattered glass of the balcony doors. He looked like a monster.

“Stop the trace,” he said. His voice was completely flat — the voice of a dead man.

“Sir? But we might —”

“I said stop the trace, Gavin.” His tone was absolute, terrifyingly calm. “Prepare the cold wallet. Contact the security team at the bunker.”

Hilliard closed his eyes. A single tear escaped, cutting a hot path down his cheek.

“Tell them to bring Elia back to the estate. We are making the trade.”

He hung up.

He turned around. Jeraldine was standing in the doorway, clutching her robe.

Hilliard looked at her. “You won,” he whispered. The words were hollow. “You saved your heir.”

He walked past her without looking back — walking toward his own execution, toward the moment he would have to look a five-year-old girl in the eyes and betray her.

The hallway outside Elia’s temporary bedroom was silent. Two armed guards stood like statues beside the heavy oak door.

Hilliard walked toward it. His right arm was bound tightly in a sling beneath his suit jacket, and the painkillers the estate doctor had injected were barely dulling the agony in his torn shoulder — but he welcomed the pain. He deserved it.

He stopped in front of the door and placed his left hand on the brass handle. He couldn’t push it down. His hand was shaking violently.

He was about to commit the ultimate betrayal. He was about to destroy the only pure thing in his life.

He took a ragged breath, pushed the handle, and opened the door.

The room was dimly lit by a single bedside lamp. Elia was not asleep. She was sitting cross-legged in the center of the massive king-sized bed, still wearing her sweater and jeans. In her small hands, she held the bare wooden stick from the caramel apple.

She looked up when the door opened. When she saw Hilliard, a small, tentative smile touched her lips. She patted the mattress beside her.

Hilliard's legs felt like lead. Every step toward the bed was like walking on broken glass.

He sat down on the edge of the mattress. The springs creaked under his weight. He kept his eyes fixed on the floor, unable to look at her face.

"Daddy, you look sad," Elia said softly. Her voice was tiny in the large room. "Is it because of Jakobe?"

Hilliard's breath hitched. She had heard the maids whispering.

He nodded slowly, his eyes burning. "Yes. He was taken by bad men. He is in danger."

Elia's brow furrowed in genuine concern. "Then we should go save him."

The innocent, brave statement felt like a serrated blade twisting in his gut.

He opened his mouth, trying to construct the lie, but his throat had closed entirely.

The bedroom door swung open wider.

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Jeraldine walked in. She had changed into a pristine black designer dress, her face a mask of cold, aristocratic stone. She walked to the foot of the bed and looked down at Elia.

“Yes, we are going to save him,” Jeraldine said, her voice devoid of warmth or empathy. “And you are how we are going to do it.”

Elia blinked, confused. She turned to Hilliard, searching his face for an explanation.

Hilliard squeezed his eyes shut. A muscle in his jaw jumped. He said nothing. His silence was the loudest confirmation he could have given.

“The bad men said they will only let Jakobe go if we send you to them,” Jeraldine continued, her words precise and cruel. “It is your duty to this family.”

The word “duty” meant nothing to a five-year-old. But the tone, the coldness, and the implication of being sent to “bad men” registered instantly.

Fear — raw and primal — flooded Elia’s wide eyes.

She scrambled backward on the bed until her back struck the headboard. Her small hand shot out and seized the sleeve of Hilliard’s suit jacket, gripping the fabric until her knuckles turned white.

“No,” Elia whimpered, shaking her head frantically. “No, I don’t want to go. Daddy, I’m scared.”

Hilliard finally opened his eyes.

He looked at his daughter’s terrified face — and watched the absolute trust in her eyes shatter into a million pieces.

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He reached over with his good hand and gently covered her small, shaking one. Her skin was ice cold.

“Elia, listen to me,” he said, his voice a hoarse, broken whisper. “It is just a game. You are going to pretend to be caught. And then I will come right behind you. I will bring you right back.”

It was a lie. A pathetic, transparent lie. He knew the Mercenary would never let her go.

Elia stared into his grey eyes.

