

Second chance 621

Chapter 621:

By mid-morning, the rain had turned into a relentless, freezing sleet.

The internet was burning down. The hashtag BillionaireVigilForLove had exploded, hitting the number one trending spot globally on X.

Every major news outlet had Hilliard's haggard, rain-soaked face plastered across their front pages. The headlines screamed: The Last Knight of Modern Romance and Holloway's Century Gamble.

Cailin's phone vibrated off the nightstand. It was Ashely.

Cailin swiped to answer, pressing the phone to her ear.

"Cailin! Are you seeing this?!" Ashely's voice was a high-pitched shriek of pure adrenaline. "The whole world has lost its mind! Half the women on the planet want to marry him, and the other half want to be you!"

Ashely was talking a mile a minute. "Oh my god, people are actually leaving candles and flowers near the gates where he's standing! They're calling it the 'Holloway Shrine'!"

Cailin rubbed her temples. A vicious headache pounded behind her eyes.

“It’s fake, Ash,” Cailin said, her voice tight and defensive. “It’s a cheap, calculated stunt. I am not buying it.”

Across the city, in a sealed, dark penthouse in Manhattan, Charla English sat on the floor.

Her phone was dead, her bank accounts frozen, her social status annihilated. She held a glowing tablet in her lap, scrolling through the exact same news feeds.

Her face twisted into a hideous mask of pure jealousy.

She had spent years believing she was the center of Hilliard’s universe. Now she was watching him throw away his empire, his pride, and his health, standing in the freezing mud like a beggar—all for Cailin.

She read the comments. Millions of strangers praising Cailin, calling her the “Queen” who had tamed the beast.

The humiliation was a physical agony. It felt like acid poured directly onto her brain.

Charla let out a sound that wasn’t human—a raw, guttural screech. She dropped the tablet, grabbed a heavy antique crystal vase from the console table, and hurled it at the massive wall mirror.

The glass shattered with an explosive crash. Shards rained down across the hardwood floor.

Charla grabbed a brass lamp and smashed the television screen. She tore the paintings from the walls. Then she dropped to her knees amid the broken glass, laughing hysterically, before collapsing into wild sobs. Her mind had completely, finally snapped.

Back in the Sinclair suite, Cailin hung up the phone.

She walked slowly to the window and pulled the curtain back a fraction of an inch. She looked down at the man still standing there, enduring the brutal punishment of the storm.

Her chest tightened. The world was screaming that his love was real. Her own eyes were telling her he was dying for it.

For the first time, a hairline fracture appeared in the foundation of Cailin's absolute certainty.

It was approaching seventy-two hours.

Chapter 622:

The rain had turned to ice. Hilliard's lips were a dark, bruised purple. His vision was tunneling, the edges of the world fading to black. He now leaned heavily against the wrought-iron gate, his body a frozen, unmoving block of ice.

Inside the suite, Elia hadn't eaten all day.

She sat quietly by the window, her small face pressed against the glass, her cheeks stained with dried tears.

She slid off the chair and walked over to Cailin. She didn't throw a tantrum. She didn't scream. She simply looked up with bloodshot, exhausted eyes.

"Mommy," Elia whispered, her voice cracking. "Please."

That single, quiet word struck like a sledgehammer, smashing through the last remaining wall of ice in Cailin's chest.

Cailin closed her eyes. Her throat burned. She gave a single, stiff nod.

She walked to the coat rack in the foyer and pulled down a massive black golf umbrella. Without a word, she opened the suite door and descended the grand staircase.

She pushed open the heavy front doors of the estate, and the freezing rain instantly soaked through her shoes.

Outside the gates, the paparazzi went absolutely feral. From their soggy, makeshift encampment across the street, flashbulbs erupted in a blinding, continuous strobe. The sound of camera shutters rattled like machine-gun fire.

Cailin walked straight up to Hilliard and raised the black umbrella, shielding his head from the freezing downpour.

"The show is over," Cailin said, her voice completely devoid of warmth, a flat, hard command. "You need a hospital."

