

## **Second chance 391**

### Chapter 391:

The heavy metal doors slammed shut. The iron latch dropped into place with a deafening boom.

The silence that followed was absolute.

Cailin didn't waste a second. She curled her body into a tight ball in the pitch black, dragging her bound wrists down her legs toward the heel of her right combat boot. Hidden inside the thick rubber sole was a micro-serrated titanium blade — standard issue for Kegan's top operatives.

She found the edge. She pressed the zip-tie against it and began to saw. The plastic resisted, cutting deeper into her own flesh, but she ignored the burning pain.

Two minutes later, the zip-tie snapped.

Cailin ripped the canvas hood from her head. Her eyes adjusted to the thin slivers of light bleeding through rusted holes in the container's roof.

She scrambled across the metal floor. "Elia!"

She found her daughter huddled in the corner. She pulled the tiny girl into her arms and pressed Elia's face against her chest.

Elia's skin was radiating heat like a furnace. The fever was raging.

Elia slowly opened her eyes. She looked at Cailin's face in the dark, and tears instantly spilled over her lashes, cutting clean tracks through the dirt on her cheeks. She reached up and weakly grabbed the collar of Cailin's tactical vest.

"Mommy," Elia rasped, her voice broken and barely audible. "You have to run. They have big guns."

The absolute selflessness of her five-year-old daughter shattered the last of Cailin's composure. Hot tears flooded her eyes. She kissed Elia's burning forehead again and again.

"Mommy is not going anywhere," Cailin whispered fiercely. "I am taking you home."

She quickly ran her hands over Elia's body. No bullet wounds. No broken bones. The blood on her head was from a superficial cut. The real danger was the stress-induced fever and shock.

Cailin looked at the heavy steel doors. She could hear the footsteps of at least four guards pacing outside. She had no gun. She couldn't shoot her way out. She had to use psychology.

She leaned down and pressed her lips to Elia's ear. "Baby, listen to me. We are going to play a game. I need you to close your eyes and pretend to be asleep. Do not move, no matter what you hear. Do you understand?"

Elia was terrified, but her trust in her mother was absolute. She gave a tiny nod and closed her eyes, letting her body go limp.

Cailin took a deep breath, crawled to the steel doors, and began to pound her fists against the metal with everything she had.

"Help!" she screamed, her voice laced with raw, hysterical panic. "Help me! She's not breathing! My baby is dying!"

The footsteps outside stopped instantly.

"She's dead!" Cailin shrieked, her voice cracking and echoing inside the metal box. "Your billion-dollar hostage is dead! You're going to lose the money!"

The words struck the guards exactly where she intended. Greed and fear of their boss's wrath overrode their tactical training.

Muffled curses erupted outside. The heavy iron latch was violently thrown back.

Chapter 392:

The right door creaked open a few inches. A guard peered inside, sweeping a flashlight across the floor, trying to find the girl.

He never saw Cailin.

She was pressed flat against the wall directly beside the hinge, invisible in the shadow. The moment the guard leaned his head through the gap, Cailin exploded from the darkness like a coiled viper — her hands shooting out, seizing his wrist with an iron grip.

Cailin's grip on the guard's wrist was absolute.

Using his own forward momentum, she yanked him violently into the pitch-black container. He stumbled, lost his balance, and dropped the flashlight.

In the fraction of a second that he pitched forward, Cailin's right hand whipped out. The serrated tactical folding knife flashed in a sliver of light.

The blade sliced cleanly across the guard's carotid artery.

Warm, thick blood sprayed across the rusted corrugated wall in a high-pressure arc. The guard didn't even have time to scream. His hands flew to his throat, and he collapsed heavily onto the metal floor, his life draining away in seconds.

The second guard standing outside heard the scuffle. He yelled in panic and raised his assault rifle, preparing to spray the interior of the container.

Cailin didn't hesitate. She grabbed the dying guard's heavy Kevlar vest and shoved his body out the door.

The dead weight slammed into the second guard, knocking his rifle barrel upward. A burst of automatic fire shattered a high window above them.

Using the falling body as cover, Cailin dropped low and swept her right leg out in a brutal, bone-cracking arc that took the second guard's knees out from under him. He crashed onto the wet concrete. Before he could draw a breath, she drove her knee into his sternum, pinned him down, reversed her grip on the knife, and drove it straight into his chest.

Two kills in under four seconds.

Cailin pulled the blade free and wiped the blood on the dead man's uniform with terrifying calm. She snatched the dropped assault rifle from the ground, slapped the magazine to check it — full — and turned back into the container.