Children possess an instinct for truth that adults lose. She saw the tears pooling in his eyes. She saw the defeat in his posture.

She knew he was lying.

But she didn't scream. She didn't cry.

The fear slowly drained from her face, replaced by a chilling, unnatural calm — the survival mechanism she had learned living in the shadows with Cailin. When there is no escape, you accept the pain.

She looked down at her hands. The silence stretched for a full minute while Hilliard felt his heart rotting inside his chest.

Finally, Elia looked back up.

"If I go," she asked, her voice barely a breath, "will Jakobe really come back?"

Hilliard swallowed the bile rising in his throat. He nodded once.

Elia looked at the wooden stick in her hand.

“Will you miss me?” she asked.

A sob tore violently from Hilliard’s throat. He couldn’t stop it. He nodded, tears spilling over his eyelashes and tracking silently down his cheeks.

“Yes,” he choked out. “Every second.”

Elia seemed to accept this. She slowly uncurled her fingers from his sleeve.

She held out the wooden stick.

“Can you keep this safe for me?” she whispered. “Until you come get me?”

Chapter 374:

It was the final, devastating blow. She was giving him the symbol of their secret — the symbol of her trust — even knowing he was sending her away.

Hilliard's hand shook violently as he took it. He closed his fingers around the wood and held it in his palm.

Elia slid off the tall bed and smoothed down her jeans. She didn't look back at him. She walked past Jeraldine, out the door, and toward the armed guards waiting to take her to the armored SUV — a tiny soldier marching to a firing squad.

Hilliard sat alone on the bed.

He did not cry. A terrifying, dead silence fell over him instead. He gripped the sticky piece of wood in his left hand and slowly closed his massive fist, squeezing until the wood splintered and drove jagged shards deep into his palm. Blood welled up, mixing with the caramel residue and wood debris, dripping silently onto the pristine white bedsheets.

He felt no physical pain at all. His soul had already been hollowed out, leaving nothing behind but a dark, bottomless abyss of self-hatred.

Cailin sat in the driver's seat of her black SUV, parked in the secure underground garage of Kegan's primary safehouse. The supervised visit was supposed to have ended exactly twenty minutes ago. Hilliard was a machine of routine — he never broke schedule. She tapped her fingers against the leather steering wheel, eyes locked on the heavily reinforced garage doors.

Ten more minutes passed. The garage remained empty.

Cailin's stomach tightened into a hard, painful knot. A cold prickle of dread crawled up her spine.

She grabbed her phone and dialed the tactical commander Kegan had assigned to shadow Elia. It rang four times and went to voicemail.

Cailin didn't wait. She dialed Kegan's direct emergency line. He picked up on the first ring.

"Where are they?" she demanded, her voice sharp and commanding.

"Cali." Kegan's voice was tense, background noise indicating he was already moving. "Hilliard's detail executed a sudden evasive maneuver right after the park. They locked down the estate and cited a Code Red Holloway blood-family emergency. My men were physically blocked at the perimeter gates by heavily armed SEALs."

Family emergency.

The words hit Cailin like a splash of ice water.

"He took her," she breathed, her knuckles turning white around the steering wheel.

She pulled out her phone and dialed Hilliard's private number. It rang for a long time before the line finally clicked open.

"What is it?" His voice came through the speaker — flat, cold, and completely devoid of emotion.

"Where is my daughter?" Cailin demanded, her voice vibrating with suppressed panic. "Kegan's men said you breached the agreement."

A two-second pause.

"Jakobe had an accident at the estate," Hilliard said smoothly, his tone pure, calculated business. "Jeraldine is hysterical. She wanted all the children back at the house. Elia is in her room. You don't need to worry."

It was a perfect, logical lie.

Chapter 375:

But Cailin had spent five years reading the micro-expressions and vocal tremors of international criminals. She heard the tiny, almost imperceptible catch in Hilliard's breath just before he said the word "room."

He was lying.

"I am coming to the estate right now," Cailin stated.

"I am in a board meeting, Cailin. Do not cause a scene." He hung up.

