

Second chance 381

Chapter 381:

He got in, slammed the door, and gunned the engine. The heavy vehicle tore away from the convoy, tires spinning in the mud, heading back toward Brooklyn. He was going alone. He was going to slaughter every single person in that warehouse, or he was going to die trying. Every micro-movement of the steering wheel sent a shockwave of agony through his torn right shoulder, but he welcomed the pain. It kept him awake. It kept the rage burning.

Ten miles away, Cailin's SUV was weaving violently through late-night Manhattan traffic, running red lights, her foot pinned to the floorboard.

Her encrypted phone sat on the dashboard, on speaker.

"Cali, I have satellite thermal imaging of Pier 4," Kegan's voice was rapid and professional. "The main warehouse is a massive heat sink. The corrugated metal roof is blocking detailed scans, but I can confirm at least four distinct heat signatures inside."

"Are they moving?" Cailin asked, eyes locked on the road.

"Negative. They are stationary near the center of the building," Kegan replied. "But Cali, the perimeter is heavily rigged. My tech team is detecting localized signal jammers and what appears to be tripwire laser grids at the main entrances."

Cailin's jaw tightened. The Mercenary was a professional. He was expecting a tactical breach from Hilliard's team.

"Kegan," she said. "Status on the drones."

"Two micro-drones are in the air, approaching the pier from the water side. Flying under the radar ceiling. I'll have visual on the rear loading docks in two minutes."

"Good."

She reached over to the passenger seat and unzipped the heavy black duffel bag Kegan had provided. Inside was a masterpiece of lethal engineering: a custom-built, suppressed Heckler & Koch MP7 submachine gun — compact, lightweight, capable of shredding Kevlar at close range. She pulled it out and placed it on her lap.

She was no longer Cailin Holloway, the broken wife. She was Cali — the woman who had survived the European underground.

Her phone beeped. Kegan's tech team had successfully bridged the connection. Cailin hit the execute command, forcefully hijacking the audio system of Hilliard's vehicle.

"Hilliard." Her voice suddenly blasted through the tactical SUV's interior speakers — cold, metallic, and dripping with pure, unadulterated hatred. "You better stop that goddamn car right now."

Hilliard slammed the brake. The SUV skidded before he regained control. He stared at the dashboard display, locked out and flashing a bypass code.

“Cailin,” Hilliard breathed, his voice rough against the roar of the engine. He didn’t ask how she had found him.

“You left her,” she hissed, her voice vibrating with lethal promise. “You traded our daughter for that piece of trash.”

Hilliard didn’t defend himself. He offered no excuses.

“I know,” he said. His voice cracked — the sound of absolute, agonizing defeat. “I am going back for her. I am ten minutes from the pier.”

“Do not go near that warehouse, Hilliard,” Cailin ordered. “You will trip their sensors and get her killed. You have done enough.”

“I am not asking for your permission,” Hilliard growled, suicidal determination bleeding through every word. “I am going to fix this.”

The line went dead. Hilliard had physically ripped the comms unit out of the dashboard.

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Cailin stared at the phone. A cold, terrifying realization hit her. Hilliard was going in blind. He was going in furious. He was going to walk straight into a kill zone, and his chaotic entry would trigger the Mercenary to execute Elia immediately.

"Kegan," Cailin called out. "Track Hilliard's vehicle. How far is he from the pier?"

"He's moving fast, Cali. He'll be there in eight minutes."

Cailin looked at her GPS. She was nine minutes away.

It was a race to the abyss. And if Hilliard arrived first, they were all going to die.

The rain had turned into a violent, blinding deluge by the time Hilliard's tactical SUV skidded to a halt two blocks from Pier 4.

He killed the headlights and the engine.

He sat in the dark for a moment, the rain hammering against the roof. His right shoulder throbbed with a sickening, rhythmic agony. Every breath felt like a rusted nail being driven into his collarbone. He ignored it.

He grabbed the heavy shotgun and, using his left hand, racked a shell into the chamber by bracing the weapon against his thigh. He stepped out into the storm.