Hilliard slowly lifted his head. His eyes were unfocused, glassy with fever. It took him a second to register her face. He tried to smile, but his frozen facial muscles only managed a weak twitch.

"Don't misunderstand this," Cailin said, her jaw tight. "This does not mean you are forgiven. I just refuse to let my daughter shed another tear over you."

Cailin felt a tug on her coat. She looked down. Elia stood beside her, small boots sinking into the wet pavement. Before leaving the suite, Cailin had knelt down and wiped her daughter's tears, whispering, "Mommy will make him stop, but we need to be brave. We are going to set the rules." Elia had nodded, her terror slowly giving way to the unshakeable safety her mother provided.

Suddenly, the small girl stepped forward. She walked straight into the freezing rain, ignoring the mud splashing onto her pajamas, and stopped right in front of Hilliard.

She looked up at the towering, freezing man, then reached out her small, warm hand and extended her pinky finger.

“Pinky swear,” Elia said, her voice dead serious. “You have to listen to Mommy from now on.”

Hilliard stared at the tiny finger. A violent shudder wracked his chest. He summoned every last ounce of strength left in his body to lift his heavy, numb arm.

His large, freezing finger hooked around her tiny, warm one.

A silent, physical current passed between them. The ice broke.

Elia didn’t let go of his finger.

She stood in the freezing rain, looking up at the towering billionaire like a strict kindergarten teacher.

“Rule one,” Elia announced, her high, clear voice cutting through the sound of the storm. “Mommy is always right.”

Chapter 623:

Hilliard’s breath hitched.

“Rule two,” Elia continued, her brow furrowed in deep concentration. “If you are not sure, look at rule one.”

“Rule three,” she added, nodding firmly. “All the ice cream and chocolate has to go to Mommy first.”

Behind them, the Sinclair security guards suddenly coughed, turning their heads to hide their grins. From the now-open estate doors, Julian Holloway emerged, a slow, appreciative smirk on his face. He had clearly been watching from the dry safety of the foyer, and now he stepped outside, biting his lip hard to keep from laughing.

The absurd, childish rules instantly shattered the suffocating, life-or-death tension that had hung over the gates for three days.

Hilliard looked down at his daughter’s serious face.

A smile broke across his own. It wasn’t his usual arrogant smirk. It was a weak, trembling, incredibly fragile smile—the smile of a man who had just been handed the keys to heaven by a five-year-old.

“I...” Hilliard rasped, his voice barely a whisper. “I accept all terms. Unconditionally.”

The moment the words left his mouth, the adrenaline that had kept him standing for seventy-two hours completely evaporated.

His eyes rolled back. His massive body went completely slack, collapsing sideways toward the mud.

Julian lunged forward. The sheer dead weight of Hilliard's collapsing frame sent him stumbling, and both men went down in a heap in the freezing muck. Julian grunted with the effort, barely managing to heave his cousin's upper body out of a puddle.

"You absolute lunatic," Julian muttered, his voice thick with panic as he struggled to support Hilliard. He roared at the guards standing nearby, "What are you waiting for? Get over here and help me!"

Hilliard's head lolled against Julian's shoulder, but his half-open eyes stayed locked on Cailin and Elia.

Cailin stood perfectly still under the black umbrella, her face a blank slate. She didn't reach out. She didn't offer to help.

She simply looked down at Elia and took her hand.

"We're going inside," Cailin said, her voice clipped.

She turned her back on Hilliard, leading Elia away from the gates and back up the driveway. She walked through the heavy wooden doors of the estate, shutting the storm, the media, and the collapsed man completely out of her sight.

The ultra-luxury suite was blissfully warm.

Cailin led Elia straight into the massive marble bathroom. She turned the gold faucets, letting steaming hot water fill the deep soaking tub.

Elia was shivering slightly, her adrenaline crashing. She stood quietly on the bath mat as Cailin began to unbutton her damp pajama top.

A soft knock echoed from the bedroom door.

Catherine Sinclair, Silas's mother and the elegant matriarch of the family, walked in. She carried a silver tray holding a steaming mug of hot milk and a plate of fresh chocolate chip cookies.

