

Second chance 59

Chapter 59:

The heavy iron door flew open with a metallic screech. Hilliard stepped into the loft, his own licensed firearm in hand, though he hoped he wouldn't need it. He had expected resistance — a team of professional hackers, perhaps corporate mercenaries.

Instead, he found silence.

Not the cold, stale silence of an abandoned building. The warm, breathing silence of a room vacated seconds ago.

Hilliard holstered his weapon and moved into the main space. Rows of server racks lined the brick walls, their cooling fans humming a low, steady note. Green indicator lights blinked in a frantic rhythm, casting long shadows across the floor.

"Clear!" a guard called from the back room.

Hilliard walked to the main workstation. It was a chaotic tangle of cables and monitors, but something about the scale was wrong. The chair was a beanbag. The keyboard was ergonomic but small.

He reached out and touched a ceramic mug on the edge of the desk.

It was hot.

He brought it closer and sniffed. Not coffee. Hot chocolate.

He scanned the room. This wasn't just a hacker's den. It was a living space. Sleeping bags rolled up in the corner. A stack of empty pizza boxes. And on the floor near the beanbag, a pair of sneakers — small, size four or five. Children's shoes.

"Sir, the drives are wiping themselves," Gavin shouted from a secondary terminal, his fingers flying across the keyboard. "Military-grade wipe protocol. There's nothing to recover."

Hilliard looked up. The monitors turned blue, then black, going dark one by one as the digital evidence dissolved into the ether. Text scrolled across the center screen: DATA PURGE COMPLETE. HAVE A NICE DAY.

Hilliard slammed his fist onto the desk. The hot chocolate mug rattled.

"They knew we were coming."

"How?" Gavin asked, his face pale. "We were airborne in under ten minutes."

"Someone warned them," Hilliard said, his voice low and dangerous.

He looked down at the desk again. Beneath the edge of the keyboard, a corner of white paper protruded. He pulled it free.

It was a drawing, done in marker. It depicted the same scene from the Times Square hack — the Blind King and the Witch. But in the bottom corner was a signature: not a digital tag, but a hand-drawn scrawl.

A and D.

The initials burned into his mind, connecting dots he hadn't wanted to acknowledge. Not one accomplice. Two. And the shoes, the hot chocolate — two children.

"Find out who leased this place," Hilliard ordered, folding the paper and sliding it into his breast pocket, where it rested against his heart like a lead weight.

Gavin tapped his tablet. "Already on it. The lease is registered to a shell company. Blue Bear LLC."

Hilliard went still.

Blue Bear.

In the hospital, Elia had asked for blue candy when she was frightened. It was a code.

This wasn't a stranger. This wasn't a corporate rival. This was Cailin.

"Back to the Estate," Hilliard said, turning on his heel. "Now."