He didn't approach down the main access road. He moved through the shadows of the rusting shipping containers, his boots sinking into the thick mud, until the massive dark silhouette of the warehouse loomed before him.

He found the main loading bay doors and saw it immediately — the faint red glow of laser tripwires crisscrossing the entrance. The Mercenary had locked the place down.

Hilliard moved along the side of the corrugated metal wall, searching for a blind spot.

He found a rusted ventilation grate near the ground, half-buried under overgrown dead weeds. He kicked it with his heavy combat boot. The rusted screws snapped. He kicked it again, and the metal panel fell inward with a dull clatter.

Hilliard dropped to his knees in the mud and squeezed his massive frame through the narrow opening. The jagged metal tore at his suit jacket and scraped across his back. He had to drag his useless right arm through last, biting his lip until it bled to keep himself from screaming as the torn tendons stretched.

He dropped onto the concrete floor inside the warehouse.

It was pitch black. The halogen lamps from earlier had been switched off. The only light came from lightning strobing through the skylights high above.

Hilliard crouched behind a stack of wooden pallets and listened.

Over the thunder of rain on the roof, he heard voices — low, muffled, coming from a small enclosed office structure built into the center of the warehouse floor.

He gripped the shotgun and began to move forward, silent as a ghost.

Outside, Cailin's SUV pulled into an alleyway three blocks from the pier. She didn't cut the engine. She grabbed the MP7, slung it over her shoulder, and stepped out into the rain in a sleek black Kevlar vest.

"Kegan, give me eyes," she whispered into her earpiece as she jogged toward the pier.

"Micro-drones are in position at the rear skylights," Kegan reported. "I have thermal visual on the interior."

Cailin pressed herself against a brick wall, studying the massive warehouse in the distance. "Talk to me."

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"There is a central office structure," Kegan said, his voice tense. "I see three adult heat signatures inside. All armed. And I see a small heat signature — it's Elia. She is tied to a chair."

Cailin's breath hitched. She was alive.

“Okay,” Cailin said, her voice turning to ice. “I am moving to the rear entrance.”

“Wait, Cali!” Kegan’s voice cut sharply into the comms. “My tech team just picked up a new heat signature. It breached the perimeter through the west wall ventilation shaft.”

Cailin froze. “Is it one of the mercenaries?”

“Negative,” Kegan said. “It’s a massive signature. Moving alone. Moving fast toward the central office.”

Cailin’s blood ran cold.

Hilliard.

He was already inside. He was moving toward the office. He was going to trigger a firefight directly on top of Elia.

“Kegan,” Cailin said, her voice dropping to a precise, controlled whisper. “Can you isolate Hilliard’s comms? Can you reach him?”

“He destroyed his unit, Cali. He is completely dark.”

Cailin closed her eyes for a fraction of a second.

Hilliard was a rogue element — injured, emotionally unhinged, and heavily armed. In a tactical hostage situation, an unpredictable, suicidal friendly was more dangerous than the enemy. If he breached that door, the Mercenary would shoot Elia instantly.

Cailin opened her eyes. The maternal instinct to protect her child overrode everything else without hesitation.

“Kegan,” she ordered. “Track that lone heat signature. Give me his exact coordinates.”

“Cali...” Kegan asked hesitantly. “What are you going to do?”

Cailin raised the MP7 and checked the suppressor.

“He is compromising the objective,” she said, her voice completely devoid of emotion. “He is the primary threat. I am going to put him down before he gets our daughter killed.”

Inside the warehouse, Hilliard crept closer to the central office. He could see the faint yellow light spilling under the door, and hear the Mercenary laughing.

Hilliard raised the shotgun with his left hand, forcing his dead right arm up to use his forearm as a makeshift brace to stabilize the heavy barrel. Cold sweat instantly soaked through his shirt as the torn rotator cuff screamed in protest.

He was ten feet from the door. He prepared to kick it open and unleash hell.