Chapter 624:

"I thought our brave little girl might need some energy," Catherine said, her voice a soothing, melodic purr. She set the tray on the vanity. "Do you need a hand, dear?"

Cailin offered a tired, grateful smile. "Thank you, Catherine. That's very kind."

Catherine picked up a thick, heated Egyptian cotton towel, ready to wrap the child the moment she stepped into the water.

Cailin pulled the damp undershirt over Elia's head.

The bright vanity lights illuminated Elia's bare skin.

Catherine's breath stopped dead in her throat.

The heavy towel slipped from her manicured fingers, hitting the marble floor with a soft thud. Her eyes widened, locking onto Elia's left shoulder.

There, resting perfectly on the child's pale skin, was a distinct, pale pink birthmark shaped exactly like a crescent moon.

Catherine's heart slammed against her ribs. A violent wave of dizziness washed over her.

Her mind flashed back thirty years. She was standing in a nursery, looking down at her newborn baby sister, Seraphina. And on Seraphina's left shoulder was that exact same mark—the Sinclair Moon, a genetic anomaly so rare it appeared only in the direct, pure bloodline of the Sinclair family.

Catherine's hands began to shake. She forced her eyes away from the birthmark and looked up at Cailin's face.

She no longer saw a mere resemblance. She saw the almond-shaped eyes. The slope of the cheekbones. The exact curve of the jawline. Cailin Morton was a living, breathing ghost of Seraphina Sinclair.

A nuclear bomb detonated in Catherine's mind. The implication was terrifying, world-altering, and absolutely undeniable.

Catherine sucked in a sharp, desperate breath. She bit the inside of her cheek hard enough to taste copper, forcing the shock down into her stomach.

This secret was too massive. It could tear two empires apart. She couldn't let Cailin see her panic.

She bent down quickly, snatching the towel off the floor, and forced a bright, overly concerned laugh from her throat.

"Oh, heavens!" Catherine exclaimed, her smile stretched tight across her face. "Look at me, dropping things like a clumsy fool. The poor child is shivering—I must have been distracted."

She stepped forward, wrapping the towel around Elia's shoulders with exaggerated care. She needed to distract Cailin immediately. Her mind raced, latching onto the most natural topic a matriarch could find.

"You know, Cailin," Catherine said, adopting a tone of intense, motherly concern, her hand gently touching Elia's forehead as if checking for a fever, "after all this stress, you and the little one must be exhausted. You must stay as long as you need. My chefs can prepare anything at all for Elia. Does she have any favorite foods? We must build her strength back up."

Cailin blinked, slightly taken aback by the sudden, overwhelming solicitousness. A polite, grateful smile touched her lips. "Catherine, you're too kind. Really, we—"

"Nonsense!" Catherine insisted, her focus entirely on Elia, a perfect performance of a doting grandmother figure. "A child's well-being is paramount. I'll have the kitchens prepare a light chicken broth immediately, and perhaps some custard. Nothing is too much trouble."

Chapter 625:

She channeled her inner turmoil into a flurry of hospitality, her words tumbling out in a rush that completely masked the pounding of her heart.

The bedroom door swung open.

Silas Sinclair walked in, holding a tray with a mug of hot cocoa he had just made downstairs. He stopped dead in the doorway.

He took in his mother's almost frantic fussing over Elia.

A dark, violent flush of red crept up Silas's neck, spreading across his face. The tray in his hands rattled, the hot cocoa nearly sloshing over the rim.

The bathroom fell into a suffocating, agonizingly awkward silence.

Silas closed his eyes and let out a long, painful groan. “Mother. I am begging you. You’re going to smother them with kindness.”

He walked stiffly into the bathroom, handed the cocoa to Elia, and then turned to Cailin. He looked like he wanted the marble floor to swallow him whole.

“Cailin, please ignore her,” Silas said, his voice flat with humiliation. “She gets... enthusiastic. We’re just glad you’re both safe.”

Cailin stared at the mortified billionaire and the overly eager mother. A genuine, bright laugh escaped her chest. The heavy tension in the room vanished, completely replacing any suspicion she might have had about Catherine’s dropped towel.