She scooped Elia up into her left arm. "Keep your eyes closed, baby," she whispered, pressing Elia's face into her shoulder so she wouldn't see the bodies.

Cailin stepped out into the rain-soaked courtyard of the chemical plant.

Fifty yards away, parked near the main gate, sat a black, heavily modified Jeep Wrangler.

The gunfire had alerted the mercenary boss. He stepped out onto the second-floor catwalk and looked down at the courtyard — two of his men bleeding out on the concrete, and Cailin sprinting toward the Jeep with the child.

He raised his radio to his mouth, thumb hovering over the transmit button.

Then his encrypted phone buzzed. A flash alert from his scout team: HOSTILE QRF. HEAVY ARMOR. ETA FIVE MIKES.

Holloway's private army. Five minutes out.

Chapter 393:

He watched the woman moving below with lethal, military precision. She had just slaughtered two of his men with her bare hands. A firefight now would pin them here until the main force arrived and turned it into a massacre. The Monero transfer had cleared completely. He had his money.

It was no longer a business decision. It was a survival imperative.

"Hold fire," the boss ordered into the radio, his voice tight. "All teams, pull back to the north exit. We are ghosts. Now."

The laser sights tracking Cailin's back vanished.

She felt the shift in the air. She didn't know why they had stopped, but she didn't stop to question it.

She reached the Jeep, smashed the driver's side window with the butt of the rifle, unlocked the door, and gently laid the unconscious Elia in the passenger seat.

She slid behind the wheel and ripped the plastic casing off the steering column. A flash of Kegan's brutal urban survival training surfaced in her mind — when you have no keys, you make one. She grabbed the red and black ignition wires, used the micro-serrated tip of her knife to slice away the rubber insulation, exposed the copper, and sparked them together.

The Jeep's engine roared to life.

Cailin slammed it into gear. The vehicle tore across the courtyard, smashed through the rusted chain-link gate, and launched onto the dark, flooded streets of Brooklyn.

She pushed the accelerator to the floor and glanced at Elia. The little girl was pale as a sheet, her breathing shallow.

"Hold on, Elia. We are going to the hospital," Cailin choked out, tears mixing with the rain blowing in through the shattered window.

She drove for two miles, the adrenaline slowly fading and desperate, burning hope rising to take its place. They had made it.

As she approached a desolate four-way intersection beneath a highway overpass, the darkness was suddenly obliterated.

Three blindingly bright sets of LED high beams flicked on simultaneously. Three massive, matte-black armored SUVs pulled out from the side streets, forming an impenetrable steel wall across the intersection.

These weren't the mercenary team's vehicles. They were military-grade.

The sunroof of the center SUV slid open. A man in a black skull mask rose from the opening, a heavy .50 caliber machine gun mounted before him. The massive barrel lowered, aiming directly at the Jeep's engine block.

Cailin slammed both feet onto the brake pedal. The Jeep locked up, hydroplaning across the wet asphalt, tires screaming as white smoke poured from the rubber. The vehicle skidded to a violent halt thirty feet from the armored wall.

Cailin's blood turned to ice.

The first team had let her go because they were in it for the money.

This was the second team. Charla's real team. They weren't here for a hostage exchange.

They were here to execute them both.

The deafening roar of the .50 caliber machine gun ripped the rainy night in half.

Massive, armor-piercing rounds slammed into the front of the Jeep. The engine block exploded in a shower of sparks and boiling coolant. The hood was shredded like wet paper.

Chapter 394:

At the exact moment the firing started, Cailin unbuckled her seatbelt and threw her entire body over the center console. She shoved Elia down into the passenger side footwell and covered the small girl completely with her own Kevlar-vested torso.

The windshield shattered inward, raining thousands of glass cubes down across Cailin's back.

The gunfire stopped as abruptly as it had begun. The Jeep was dead, thick black smoke pouring from the ruined engine, the blinding high beams of the three armored SUVs still locked on the wreckage.

Four men dressed in black tactical gear and skull masks stepped out of the vehicles. They moved with terrifying, synchronized precision, assault rifles raised, advancing on the smoking Jeep.

Cailin lay pinned over Elia, ears ringing violently from the concussive force of the heavy machine gun.

She grabbed the assault rifle she had taken from the factory and checked the magazine. Less than ten rounds.

She knew, with cold clarity, that this was the end. The firepower arrayed against her was insurmountable. But the maternal fire burning in her chest refused to be extinguished.