A shadow dropped silently from the steel rafters above him.

Before Hilliard could process the shift in the air, a heavy weight landed perfectly behind him, driving him down. In the same fraction of a second, a line of absolute, freezing cold pressed directly against his carotid artery.

A matte-black ceramic tactical knife, held with terrifying, surgical precision.

Hilliard went completely still. The agonizing throb in his torn shoulder was eclipsed entirely by the lethal threat at his throat.

“Dare to make a single sound, Hilliard,” Cailin’s voice whispered directly into his ear, cold as a Siberian winter, “and I swear to God, I will open your throat right here.”

Hilliard’s massive body went completely rigid. The agonizing throb in his torn right shoulder was momentarily eclipsed by the blade at his throat. He didn’t raise his hands. He just stared at the sliver of yellow light spilling from under the office door ten feet away.

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“They are in there,” Hilliard breathed, his voice a low, gravelly rasp.

“Listen closer, you idiot,” Cailin hissed, keeping the blade steady.

Hilliard strained his ears over the sound of the storm. The muffled voices coming from the office were repeating — the exact same laugh, the exact same heavy footstep, cycling on a loop. It was a digital audio recording playing through a cheap speaker.

Hilliard’s blood turned to ice.

Cailin shoved him forward and pulled her knife away. Hilliard didn’t hesitate. He lunged at the heavy rusted iron door and kicked it with the flat of his boot.

The door flew open and slammed against the interior wall with a deafening crash.

His shotgun was up, finger tight on the trigger. His eyes swept over a completely empty room. No mercenaries. No Elia. Only a cheap tape recorder sitting on a wooden crate, playing a looped conversation on repeat.

Hilliard dropped to his knees. A guttural roar of pure, animalistic despair tore from his throat. He tore through the empty cardboard boxes scattered across the concrete floor, his tactical flashlight cutting through darkness that revealed nothing but dust and a puddle of muddy water near a rear exit hatch.

He pressed his hand into the puddle. The water was freezing and smelled of the harbor. They had escaped by boat.

A suffocating panic seized his lungs. He pulled his left fist back and drove it with devastating force into the rusted steel pillar beside him. The impact rang like a gunshot in the empty warehouse. The skin across his knuckles split open, warm blood mixing with the cold rainwater dripping from his hair. He felt no pain — only the black, bottomless abyss of his failure.

Five miles away, the darkness was absolute.

Elia was shoved violently into the back of a moving, windowless box truck. The heavy metal doors slammed shut behind her, plunging her into a suffocating, pitch-black void that smelled of motor oil and old rust. The deafening click of the exterior padlock echoed inside the metal box.

The sound triggered a massive spike of primal terror. Her claustrophobia — born from years of hiding in small spaces to survive — completely took over.

She scrambled backward until her small spine struck the freezing corrugated metal wall. She pulled her knees to her chest and pressed her hands tightly over her ears. Her entire body shook with violent, uncontrollable tremors.

Outside the truck, standing in the pouring rain, the mercenary known as Bloodhound lit a cheap cigarette and exhaled a thick cloud of smoke into the damp air.

The mercenary boss walked up beside him, tapping a rugged tablet. "The Monero crypto is washed and in the cold wallet. The Holloway money is ours."

Bloodhound peered through a small rusted ventilation hole in the side of the truck at the tiny girl shivering in the dark corner. A cruel, sadistic smirk crossed his scarred face.

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"Take the cash and scatter," the boss ordered coldly. "We transfer the package to the second team at the chemical plant. This is their problem now."

The truck's diesel engine roared to life. The vehicle lurched forward violently.

Elia was thrown sideways. Her forehead slammed hard against the exposed metal ribbing of the wall. Warm blood welled up from the cut and dripped down into her eyebrow.

The pain ripped a small, pathetic whimper from her throat. But she bit down hard on her bottom lip, tasting copper, and squeezed her eyes shut. Hilliard's face flashed in her mind. His deep voice, echoing in the warehouse: I will come back. I swear to God, I will come back.