The secret of the Sinclair Moon remained hidden, buried under a perfect layer of familial concern.

Hilliard lay in the VIP suite of the Holloway Private Hospital.

His core temperature was still dangerously high. IV lines pumped antibiotics and fluids into his veins. His chest heaved with every labored breath.

But his eyes were open, burning with a fierce, manic clarity.

He looked at Gavin, who stood nervously by the bed. “My phone,” Hilliard rasped.

Gavin hesitated, then handed over the device.

Hilliard unlocked it and opened his verified X account—an account followed by millions of investors and journalists. His fingers trembled as he typed out a single, brutal sentence.

72 hours of rain cannot wash away a fraction of my sins. Everything I have done, and everything I will do, is to beg for the forgiveness of my wife, Cailin Morton.

He hit post.

He dropped the phone onto the sheets and closed his eyes. He had just publicly crowned her. He had taken the shame and worn it like a badge.

A week later, the storm had finally passed.

Cailin stood in the grand foyer of the Sinclair estate. Her bags were packed. She had thanked Sebastian, Catherine, and Silas for their protection. But over the last few days, she'd felt a subtle shift. Sebastian's protective gaze on Elia had begun to feel possessive. She had escaped one gilded cage only to find herself in another, more opulent one. She knew she couldn't stay. It was time to leave. She couldn't hide in their fortress forever.

She held Elia's hand and walked out the front doors, down the long, sweeping driveway.

As they neared the massive iron gates, Cailin stopped.

A familiar, heavily armored black SUV was idling at the curb.

The passenger's side door opened. Hilliard stepped out.

Chapter 626:

He wore a simple black turtleneck and dark slacks. He had lost weight over the last week. His cheekbones were sharp, his skin still pale, and he leaned heavily against the open car door for support. The hand he used to steady himself still bore the faint bruising of an IV site. The deadness in his eyes was gone. They were laser-focused on her.

Cailin's jaw tightened. She instantly looked around, spotting the telltale glint of camera lenses hidden in the tree line across the street. The paparazzi were still there, their makeshift tents and news vans still hunkered down for the siege.

Hilliard didn't step closer. He kept his distance, his hands resting at his sides.

"I'm here to take you home," Hilliard said, his voice rough but steady.

Cailin's first instinct was to turn around and walk away. But she looked at the cameras. She looked at Elia, who gripped her hand tightly. She refused to give the media another spectacle. She refused to let her daughter be put on display again.

She took a slow, deep breath, weighing her options, her eyes cold and calculating.

"Get in the car, Elia," Cailin said quietly.

She opened the heavy rear door. Elia scrambled into the backseat, and Cailin slid in beside her, not sparing Hilliard a single glance.

Hilliard closed the door behind them, walked around the vehicle, and got into the passenger seat. The powerful engine roared to life.

The heavy, armored doors of the black SUV unlocked with a solid, mechanical thud.

The drive from the Sinclair estate had passed in a suffocating, absolute silence. Cailin hadn't uttered a single syllable, let alone given an address to the driver, but he hadn't needed one. Hilliard's terrifying omniscience meant he already knew exactly where she was going.

Cailin pushed the door open. The damp, freezing air of the Upper East Side hit her face, a sharp contrast to the stifling, heated tension inside the vehicle. She stepped onto the curb, her boots splashing into a shallow puddle. She reached back, her fingers wrapping securely around Elia's small, warm hand, and pulled her daughter out onto the pavement.

Behind the tinted passenger window, Hilliard sat completely motionless. His amber eyes tracked her every movement. He didn't speak. He didn't try to follow. He simply watched them walk toward the entrance of the unlisted, high-security apartment building Cailin used as a temporary safe house. Chloe had undoubtedly used her old emergency contact bypass to trick the front desk, paving the way for the nightmare that followed.

The SUV's engine revved with a low, guttural growl, and the vehicle slowly pulled away from the curb, disappearing into the Manhattan traffic.