She pushed herself up slightly and rested the barrel on the shattered window frame. She didn't aim — she just pulled the trigger.

A short burst dropped the lead killer, the rounds punching through his thigh.

The response was instantaneous and overwhelming. A hail of return fire tore through the Jeep's doors.

A searing, white-hot pain sliced across Cailin's left shoulder. A bullet had grazed her deltoid, tearing through the muscle. Warm blood immediately soaked the sleeve of her tactical jacket.

Popular stories on .com

The rifle clicked empty. The bolt locked back.

Cailin threw the useless weapon out the window and curled her body tighter around Elia, squeezing her eyes shut, waiting for the final shot.

The driver's side door was violently ripped open.

Two massive hands seized her by the collar of her vest. She was hauled out of the vehicle and thrown face-first onto the wet, muddy asphalt. A heavy combat boot slammed down on the center of her back, pinning her to the ground.

Another killer reached into the passenger side and grabbed the unconscious Elia by the back of her sweater, hauling her out like a piece of luggage.

"Don't touch her!" Cailin screamed, the sound tearing her throat raw. She thrashed wildly, fingers clawing at the asphalt, straining toward her daughter.

The killer standing over her raised his rifle and drove the heavy steel stock directly into the back of Cailin's skull.

A blinding flash of white light detonated behind her eyes. The world went dark.

A violent, freezing shock jolted Cailin awake.

She gasped, her lungs expanding painfully as ice-cold water dripped from her hair and face. She blinked rapidly, trying to clear the blurry, spinning room.

She was sitting in a heavy rusted iron chair, wrists and ankles bound tightly to the metal frame with thick leather straps. The room was a windowless, subterranean concrete box. The air smelled strongly of bleach and old blood.

What made her stomach drop into a bottomless abyss were the four corners of the ceiling. Mounted in each one was a high-definition camera, the small red recording lights blinking steadily in the gloom.

Chapter 395:

The leader of the killers stood before her, still wearing his skull mask, casually twirling a polished surgical scalpel between his fingers.

“Where is Elia?” Cailin demanded. Her voice was hoarse, but her eyes burned with lethal, unyielding hatred.

The killer didn’t answer. He walked to a small metal table and pressed a button on an intercom unit.

Instantly, the sound of a child screaming filled the concrete room.

“Mommy! Where are you? I’m scared!” Elia’s voice was distorted by the speaker, but the primal terror in it was unmistakable.

The sound hit Cailin like a bullet to the heart. She lunged forward, the heavy iron chair rattling violently against the floor as she strained against the leather straps.

“Elia! Mommy is here! I’m here!” she screamed at the concrete wall, tears of absolute desperation streaming down her face.

The killer smiled beneath his mask. He hit the button again, cutting off the audio. The silence was agonizing.

He walked back to Cailin and trailed the flat edge of the cold scalpel slowly down her cheek.

“Listen closely, Cali,” he whispered, his voice dripping with sadistic pleasure. “The employer paid a premium for this contract. She doesn’t just want you dead. She wants your soul destroyed.”

He pointed the scalpel at the blinking red lights on the cameras.

“Everything that happens in this room is being live-streamed to a VIP encrypted channel on the Dark Web. Your employer wants to watch you break. She wants to see the great Holloway bitch beg for mercy.”

Cailin's breathing hitched. The realization was sickening. Charla. Charla was sitting somewhere safe, watching through a screen, orchestrating her ultimate humiliation.

The killer pressed the sharp tip of the scalpel against the hollow of Cailin's throat. A tiny bead of blood welled up.

"If you fight me," he warned softly, "if you look away from the cameras — I will go into the next room, and I will start cutting pieces off that little girl while you listen."

Cailin's entire body went rigid. The threat paralyzed her completely. She stared at the blinking red light, trapped in a nightmare from which there was no waking up.

The heavy industrial halogen lights suspended above the iron chair snapped on with a loud electrical hum.

The blinding, clinical white light assaulted Cailin's eyes. She squeezed them shut, her head throbbing violently from the rifle butt strike.

The killer walked to a laptop sitting on a metal cart and typed a quick sequence of commands. A green progress bar filled the screen, followed by a bold text prompt: VIP ENCRYPTED STREAM CONNECTED.

Miles away, in a sprawling multi-million-dollar penthouse overlooking Central Park, Charla English sat on a white velvet sofa, holding a crystal glass of expensive Merlot. Her eyes were fixed on the massive flat-screen television on the wall, watching the live feed of Cailin strapped to the chair. A sick, euphoric smile stretched across Charla's face.