It was a lie. He had left her in the dark.

Back at the pier, Hilliard stood alone in the empty warehouse, his shirt soaked with sweat and rain. He pulled his encrypted satellite phone from his pocket with a shaking left hand.

"Sir?" Gavin answered immediately.

"Call all the private military contractors," Hilliard ordered, his voice like sandpaper grinding against glass. "I want every Black Hawk helicopter we own in the air. Lock down the entire New York harbor. Nothing gets in or out."

"Sir, you can't do that," Gavin warned, his voice spiking with panic. "A military-grade blockade over civilian airspace will trigger an immediate FBI and Homeland Security response. They will seize the company assets."

"I don't care!" Hilliard roared, the sound tearing his throat raw. "Let the entire Holloway empire burn to the ground. Find my daughter!"

He hung up. He stumbled backward, his heavy boots slipping in the mud, and looked down at his bloody hands. The horrifying reality of what he had done finally crushed him. He had pushed an angel into a meat grinder to save a parasite.

The box truck pulled into a completely abandoned industrial zone in Brooklyn. Tall, decaying cooling towers loomed in the darkness like giant tombstones.

Bloodhound ripped the rear doors open and shone a blinding military-grade tactical flashlight directly into Elia's face. The intense light burned her eyes. She cried out and threw her hands up to shield them.

He reached in, grabbed the collar of her soft sweater, and dragged her from the truck. He threw her onto the wet concrete floor of a subterranean basement beneath the chemical plant.

The air down there was thick with the smell of rotting matter and black mold. Rusted chains hung from the ceiling.

Elia's body gave out. Her breathing became rapid and shallow, and a severe stress-induced fever spiked instantly, burning her skin and blurring her vision.

Bloodhound pulled an old Polaroid camera from his tactical vest and aimed it at Elia, who was curled in a small, pathetic ball on the filthy floor. The flash lit the basement for a single, brutal second. The camera whirled and spat out a square photograph — a tiny, bloodied, terrified girl discarded in a nightmare.

The boss snatched it up. "Scan it. Send it through the Dark Web node to the employer. We are done here."

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As Elia's consciousness finally slipped away into the dark, her small fingers remained locked in a death grip around the bare wooden stick of the caramel apple — the only thing anchoring her to the world above.

Hilliard climbed back into his tactical SUV and slammed his foot to the floor. The heavy vehicle tore out of the pier like a wounded animal, hunting blindly in the dark.

At that same moment, miles away, Cailin's black bulletproof SUV accelerated to eighty miles per hour, aimed directly at the solid bronze gates of the Holloway estate.

The heavy reinforced steel bumper of Cailin's SUV slammed into the ornate bronze gates of the Holloway estate with the force of a freight train.

The deafening crash shattered the quiet wealth of the neighborhood. The metal hinges screamed and snapped. The massive gates were ripped from their stone pillars and crashed onto the pristine driveway.

Alarms shrieked into the night air.

Cailin didn't touch the brakes. The tires screeched violently against the wet marble, leaving thick black skid marks as she slammed the gear shift into park at the base of the grand front steps.

She kicked her door open and stepped out into the pouring rain — a black tactical windbreaker, her face a mask of absolute, terrifying ice. In her right hand she held a Glock 19 fitted with a long black suppressor.

Four armed estate security guards rushed out of the front doors, their hands moving toward their holstered weapons.

"Stop right there!" the lead guard yelled.

Cailin didn't blink. She raised the Glock and pulled the trigger twice.

Pfft. Pfft.

The suppressed shots were barely audible, but the impact was devastating. The bullets shattered the expensive marble tiles exactly one inch from the lead guard's boots. Sharp fragments of stone exploded upward, tearing into his trousers.

All four men froze. The sheer, predatory killing intent radiating from Cailin's eyes paralyzed them. They were paid to protect property — not to die. They raised their hands slowly and stepped back.

Cailin walked past them, her boots leaving muddy footprints on the white marble steps.