Cailin's shoulders dropped a fraction of an inch. She swiped her keycard. The glass doors slid open.

They stepped into the elevator. The ride up to the fourteenth floor passed in silence. Elia leaned her tired head against Cailin's thigh. Cailin stroked her daughter's hair, her heart rate finally beginning to slow after the exhausting seventy-two-hour ordeal at the Sinclair estate.

The elevator doors chimed and parted.

Cailin stepped out into the softly lit, carpeted hallway. She had taken only two steps toward her apartment door when a figure lunged out from the dark alcove near the emergency stairwell.

"Cailin!"

A hand clamped down hard on Cailin's forearm.

Chapter 627:

Cailin flinched, her body instantly coiling tight. The sudden movement sent a sharp, tearing pain through the scar tissue on her left shoulder, a brutal reminder of her body's fragility. She yanked her arm back, shoving Elia behind her legs in one fluid motion.

It was Chloe Morton. Her cousin's face was gaunt, the skin around her eyes bruised purple from lack of sleep. Her expensive designer coat was stained and wrinkled, her hair a frantic, greasy mess. She looked completely unhinged.

"Chloe," Cailin said, her voice dropping to a dangerous, flat register. "Take your hand off me. Right now."

"You have to help me!" Chloe shrieked, her voice cracking with pure, animal panic. Her fingernails dug into the fabric of Cailin's sleeve. "You have millions! You took half of Hilliard's money! I need two million dollars, Cailin. Right now. If I don't pay Brad back by midnight, his guys are going to sell me to the underground market! They're going to skin me alive!"

Cailin stared at the pathetic, trembling woman. Her stomach twisted with cold, absolute disgust.

"Your gambling debts are your own," Cailin said, her jaw locking. She wrenched her arm out of Chloe's grip. "I told you I was done with the Morton family. If you don't get out of this hallway in three seconds, I am calling building security to drag you out."

Chloe's face contorted into a mask of ugly, desperate rage. She opened her mouth, preparing to scream, preparing to throw herself onto the floor in a tantrum.

A soft, metallic click echoed from the end of the hallway.

The heavy fire door to the emergency stairwell swung open—no squeak of hinges, just the terrifying, silent arrival of three massive men stepping into the corridor.

They wore black tactical vests over dark clothing. Black balaclavas covered their faces.

Cailin's combat instincts, honed by five years of paranoia and survival, violently overrode her exhaustion. The air in the hallway instantly felt too thin to breathe. The hairs on the back of her neck stood straight up.

There was no hesitation in their movements, no demands for money—just pure, concentrated killing intent.

The man in the center, Kane, locked eyes with Cailin. He drew a serrated tactical combat knife from his chest rig. The blade caught the overhead lights. He closed the distance with terrifying, professional speed.

Cailin's pupils dilated. Her brain processed the threat in a fraction of a second. She couldn't fight three armed mercenaries in a narrow hallway while protecting a five-year-old.

She spun around, grabbed Elia by the shoulders, and shoved her violently through the open doorway of the apartment.

“Mommy!” Elia screamed, stumbling onto the hardwood floor inside.

Cailin didn’t look back. She slammed her palm against the emergency lockdown button on the smart lock panel.

The heavy, steel-reinforced door slammed shut with a deafening boom. The deadbolts engaged with a rapid, mechanical whir, sealing Elia in the absolute safety of the apartment.

The physical barrier separated them. Cailin’s heart ripped in half, but she had no time to process the agony.

She turned back to the hallway just as Kane lunged.

Chapter 628:

Cailin raised her forearms, attempting to block the downward strike of the knife. The impact was like getting hit by a truck. Kane’s physical strength was overwhelming. The force of the blow sent a spiderweb of agony radiating from her surgically repaired wrists, and for a terrifying moment her muscles threatened to give out completely. He grabbed her wrist, twisting it brutally until a sharp, tearing pain shot up to her shoulder.

He slammed her back against the hallway wall. The impact knocked the air completely out of her lungs. The brutal collision made her vision flash white, and a searing pain flared along the old surgical incision on her abdomen, stealing what little strength she had left.