Cailin stared at the dead phone. Her blood ran cold.

She threw the car into drive and sped out of the underground garage, dialing Kegan back immediately.

"Kegan," she said, her voice dropping into the cold, lethal register of Cali — the underground queen. "I need your absolute best tech team to hack the Holloway estate's internal security grid. Right now. Find out exactly what time Hilliard left and track the GPS of his vehicle."

"I'm putting my top specialists on it. I'll patch their feed directly to your comms," Kegan replied grimly.

Twenty miles away, at that exact moment, a black armored SUV was moving down a desolate stretch of highway toward the Brooklyn waterfront.

Elia sat in the back seat, staring out the window at the grey, decaying industrial buildings rolling past. Hilliard sat beside her, his right arm in the sling, his jaw locked, his face a mask of stone. The silence in the car was heavy, thick with the smell of leather and impending death.

The SUV hit a pothole and bounced slightly.

Elia turned her head and looked at Hilliard's rigid profile.

"Daddy," she said softly.

It was a quiet, factual statement — not a plea, not a question. Just his name.

Hilliard's entire body flinched. The word tore through his chest. He turned his head slowly to look at her.

"You are taking me to play the game now, right?" Elia asked.

Hilliard couldn't speak. He gave a slow, agonizing nod.

Elia reached into the pocket of her jeans and pulled out a small, folded piece of paper. She smoothed it out on her lap. It was a drawing she had made in art class a few days ago, done in bright crayons. It showed a tall stick figure holding hands with a small stick figure, and between them, a massive bright red circle on a stick — a caramel apple.

She reached over and pressed the drawing into Hilliard's good hand.

"This is for you," Elia whispered. "So you don't forget to come get me."

Hilliard looked down at the crude, colorful drawing. His vision blurred. His chest heaved as he fought back a violent sob. The paper felt like it was burning his skin.

The SUV slowed.

Gavin Thorne turned from the front seat, his face pale. "Sir," he said quietly. "We have arrived at Pier 4."

Hilliard looked out the window. The massive, rusting corrugated metal doors of an abandoned warehouse loomed in the rain.

He folded the drawing carefully and shoved it into his suit pocket, right over his heart. Then he forced his face back into a mask of cold, dead ice.

Meanwhile, Cailin's SUV was weaving violently through traffic. She pulled out her encrypted laptop and opened a secure communication channel, waiting for Kegan's tech team to break through.

Chapter 376:

The heavy tires of the armored SUV crunched over broken glass and rusted metal as it pulled up to the gaping entrance of the abandoned warehouse at Pier 4.

The rain was coming down in sheets, turning the ground into thick, black mud. The smell of rotting fish and salt water filled the air.

Hilliard's phone buzzed. He looked at the screen — a text from the scrambled number.

Bring the girl and the cold wallet. Come in alone. If I see one guard step out of that car, the boy dies.

Hilliard locked the phone and looked at Gavin. "Stay here. Keep the engine running."

He grabbed the heavy silver Halliburton briefcase containing the encrypted hard drive with one hundred million dollars in Monero, opened his door, and stepped out into the freezing rain.

He opened the rear door and held out his left hand.

Elia looked at it. She didn't hesitate. She placed her small palm against his.

Hilliard pulled her out of the car and kept her tucked close to his side, shielding her from the rain with his body. Together they walked into the cavernous darkness of the warehouse.

The only light came from a few high-powered industrial halogen lamps suspended from the steel rafters, casting long, terrifying shadows across the concrete floor.

Three men stood in the center of the light.

They wore full black tactical gear — heavy Kevlar vests, thigh holsters, and black balaclavas covering their faces. Night-vision goggles sat pushed up on their helmets. They looked like professional death squads.

The man in the center stepped forward, a customized M4 assault rifle resting casually across his chest. “Stop right there, Hilliard.” His voice came through a small electronic scrambler clipped to his collar.

Hilliard stopped. He was thirty feet away. He kept Elia slightly behind his leg.

“Slide the case,” the Mercenary commanded.