## Chapter 396:

Back in the dungeon, the killer turned away from the laptop. He reached onto the cart and picked up a heavy black leather whip. Woven into the thick leather were dozens of small, rusted iron barbs.

He cracked it against the concrete floor. The sound was like a gunshot.

He walked up to Cailin and hit the intercom button. Elia's terrified sobbing instantly filled the room.

"Open your eyes," the killer ordered. "Look at the camera. Start the show."

Cailin's jaw locked. She tasted the metallic tang of blood as she bit down on the inside of her cheek. For Elia, she forced her eyes open and stared directly into the camera lens in front of her.

The killer swung his arm back and brought the whip down with brutal force. The iron barbs tore through Cailin's tactical jacket and sliced deep into the flesh of her left shoulder.

The agony was blinding. Her entire body convulsed violently against the leather straps. Her lungs seized, but she refused to give them the satisfaction of a scream. A low, guttural grunt escaped through her clenched teeth.

In the penthouse, Charla frowned. She set her wine glass down and pressed a button on a secure microphone linked to the killer's earpiece.

"I want to hear her scream," Charla's voice hissed. "Flay her until she begs."

The killer nodded slightly and adjusted his grip on the whip. He brought it down again. And again. And again.

He was a professional torturer. He aimed specifically for areas with the highest concentration of nerve endings, carefully avoiding major arteries. The whip shredded her jacket, tearing into her ribs, her back, her thighs.

Within minutes, Cailin's clothes were in tatters. Her skin was crisscrossed with horrific, bleeding lacerations. Sweat and blood mixed together, running down her face and dripping onto the cold concrete floor. Her breathing had become ragged, shallow gasps. Every muscle in her body screamed in agony.

But her eyes never left the camera lens.

Through the pain, through the blood, her gaze remained a terrifying, unbreakable void of pure defiance. She stared into the lens as if she were staring directly into Charla's soul, promising a violence that transcended death.

The absolute silence from his victim infuriated the killer.

He threw the bloody whip to the floor. He grabbed a fistful of Cailin's sweat-soaked hair and wrenched her head back, exposing her throat. He pulled a heavy combat dagger from his thigh holster and pressed the flat, freezing steel against her cheek.

"You think you're tough," the killer sneered, his breath hot against her face. "Let's see how tough you are when I carve that pretty face into a Halloween mask."

The threat sent a jolt of primal panic through Cailin's nervous system, but she forced her facial muscles to remain perfectly still.

She looked at him, her voice barely a whisper, laced with absolute venom. "If I survive this, I will peel the skin from your bones while you watch."

The killer let out a harsh, ugly laugh. He pressed the tip of the dagger into the soft skin just below her collarbone and dragged it sideways. A fresh line of fire erupted across her chest.

Chapter 397:

Then a massive, concussive explosion rocked the entire subterranean structure.

The concrete walls vibrated violently. Dust and chunks of cement rained from the ceiling. The halogen lights flickered wildly, dimming to a dull orange before buzzing back to full power.

The killer froze, the dagger still against Cailin's skin. He looked toward the heavy steel blast door at the far end of the room. The secondary monitor showing the exterior security cameras had gone completely to static.

An EMP. Military-grade electronic warfare.

Cailin felt the shift in the room's pressure. Her heart hammered against her ribs. Kegan's team, or Hilliard. The cavalry was here.

The killer cursed and tapped his earpiece, trying to reach his perimeter guards. "Status! Talk to me!"

Only dead static answered.

He understood immediately that the perimeter was breached. He dropped the dagger, grabbed his assault rifle from the table, and racked the charging handle.

He glared at Cailin. "You got lucky. I'll finish you after I deal with the rats outside."

He turned his back on her and sprinted toward the heavy blast door.

In the penthouse, Charla screamed in frustration and hurled her wine glass against the television screen as the live feed buffered and died.

Left alone in the center of the room, Cailin didn't waste a microsecond.

She ignored the agony — the thousand burning needles across her back — and focused. The violent thrashing during the whipping had slightly loosened the rusted bolts anchoring the straps to the iron chair. It was a sliver of a chance, born entirely from suffering.

She began to twist her bloody wrists against the leather straps in a desperate, silent battle against the metal and her own failing body.

The killer reached the heavy steel blast door. Before he could touch the locking wheel, a terrifying symphony of violence erupted on the other side.