The freezing, flat edge of the combat knife pressed hard against her carotid artery.

Cailin gasped, her chest heaving, her eyes locked onto the dark slits of Kane's mask.

A few feet away, Chloe let out a pathetic, strangled whimper. Her knees buckled. She collapsed onto the carpet, a dark, wet stain rapidly spreading across the front of her designer trousers. She clamped both hands over her mouth, too paralyzed by terror to even scream.

Kane glanced at the locked apartment door, then looked back at Cailin. A low, raspy chuckle vibrated in his chest.

"Holloway's woman," Kane whispered, his breath hot and smelling of stale coffee and adrenaline. "You've got some nerve. But you're mine now."

The second mercenary stepped up beside Cailin. He pulled a thick, white medical gauze pad from a sealed pouch. The sharp, sickeningly sweet chemical stench of chloroform hit the air.

Cailin thrashed violently. She kicked out, her boot connecting with a kneecap, but Kane simply pressed his body weight harder against her, the knife breaking the top layer of skin on her neck. A warm drop of blood slid down her collarbone.

The mercenary clamped the soaked gauze brutally over her nose and mouth.

Cailin squeezed her eyes shut. She held her breath, fighting the burning sensation in her lungs. Her fingers clawed desperately at the man's thick wrists, her nails tearing.

But her lungs screamed for oxygen. Her chest convulsed. She took a breath.

The chemical fire flooded her brain. The edges of her vision instantly turned black.

As her knees gave out and the darkness swallowed her, she heard Kane's muffled voice giving one last order.

"Use the rest of the chloroform on her. A deep dose. She won't wake up for hours, and we'll be long gone by then. No witnesses left conscious." A heavy boot swung, connecting with a sickening thud, and Chloe's whimpering abruptly ceased.

The violent, biting cold was the first thing to register.

Then came the smell—a thick, nauseating stench of mold, damp concrete, and raw gasoline.

Cailin's eyes snapped open. A dull, throbbing agony pounded at the base of her skull. She tried to lift her hands to her head, but her shoulders screamed in protest.

She pulled at her arms. They didn't move. She was sitting on a freezing concrete floor, her arms pulled back and secured around a thick wooden support pillar. The bindings weren't rope—they were heavy-duty industrial nylon zip ties, biting viciously into the sensitive skin of her wrists.

Chapter 629:

She forced herself to take slow, deep breaths. In through the nose, out through the mouth. She needed to flush the remaining chloroform from her bloodstream. She blinked rapidly, forcing her blurry vision to focus on the dim, yellow light of the basement.

A sudden, hysterical sob echoed from the dark corner to her right.

Cailin turned her head. Her neck muscles protested with a sharp cramp.

Tied to an identical pillar ten feet away was Ashely. Her best friend looked nothing like the sharp, impeccably styled gallery director who had terrorized New York art circles. Her expensive silk blouse was ripped at the shoulder. Her blonde hair was a tangled, dirty rat's nest. A massive, dark purple bruise covered the left side of her cheekbone, swelling her eye shut.

Ashely saw Cailin looking at her. The terror in Ashely's good eye instantly morphed into fierce, protective defiance. "Cailin!" Ashely yelled, her voice echoing off the concrete walls. She thrashed against her zip ties like a wild animal. "Are you okay? Don't let these steroid-junkie apes see you sweat! They ambushed me at my apartment!"

Cailin stared at her, her face a mask of absolute, freezing calm. She didn't waste a single breath responding to the provocations of their captors, but she gave Ashely a micro-nod of solidarity. Her amber eyes shifted away, locking onto the wooden staircase at the far end of the basement.

Heavy combat boots thudded against the wood.

Kane walked down the stairs. He had removed his balaclava. A jagged, ugly scar ran from his left ear down to his jawline, pulling the skin tight. He was casually spinning a black M1911 pistol around his index finger.

He walked to the center of the room, stopping halfway between the two women.

Ashely kept yelling. "Let her go! Do you know who you're messing with? You're dead men walking!"