The head butler was standing near the grand staircase inside the chandelier-lit foyer — the same man who had lied to her face hours ago about a family emergency. He clutched a walkie-talkie, his hand shaking violently as he tried to call for backup.

Cailin crossed the room like a ghost.

Before he could press the transmission button, she seized the lapels of his perfectly tailored suit and slammed him backward against the silk-wallpapered wall with terrifying force. She pressed the hot muzzle of the suppressor directly against the center of his forehead. The burning metal made him gasp. The walkie-talkie slipped from his fingers and clattered onto the floor.

“Where is my daughter?” Cailin asked. Her voice was completely flat, devoid of any human emotion.

The butler swallowed hard, sweat beading on his upper lip. “Madam, I... I told you. Mr. Holloway took her to a secure location because of the family emergency. It is protocol —”

Cailin didn’t let him finish.

She lowered the gun six inches and pulled the trigger.

Pfft.

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The bullet ripped through the meat of the butler’s left thigh. He let out a blood-curdling, agonizing scream and collapsed onto the pristine marble floor, clutching his leg as dark red blood rapidly soaked through his trousers and pooled on the white stone.

The illusion of Holloway wealth and civility shattered in an instant.

Cailin crouched beside him and pressed the muzzle against his right kneecap. Her eyes were dead.

“Next question,” she whispered. “Where exactly did Hilliard take her?”

The physical agony and the absolute certainty that she would follow through shattered the butler's conditioning completely. He sobbed, tears and mucus running down his face.

"Pier 4... Brooklyn!" he shrieked, his words broken and desperate. "He came back an hour ago with Master Jakobe! Only him! The girl — she wasn't in the car! He left her! He left her there! I swear, that's all I know, please!"

The words hit Cailin's brain like a physical sledgehammer.

The air was violently sucked out of her lungs. The grand foyer spun around her.

She couldn't process it. The man who had sworn on his life to protect their daughter. The man who had wept in the hospital. He had actively, willingly handed their five-year-old child to professional killers.

Cailin's hand trembled — not from weakness, but from a rage so profound it threatened to tear her apart from the inside. She grabbed the butler by his hair and wrenched his head back. "What did he do at Pier 4?" Her voice dropped to a low, guttural snarl — the sound of a predator cornering its prey.

The butler shook his head frantically, his sobs dissolving into incoherent wails of pain. "I don't know! I swear to God, I don't know the details! He just — he came back with the boy! And not the girl! He left her!"

Cailin let go of his hair. He slumped to the floor, groaning.

A wave of intense, acidic nausea struck her. Her internal organs felt as though they were twisting into knots.

She pulled her encrypted phone from her pocket with a trembling hand and hit Hilliard's number.

He answered on the first ring. The line filled with the sound of a roaring engine and his heavy, ragged breathing. He said nothing.

Cailin gripped the phone so hard the plastic casing creaked. She forced the words past the bile in her throat.

"You handed her over," she said. It wasn't a question.

The silence on the other end was absolute. Ten agonizing seconds in which Hilliard said nothing. That dead, heavy silence was the most brutal, unforgiving confession in the world.

At that moment, her phone vibrated against her ear. An encrypted email notification appeared — sender ID a simple pre-arranged code from Kegan's team, routed through Aron's secure server.

Cailin pulled the phone away and opened the message.

Red alert. Package location compromised. New photo on the network. Below it was a set of GPS coordinates for a Brooklyn industrial zone.

She tapped the attachment.

The Polaroid loaded on her screen.

It was Elia. Lying on a filthy concrete floor, her face covered in blood and dirt, looking like a discarded and broken doll.

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Every pixel of that image acted like a serrated blade carving through Cailin's heart. The gash on her daughter's forehead made Cailin's vision go black at the edges.

The primal, biological instinct of a mother watching her child suffer ripped a horrific, guttural scream from her throat — a sound of absolute, world-ending agony.

She didn't say another word to Hilliard. She ended the call.