Hilliard swung the heavy silver briefcase. It slid across the smooth, wet concrete and stopped perfectly at the Mercenary’s combat boots.

One of the other men knelt down, opened the case, pulled out a small diagnostic tablet, and plugged in the hard drive. He typed rapidly for ten seconds, then looked up and nodded. “The crypto is verified. One hundred million.”

The Mercenary chuckled — a cold, metallic sound. He reached into a pouch on his tactical vest and produced a small black plastic square: a GPS tracker. He tossed it underhand. It clattered across the concrete and came to rest near Hilliard’s feet.

“Jakobe is at those coordinates,” the Mercenary said. “My men are guarding him. In exactly twenty minutes, they will leave and the tracker will activate. You can go pick up your precious heir.”

Hilliard didn’t look at the tracker. He kept his eyes locked on the Mercenary.

“Now,” he said, his voice a low, dangerous growl that rolled through the empty space. “Give me my daughter.”

The Mercenary tilted his head. The halogen light caught the dead, flat look in his eyes behind the mask.

“I think you misunderstood the terms of the deal, Hilliard,” the Mercenary sneered.

Hilliard’s blood instantly froze. The muscles in his back locked up.

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“The deal was one for one,” the Mercenary continued. “You get the boy. I keep the girl. You leave.”

Hilliard’s jaw dropped a fraction of an inch. The sheer audacity of the betrayal struck him like a physical blow. He had been played.

“No,” Hilliard roared, his voice booming with fury.

He stepped in front of Elia, shielding her entirely with his body. His hand dropped instinctively toward the concealed holster under his jacket — forgetting, for a split second, that his right arm was useless in the sling.

A shockwave of blinding pain tore through his shoulder, forcing a choked gasp from his throat. His arm refused to obey, hanging dead at his side.

Instantly, the two other mercenaries raised their assault rifles.

Two bright red laser dots appeared directly on the center of Hilliard's chest.

"Take your hand out of your jacket. Slowly," the Mercenary ordered, raising his own rifle. "Or I cut you in half right now and take the girl anyway."

Hilliard froze. The red dots burned against his shirt. He was outgunned, injured, and outmaneuvered. If he moved, he died — and Elia was left alone with them regardless.

A terrifying, suffocating helplessness crushed his lungs.

Then he felt a small tug on the fabric of his trousers.

Elia stepped out from behind his leg.

She looked at the three massive men with guns and didn't cry. Her face was pale, but her eyes held the same dead, flat grey as Hilliard's. She looked up at him.

"Daddy," Elia whispered, her voice steady. "You have to go. You have to go save Jakobe."

She thought this was the game. She thought she was doing her part.

The innocence of her words was the most violent, agonizing torture Hilliard had ever experienced. It broke him — completely, utterly, beyond repair.

He looked down at her. His chest heaved. A tear slipped down his face and mixed with the rain.

Slowly, agonizingly, he uncurled his fingers from hers. The physical act of letting go of her hand felt like amputating his own soul.

He crouched down, ignoring the laser sights burning against his chest, and looked directly into her eyes.

"Remember what I told you," Hilliard whispered, his voice fracturing. "I will come back. I swear to God, I will come back."

He stood up.

He turned his back on his five-year-old daughter and walked toward the exit. Every step felt like wading through concrete. The sound of his own footsteps was deafening in his ears.

He walked out into the rain and got into the SUV.

The heavy metal doors of the warehouse slammed shut behind him with a massive, echoing boom, locking Elia inside the darkness.

Hilliard collapsed back against the leather seat. He pulled the crayon drawing from his pocket and crushed it against his chest. He looked at Gavin, his eyes completely black — filled with a psychotic, suicidal rage.

“Activate the GPS,” Hilliard commanded, his voice a demonic growl. “Alpha team, prepare to breach. We are getting Jakobe.”

Chapter 378:

Cailin sat in her SUV, parked under the dark shadow of a highway overpass in Queens. The glow of her laptop screen illuminated her pale, tense face.