The muffled, rapid-fire staccato of suppressed automatic weapons echoed through the thick steel, followed by the heavy, wet thuds of bodies hitting the floor. It wasn't a firefight. It was an execution.

He peered through the small bulletproof glass observation port at the center of the door.

His blood ran cold. The men clearing the hallway weren't police. They moved with the fluid, lethal precision of Tier One special operators.

He understood instantly that the blast door wouldn't hold them for more than two minutes. The contract was burned. His only option was the emergency escape tunnel hidden behind the shelving unit in the corner.

But he was a professional cleaner. He never left loose ends.

He turned around, raised his assault rifle, and walked slowly back toward Cailin.

Cailin's frantic twisting stopped. Her heart slammed against her ribs as she stared at the black muzzle of the rifle aimed directly at her chest. She had run out of time.

The killer stopped five feet away. He looked at her bleeding, broken body, and a cruel, sadistic smirk twisted his lips beneath the mask. He decided to deliver one final, devastating psychological blow before he pulled the trigger.

Chapter 398:

"Do you know who is out there right now, tearing this place apart to find you?" the killer asked, his voice echoing off the concrete walls. "It's your devoted ex-husband. Hilliard Holloway."

Cailin's eyes narrowed. The mention of his name sent a spike of pure hatred through her veins.

"My employer, Charla, is thorough," the killer whispered, driving the final nail in. "She purchased the body-cam footage directly from the mercenary team at Pier 4 to verify the transaction. I watched it. It was quite a scene. He was surrounded, yes. But your daughter — she told him to go. And he did. He didn't try to negotiate. He didn't try to fight. He just let go of her hand and walked away. He used her words as an excuse to save the heir. He chose the empire over her, right there on that dock."

The words detonated inside Cailin's brain like a nuclear bomb.

He just let go of her hand.

The lie the butler told her was only half the truth. Hilliard hadn't just been cornered — he had calculated the value of his daughter's life against the family empire, and he had chosen the empire.

A sound clawed its way up Cailin's throat. It wasn't a laugh. It was a dry, chilling rattle — the sound of a soul turning to ash. All the lingering pain, the betrayal, the residual love she had fought to suppress for five years — it all vaporized, leaving nothing but a black, bottomless void.

The killer frowned, unnerved. He raised the rifle and aimed dead center at her forehead, his finger tightening on the trigger.

"Do you really think Charla is going to pay your final installment?" Cailin asked. Her voice was suddenly dead calm, stripped of all panic.

The killer's finger paused a fraction from the trigger break.

"Hilliard's death squads are outside," Cailin continued, her voice hypnotic, weaving a web of pure logic. "If you run down that tunnel, Charla will burn you. She will hand your identity to Hilliard to save herself. You are the scapegoat."

The killer's eyes darted toward the escape tunnel. Doubt — the most lethal poison in a combat situation — seeped into his brain.

“Let me go,” Cailin whispered. “I have access to Kegan Aguirre’s offshore accounts. I will wire you ten times what Charla promised, right now, and guarantee your safe passage out of the country.”

The killer looked back at her. Greed flashed in his eyes. For exactly one-tenth of a second, his tactical focus wavered.

It was all Cailin needed.

The blood from her shredded back and arms had pooled around her wrists, acting as a perfect, slick lubricant. With a violent, agonizing wrench that dislocated her left thumb, Cailin ripped her hands free from the leather straps.

She didn’t lunge for his gun.

She threw her entire body weight sideways, diving toward the metal cart holding the laptop and the electrical controls. Her bloody fist slammed down onto the large red main power switch.

The heavy clack echoed through the room.

Instantly, the blinding halogen lights died. The subterranean chamber was plunged into absolute, suffocating darkness.

Chapter 399:

The darkness was absolute — a heavy, suffocating blanket that swallowed the room whole.

The killer reacted with pure, panicked instinct. He squeezed the trigger of his assault rifle, spraying a blind arc of automatic fire into the pitch black. The deafening roar bounced off the concrete walls. Sparks flew as bullets shredded the metal cart and shattered the laptop screen.

But Cailin was already gone. The moment she hit the power switch, she had dropped flat to the floor and rolled desperately behind the heavy iron chair. The bullets chewed into the concrete inches from her boots.

The firing stopped. The sudden silence was terrifying, broken only by the sound of empty brass casings rolling across the floor.

The killer cursed. He reached up and pulled down his night-vision goggles. With a soft electronic whine, his vision shifted into a grainy, luminescent green. He scanned the room, searching for the bright thermal bloom of a human body.