She gripped the phone fiercely, her knuckles going bone-white. The glass screen spider-webbed and cracked under the pressure, sharp splinters biting into her palm — but she didn't destroy it. She needed the coordinates.

She took one slow, deep, shuddering breath, drawing the chaotic, agonizing heartbreak deep into her lungs, and exhaled nothing but a cold, apocalyptic fury.

She was no longer a mother in mourning. She was a reaper.

Cailin walked out of the Holloway estate, leaving the bleeding butler and the terrified guards behind her. She didn't look back.

She climbed into the driver's seat of her armored SUV, ripped the silk scarf from her neck, and wrapped it tightly around her left hand to bind the deep cut from the shattered phone glass. She didn't feel the sting.

Her eyes were locked on the secondary GPS monitor in the dashboard. The coordinates from Kegan's team pulsed like a red heartbeat over the Brooklyn industrial zone.

She slammed the accelerator to the floor. The heavy SUV roared out of the driveway and merged violently into the slick, rain-soaked Manhattan traffic.

The backup comms unit in the center console flashed green. Kegan's transatlantic encrypted line forced its way through.

"Cali," Kegan's voice barked, tight with a rare, unfiltered panic. "My team sent the data. I know where she is. You need to pull over immediately."

Cailin kept one hand on the steering wheel, weaving the massive vehicle between two semitrucks with inches to spare.

“Too late, Kegan,” she said, her voice a dead, flat monotone. “My daughter is waiting for me.”

“Listen to me!” Kegan roared over the static. “My tactical team is already airborne. They are dropping in ten minutes. You wait for them! The men holding Elia are cartel-level cleaners. They are heavily armed and expecting a breach.”

Cailin stared through the windshield as the wipers slashed back and forth through the heavy rain.

“If I wait ten minutes,” she said, her tone terrifyingly calm, “Elia won’t even be a corpse. They will make her disappear.”

She reached down and ripped the comms wire from the console, killing Kegan’s voice instantly. She buried the accelerator, the speedometer climbing past 120 miles per hour.

Miles away, Hilliard sat motionless in his tactical SUV on the shoulder of the highway, staring at his phone. The call had ended.

The absolute, crushing weight of Cailin’s silence drowned him. He knew, with terrifying certainty, that he had permanently destroyed the only woman he had ever loved.

His secondary radio crackled. Gavin's voice cut through.

"Sir, our cyber team intercepted a Dark Web ping. We have a visual on the girl. The IP address is localized to an abandoned chemical plant in the Brooklyn industrial sector."

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Hilliard's head snapped up. The hollow deadness in his eyes was instantly replaced by a blood-red, psychotic rage.

"Send the coordinates to my dash," he ordered, his voice a demonic growl. "Tell the assault teams to converge on that location. Shoot anything that moves."

Cailin's SUV tore off the highway exit and plunged into the dark, decaying streets of the Brooklyn industrial zone. The streetlights were shattered. The roads were lined with rotting garbage and graffiti-covered brick walls.

She hit a button on the dashboard. A hidden compartment beneath the passenger seat slid open — the emergency tactical cache Kegan had pre-staged in all her vehicles for a worst-case scenario. She checked the gear while steering with her knees. Two spare magazines for the Glock. A serrated tactical folding knife. Three flashbang grenades. She shoved them all into the pockets of her vest.

The road ahead was blocked by a line of rusted, water-filled oil drums.

Cailin didn't touch the brakes. She braced against the steering wheel and drove straight through them. The heavy steel bumper smashed the drums aside like bowling pins, sending a spray of filthy water into the air.

As she burst into the open dirt lot of the chemical plant, three distinct red laser beams sliced through the rain and locked directly onto her windshield.

The perimeter guards had spotted her.

Cailin yanked the steering wheel hard to the left and pulled the emergency brake simultaneously. The heavy SUV went into a massive, sliding drift through the thick mud.

A hail of automatic gunfire erupted from the darkness.