“Cali, my tech specialists are in,” Kegan’s voice crackled through the encrypted earpiece. “They bypassed the estate’s firewall. The security logs show Hilliard left two hours ago. They tracked the GPS beacon on his primary vehicle.”

"Where did he go?" Cailin demanded, her fingers flying across the keyboard to sync with the data feed Kegan was pushing to her screen.

"The vehicle stopped at Pier 4 in Brooklyn for exactly twelve minutes," Kegan relayed, his voice tight. "Then it moved again. It's currently heading toward an abandoned power station in Queens."

Pier 4. Brooklyn.

Cailin's heart slammed against her ribs. The waterfront was notoriously controlled by organized crime and smugglers. It was a drop point.

"Did Elia leave Pier 4 with him?" Cailin asked, her voice trembling slightly.

A pause on the line. The sound of rapid typing echoed over the comms.

"My team accessed the DOT traffic cameras at the intersection outside the pier," Kegan said, his voice dropping very quiet. "They ran facial recognition through the tinted windows of the SUV as it left. Hilliard is in the back seat. Gavin Thorne is driving."

Kegan swallowed hard. "Elia is not in the car, Cailin."

The air vanished from the SUV.

Cailin stopped breathing. The world tilted violently on its axis.

He left her there. Hilliard had taken their daughter to a smuggler's pier and left her there.

The realization struck with the force of a freight train. The family emergency. The lies. This wasn't just a kidnapping. It was a trade.

A primal, terrifying roar of pure maternal fury erupted from Cailin's throat. She slammed her fists against the steering wheel so hard the horn blared into the empty night.

"Send me the schematics for Pier 4," Cailin ordered, her voice transforming into something cold, metallic, and lethal. "Kegan, prep your drone units. I am going in."

At that exact moment, five miles away, Hilliard's armored SUV smashed through the rusted chain-link fence of the abandoned Queens power station.

The GPS tracker had led them straight to a low concrete bunker attached to the main cooling tower. Hilliard didn't wait for the vehicle to stop completely. He kicked the door open and rolled out into the rain, his good hand gripping a heavy SIG Sauer pistol pulled from the car's armory.

“Breach!” Hilliard roared.

The SEAL team exploded from the trailing vehicles, moving with terrifying, synchronized precision. Two flashbang grenades shattered the bunker’s small windows. The deafening cracks echoed over the rain.

The SEALs kicked the steel door off its hinges and flooded the room. The firefight lasted less than ten seconds. The two low-level thugs hired to guard the boy barely had time to raise their weapons before they were neutralized.

Hilliard walked into the smoking, cordite-filled room.

Jakobe was tied to a chair in the center, exactly as he had appeared in the video — shaking violently, crying hysterically.

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Hilliard walked over, said nothing, and used his knife to slice the thick zip-ties binding Jakobe’s wrists and ankles.

“Uncle Hilliard!” Jakobe sobbed, throwing his arms around Hilliard’s waist. “I knew you would come! I knew it!”

Hilliard stood perfectly rigid. He didn’t hug the boy back. He felt nothing but a cold, sickening emptiness.

He grabbed Jakobe by the collar of his ruined shirt and hauled him toward the door.

Ten minutes later, they were back in the armored SUV, speeding away from the power station. A medic had bandaged the cut near Jakobe's eye, and the boy was drinking a bottle of water, his panic rapidly subsiding as the reality of his rescue settled over him.

The silence in the car was heavy.

Jakobe wiped his mouth and looked at Hilliard, who was staring out the window, his face a mask of stone.

"They were so scary," Jakobe said, his voice already recovering a hint of its usual arrogant whine. "But I told them they were making a mistake. I told them you would pay anything for me."

Hilliard didn't blink. He didn't respond.

Jakobe took another sip of water and leaned back against the plush leather seat, looking incredibly self-satisfied. "Did they hurt her?"

Hilliard's head snapped around. His grey eyes locked onto Jakobe. "What?"

"Elia," Jakobe said, shrugging. "I heard the guards talking. They said they were trading me for her. Did she cry a lot when you left her there?"