Kane didn't even look at her. He casually lifted his heavy boot and kicked Ashely squarely in the ribs.

The breath exploded out of Ashely's lungs in a wet gasp. She slumped sideways against the pillar, coughing violently.

"Shut your mouth, you stupid cow," Kane said, his voice a low, gravelly rumble. "You're both just bait for the big fish."

Cailin didn't flinch at the violence. She kept her eyes locked on Kane's face, analyzing his posture, his weapon handling, the specific brand of his tactical gear.

“You want Hilliard’s life,” Cailin said, her voice steady, completely devoid of the panic Kane expected. “You’re private military. Blackwater? Or Vanguard remnants?”

Kane stopped spinning the gun. A flicker of genuine surprise crossed his scarred face. He stepped closer to Cailin, crouching down so they were eye level.

The surprise in his eyes quickly melted into feverish, manic hatred.

“Holloway,” Kane spat the name like a curse. “Three years ago in Syria. He wanted an oil field contract. My brother’s unit was stationed in the adjacent compound. Holloway’s lobbyists paid to have the strike coordinates ‘adjusted.’ A drone leveled the entire camp. Today, I’m going to make him feel what it’s like to have his soul ripped out.”

Ashely, gasping for air, heard Hilliard’s name. A twisted, desperate hope ignited in her bruised face.

Chapter 630:

“Holloway will tear you apart!” Ashely rasped, spitting blood onto the concrete. “He might be a cold-blooded bastard, but if you touch her, he will hunt you to the ends of the earth!”

Kane slowly turned his head. He looked at Ashely as if she were a fascinating, pathetic insect. Then he turned his gaze back to Cailin.

A slow, terrifying smile spread across his face.

“Fascinating,” Kane whispered. “I spent three years studying every facet of his miserable life. I know about his ex-wife. I know about his ex-wife’s only friend. I know where she lives, what she eats for breakfast, and that she’d be the perfect second piece of leverage.” He reached out and used the cold steel barrel of the M1911 to tilt Cailin’s chin up.

Cailin jerked her head away, her eyes burning with cold defiance.

“The fiercely loyal best friend,” Kane mocked, gesturing to Ashely. “And the hidden, discarded ex-wife.” He looked back at Cailin. “Let’s play a game. Let’s see exactly who the Wall Street tyrant chooses to let live.”

Cailin’s stomach plummeted. The physical cold of the basement seeped directly into her bones. She realized instantly that Kane wasn’t just planning an execution. He was constructing an arena for absolute, psychological torture.

Kane stood up. He holstered the M1911 and reached into one of the deep pockets of his tactical vest, pulling out a rugged, military-grade tablet encased in thick black rubber.

He tapped the screen, connecting to an encrypted satellite network, then punched in a sequence of numbers.

Cailin knew those numbers. It was the direct, emergency override line to the Holloway Group’s central security command. “You think Holloway’s billion-dollar firewalls are secure?” Kane sneered, noticing her recognition. “After my brother burned, I spent three years and every dime I had studying every single vulnerability in his network. I own his comms today.”

Kane walked over to Ashely. He grabbed a fistful of her tangled blonde hair and yanked her head back, forcing her face into the harsh glare of the tablet's camera.

The screen flickered. The call connected.

Hilliard Holloway's face appeared on the screen.

He looked like a man standing on the edge of a cliff. His tie was gone. His collar was unbuttoned. His amber eyes were bloodshot, radiating a terrifying, barely contained violence. He was clearly in the middle of tearing the city apart looking for Cailin.

Ashely saw his face on the screen.

"Hilliard!" Ashely shouted, tears and blood streaming down her bruised face. "Don't negotiate with this psycho! Just get Cailin out of here! Do you hear me? Get her out!"

Hilliard stared at the screen. The violent panic in his eyes instantly vanished, replaced by a sheet of absolute, freezing ice. He looked at Ashely's battered face with a level of calculating detachment that masked his inner turmoil.

"If you want money," Hilliard's voice came through the tablet's speakers, a low, dead monotone, "name your price. But if you think you can use her friend to threaten me, you grabbed the wrong woman."