Cailin lay perfectly still behind the chair. Her breathing was shallow. Every microscopic movement sent a fresh wave of agony through her fractured ribs, but she focused on the pain, using it to anchor herself in the darkness.

She listened. Over the ringing in her ears, she heard the soft, distinct crunch of a combat boot on broken glass. He was moving to her right, trying to flank the chair.

She needed a weapon. She remembered the heavy, barbed iron whip the killer had thrown on the floor — roughly six feet to her left.

She slowly, agonizingly, shrugged off the shredded remains of her tactical jacket. She balled the bloody fabric in her right hand and, with a sudden, violent jerk, hurled it toward the far right corner of the room.

The night-vision goggles caught the movement of the warm, blood-soaked fabric arcing through the air. The killer spun and fired a three-round burst, pinning the jacket to the wall.

Using the noise of the gunfire as cover, Cailin lunged left. Her bloody fingers scrambled across the cold concrete until they brushed against the heavy leather handle of the whip.

She gripped it tight.

But the killer was a professional. He recognized the decoy instantly and spun back, his green vision locking onto Cailin's crouching form.

Before she could swing the whip, he closed the distance. He swung his rifle like a baseball bat. The heavy polymer stock slammed brutally into Cailin's ribs.

She gasped as two ribs fractured. She was thrown backward and crashed onto the floor. The whip slipped from her fingers.

The killer stepped forward. He drove the heel of his combat boot directly into her bleeding left shoulder, pinning her to the ground. The agony was blinding.

He pressed the hot muzzle of the assault rifle against the center of her forehead.

“Game over,” the killer snarled into the dark.

A stalemate settled over the room — his heavy breathing and her ragged gasps the only sounds. She stared up at the green glow of his goggles, the barrel cold against her skin. Time stretched, each second a lifetime.

Chapter 400:

Then the heavy steel blast door at the end of the room ceased to exist.

A block of C4 directional explosive detonated. The shockwave was apocalyptic. The heavy steel door was blown completely off its hinges, tumbled through the air, and crashed into the far wall.

Instantly, the doorway was flooded with the blinding, concentrated beams of six military-grade tactical flashlights.

The sudden, intense burst of light hit the killer’s night-vision goggles. The NVG tubes — designed to amplify ambient light thousands of times — overloaded in an instant. A searing white flash burned directly into the killer’s retinas.

He screamed in absolute agony, dropped his rifle, and threw his hands over his eyes as he stumbled backward off Cailin.

Through the thick, swirling smoke of the explosion, a massive silhouette charged into the room.

It was Hilliard.

He was soaked in rain and blood, his suit torn, his eyes burning with psychotic, demonic fury. He held a SIG Sauer pistol in his left hand, his right arm hanging uselessly in its sling.

He saw the killer stumbling blindly. He didn't hesitate.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Three shots in rapid succession. The bullets shattered the killer's right kneecap and both elbows. The man collapsed to the floor screaming, completely neutralized.

The tactical team flooded the room, securing the perimeter and rushing to the adjacent room to find Elia.

Hilliard kept his weapon trained on the writhing killer, advancing until his operators swarmed the room and pinned the man to the concrete. Only then did he engage the safety and shove the pistol into his holster.

He fell to his knees on the concrete floor, sliding through blood and debris until he reached Cailin.

He looked at her shredded, bleeding body — the horrific lacerations covering her pale skin. His chest heaved with violent, uncontrollable sobs.

He reached out with his trembling left hand and tried desperately to pull her broken body against his chest, trying to shield her from the nightmare that had already happened.

“Cailin,” Hilliard wept, his tears falling onto her face. “I’m here. I’m so sorry. I’m here.”

Cailin lay on the cold floor. She didn’t close her eyes. She didn’t cry.

She looked up at the man holding her, and her eyes were completely, terrifyingly dead.

Hilliard knelt in the pool of blood, his massive frame shaking uncontrollably. He shrugged off his ruined suit jacket with his good arm and wrapped it tightly around Cailin’s shivering, lacerated body.

He pulled her against his chest and buried his face in her sweat-soaked hair.

“We are safe,” Hilliard choked out, his voice thick with tears and the desperate, pathetic relief of a man who believed he had outrun his sins. “I got her back, Cailin. Elia is safe. It’s over.”

From the adjacent room, two tactical operators emerged. One carried Elia, wrapped tightly in a thermal blanket. The little girl was unconscious, her face pale, but she was breathing steadily.