Heavy-caliber bullets hammered against the side of the vehicle — the impacts sounding like sledgehammers against an anvil. The bulletproof glass held, but thick white cracks bloomed instantly across the passenger window.

Cailin didn't panic. Her eyes tracked the muzzle flashes in the dark. Two shooters, elevated on a rusted catwalk to her right.

She kicked her door open and threw herself out of the moving vehicle. She hit the mud, rolling perfectly to absorb the impact, and came up crouching behind the rear tire.

She raised the suppressed Glock 19 and let muscle memory take over.

Pfft. Pfft.

Two shots. Two bodies dropped from the catwalk and crashed into the mud with a heavy, wet thud.

But the gunfire had triggered the main alarm. A piercing, mechanical siren began to wail from inside the massive concrete factory building.

The stealth approach was dead. It was going to be a bloodbath.

Cailin took a slow breath, filling her lungs with the smell of cordite and wet earth. She checked her watch. Twenty-two minutes had passed since Kegan's team sent the photo.

She drew the tactical folding knife from her vest, gripped it in a reverse hold, and melted into the shadows along the factory wall.

Inside the factory's control room, the mercenary boss stared at the security monitors and watched the woman in black execute his perimeter guards with terrifying efficiency. He narrowed his eyes.

"Pull everyone back to the main floor," he ordered. "Drag the kid out here. Use her as a shield."

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Cailin moved silently to a rusted side door, checked the handle — locked — stepped back, and drove the heel of her combat boot directly into the locking mechanism. The door flew open.

She stepped onto the cavernous factory floor.

The lights snapped on, blindingly bright.

Cailin froze.

Thirty feet away, standing in a semicircle, were twelve heavily armed mercenaries with assault rifles aimed directly at her chest.

And hanging from a thick nylon rope at the center of the room, her small feet dangling inches above the floor, was Elia.

Twelve red laser dots danced across Cailin's black tactical vest.

Her eyes ignored the guns. Her gaze locked entirely on Elia, suspended from the thick nylon rope tied around her small waist. The girl's sweater was stained dark with blood and mud. Her head hung limply forward, chin resting on her chest — a fragile, broken bird caught in a snare.

Cailin's heart seized in her chest. A sharp, agonizing pain radiated down her left arm. The urge to raise her gun and slaughter every man in the room was a roaring fire in her brain, but cold, hard logic poured ice over it.

If she fired a single shot, twelve automatic rifles would turn Elia into mist.

Cailin took a slow, deep breath and forced her heart rate down. She raised both hands above her head.

She opened her right hand. The Glock 19 slipped from her fingers and clattered onto the hard concrete floor.

The mercenary boss stepped out from behind the wall of armed men and let out a harsh, mocking laugh. He flicked his wrist. Two massive guards rushed forward. One drove the butt of his rifle hard into the backs of Cailin's knees.

She dropped onto the concrete. Before she could react, the second guard wrenched her arms behind her back. The sharp plastic teeth of a heavy-duty zip-tie bit deep into the skin of her wrists and locked tight. Warm blood immediately trickled down her hands.

The boss walked up to her and used the hot barrel of his rifle to tilt her chin upward.

"The great Holloway bitch," he sneered, his eyes filled with cruel amusement. "Walking right into the slaughterhouse."

Cailin stared back at him. Her eyes were not human — flat, dead pools of freezing water, devoid of fear or pleading, holding nothing but the quiet promise of absolute violence.

The boss felt a sudden, uncomfortable chill crawl up his spine. He didn't like that look.

"Put a hood on her," he barked, stepping back. "Throw her in the shipping container with the brat. We'll deal with them when the extraction team arrives."

A rough, foul-smelling canvas sack was shoved violently over Cailin's head. Darkness swallowed everything. Rough hands grabbed her under the armpits and dragged her across the concrete floor, her boots scraping against the ground. She heard the heavy screech of rusted metal hinges.

She was thrown forward. She hit a hard, corrugated steel floor, the impact knocking the wind out of her.

A moment later, a small, soft body was tossed in beside her.