The casual, callous tone was like a spark hitting a pool of gasoline.

“She was brave,” Hilliard said, his voice a low, dangerous rumble.

Jakobe scoffed — a small, ugly sound. “Well, it’s what she’s supposed to do. Grandma Jeraldine always says she is just a spare. A bastard. I am the heir to the Holloway empire. Her life is worth less than mine. It was a fair trade.”

The words hung in the air.

Her life is worth less than mine.

The sheer, toxic, sociopathic entitlement of the boy — the exact entitlement Hilliard’s family had spent years breeding into him — struck Hilliard with absolute, devastating clarity. He had sacrificed an innocent, brave five-year-old girl, his own flesh and blood, to save this arrogant, soulless creature.

A violent, blinding rage exploded in his brain.

He moved faster than a striking snake.

Hilliard's massive left hand shot out and seized Jakobe by the throat. He slammed the boy backward, pinning him brutally against the bulletproof glass of the window.

Jakobe's eyes bulged in pure terror. The water bottle dropped from his hands, spilling across the leather seats. He gagged, his hands frantically clawing at Hilliard's iron grip.

"Sir! Stop!" Gavin yelled from the front seat, slamming on the brakes. The SUV skidded to a violent halt on the shoulder of the highway.

Hilliard didn't hear him. He leaned in close to Jakobe's face, his eyes completely black and devoid of any humanity.

"You are nothing," Hilliard snarled, his voice vibrating with demonic fury. "You are a parasite. You are the rot inside this family."

Chapter 380:

He squeezed tighter. Jakobe's face began to turn purple.

"If she dies," Hilliard whispered, the words dripping with lethal promise, "I will come back and I will kill you myself."

He shoved Jakobe violently away. The boy collapsed onto the seat, coughing and gasping, sobbing in absolute terror.

Hilliard turned his dead eyes to Gavin. “Freeze all of his trust funds. Liquidate his personal accounts. Strike his name from the Holloway family registry immediately. He is no longer the heir. He is nothing.”

He threw the car door open and stepped out into the freezing rain.

The rain lashed against Hilliard’s face, cold and biting.

He stood on the shoulder of the desolate highway, the red taillights of the SUV casting a dim glow over the steam rising from the wet asphalt. He looked back at the car. Jakobe was huddled in the corner of the back seat, crying pathetically, terrified of the man who had just saved him.

Gavin Thorne stepped out from the driver’s side, his hand resting cautiously on his holstered weapon.

“Sir,” Gavin said, his voice tight with alarm. “You need to get back in the car. We need to get the boy to a secure location.”

Hilliard turned his head slowly.

The look in his eyes made the seasoned security professional take a physical step backward. It was the look of a man who had completely snapped — who had burned his own soul to the ground and had nothing left to lose.

“Take him to my mother,” Hilliard ordered, his voice eerily calm, a dead, flat monotone far more terrifying than any shouting. “Tell her she has her heir. Tell her I am no longer the CEO of Holloway Group. I am done.”

Gavin’s eyes widened. “Sir, you can’t be serious. The board —”

“The board can burn in hell,” Hilliard said, and walked past him.

He moved toward the black, unmarked tactical SUV parked behind the Maybach — the vehicle the SEAL team used to transport their heavy ordnance. He opened the rear hatch and reached inside with his good hand, bypassing the standard rifles. He pulled out a heavy, matte-black tactical shotgun, grabbed a bandolier of slug shells and slung it over his good shoulder, then shoved a spare SIG Sauer pistol into the waistband of his trousers.

“Sir, what are you doing?” Gavin asked, panic rising in his voice. “We don’t have the manpower to assault Pier 4 right now. The Mercenary has a fortified position. We need to call the FBI.”

Hilliard slammed the hatch shut.

“If I call the FBI, they will execute her before the negotiators even arrive,” he said coldly.

He walked to the driver’s side of the tactical SUV and opened the door.

“I made a deal with the devil,” Hilliard said, staring out into the dark, rainy night. “Now I have to go kill him.”