

Second chance 631

Chapter 631:

Ashely's shouting stopped instantly. The words hit her like a physical blow to the chest. Her mouth hung open. She knew Hilliard was ruthless, but hearing him dismiss her life so casually still sent a chill down her spine.

Kane didn't look disappointed. He threw his head back and let out a sharp, barking laugh, then released Ashely's hair, letting her head slump forward.

"Cold," Kane said, turning the tablet around. "Very cold, Holloway. But let's check your pulse on this one."

Kane walked across the basement, stopped in front of Cailin's pillar, and thrust the tablet directly into her face.

Cailin stared into the camera lens. Her face was pale, dirt smudged across her cheek, but her eyes were steady. She didn't say a word. She didn't ask for help.

On the screen, the moment Hilliard's eyes registered Cailin's face, his entire physical demeanor violently fractured.

His breath stopped completely. The muscles in his jaw bunched so hard it looked like his teeth would shatter. He slammed both hands down onto the mahogany desk in front of him, his knuckles instantly turning a stark, bone-white.

“Don’t,” Hilliard breathed. His voice was no longer a dead monotone. It was the raw, guttural growl of a wounded animal. “Don’t you fucking touch her.”

Kane smiled. It was a terrible, satisfied smile.

“Ah,” Kane purred. “So the tabloids are full of shit. This is the one that makes your heart bleed.”

Kane drew his combat knife again and pressed the flat of the blade against Cailin’s cheek. Cailin didn’t blink. She kept her eyes locked on Hilliard through the screen, her expression demanding he stay rational.

“Listen to me very carefully, Holloway,” Kane commanded. “I am sending you a set of coordinates. You have exactly two hours to arrive. You come alone. No cops. No private security dogs. No snipers.”

Kane took three steps back, panning the tablet’s camera to show the wider basement.

Cailin’s blood ran cold. Strapped to the main load-bearing pillars of the basement, wired with blinking red detonators, were thick blocks of grey C4 plastic explosive.

“If you are one second late,” Kane said, his voice dropping to a deadly whisper, “or if I see a single helicopter... I will turn both of your women into red mist.”

The screen went black. Kane severed the connection.

The basement plunged back into a suffocating silence, broken only by Ashely's broken, hyperventilating sobs and the slow, steady rhythm of Cailin's breathing. The countdown had begun.

Thirty minutes bled away in the freezing, gasoline-scented darkness.

Cailin's wrists were completely numb. The nylon zip ties had cut off her circulation. She flexed her fingers continuously, fighting the creeping paralysis.

Suddenly, the heavy steel door at the top of the basement stairs groaned open.

Heavy footsteps stomped down the wooden steps, accompanied by a string of sharp tactical commands. Two mercenaries carried heavy crates of explosives down into the light.

Chapter 632:

Cailin's heart slammed violently against her ribs. They were wiring the basement. As the men moved around her, Cailin's amber eyes scanned the shadows. About ten inches from her left tactical boot was a rusted, wall-mounted electrical box. Its thick glass cover had shattered at some point, leaving a jagged, dagger-like shard precariously wedged in the metal frame.

"Hey!" Cailin hissed, her voice tight with artificial panic, faking a claustrophobic attack. "The zip ties are cutting off my circulation! I can't breathe!"

One of the mercenaries grunted and stepped over to her. He grabbed her shoulder roughly, shoving her back to check the bindings. The violent shove was exactly what she needed. Her body weight shifted, her shoulder slamming into the pillar, sliding her just a few crucial inches to the left.

Ashely, still tied to her pillar, saw Cailin moving. A twisted, hysterical giggle erupted from her throat.

“Look at this!” Ashely shrieked, her voice dripping with venomous sarcasm to distract the guards. “The great Cailin Holloway, finally breaking a sweat! You guys are really terrifying!”

“Shut your mouth,” the mercenary snarled, turning his attention away from Cailin to backhand Ashely across the face.

But Cailin wasn’t looking at Ashely.

Her eyes were locked on the floor. With agonizing, millimeter-by-millimeter slowness, Cailin extended her left leg.

Her thigh muscles burned. She pointed her toe, reaching out until the edge of her boot brushed against the wall. She curled her toes inside the boot, pressing the sole down onto the edge of the glass shard sticking out of the electrical box, snapping it free silently under the cover of Ashely’s shouting.

She brought her right foot over and pinched the piece of glass between the inner arches of her boots.

Using every ounce of core strength she possessed, she lifted both legs slightly off the ground. She bent her knees, sliding her feet up the inside of her pant leg. The sharp edge of the glass bit into her ankle through her sock, but she didn't flinch.

She guided the shard up to the side of her calf, right where the thick leather cuff of her tactical boot created a natural pocket. She twisted her ankle, dropping the glass shard silently into the deep recess of the boot.

Kane walked down the stairs, yelling at his men to secure the new hostage.

Cailin let her legs drop back to the floor. She slumped her shoulders, feigning exhaustion and defeat. But deep in her amber eyes, a lethal, icy fire had ignited. She had a weapon.

The countdown timer on Kane's tablet hit twenty minutes.

Outside the abandoned Long Island mansion, the night sky was violently torn apart by the deafening roar of rotor blades.

Three black, unmarked Little Bird helicopters descended from the low-hanging clouds like birds of prey. They flared aggressively, touching down on the overgrown lawn just outside the perimeter of the dead trees.

Before the skids even hit the mud, the Holloway Shadow Squad poured out. Two dozen men in full tactical gear, armed with suppressed assault rifles, fanned out into the darkness. Red laser sights cut through the freezing mist. Within sixty seconds, snipers had established overwatch positions, and a mobile jammer had severed all cellular signals within a two-mile radius.

Hilliard Holloway stepped out of the lead helicopter.

Chapter 633:

He wore a heavy black Kevlar tactical vest over his dress shirt. His face was a mask of absolute, terrifying murder. The veins in his neck stood out as thick cords of tension. Gavin stepped up beside him, a radio earpiece pressed to his ear, relaying the perimeter status.

Suddenly, Gavin's earpiece crackled with a high-priority encrypted transmission. He pressed two fingers to his ear, his eyes widening briefly before he turned to Hilliard.

"Boss," Gavin reported, his voice cutting through the rotor wash. "Team Alpha just breached the safe house. The emergency lockdown held. Elia is completely unharmed. They've secured her in the mobile command chopper at the staging area three miles back."

Hilliard's chest caved in. A physical, agonizing pain mixed with overwhelming relief ripped through his heart. He closed his eyes for a microsecond, the thick cords of tension in his neck trembling. "Is she..." he choked out, his voice thick with unshed tears. "Is she asking for her mother?"

"She's terrified, sir," Gavin said softly. "But she's safe."

Hilliard stood up straighter, the momentary vulnerability vanishing, replaced by a lethal, absolute focus. He turned his head and looked at the perimeter guards dragging a struggling figure out of the brush.

It was one of Kane's perimeter spotters, clad in urban camo. The man was clutching a detonator relay in a death grip.

The spotter saw Hilliard. His eyes lit up with arrogant defiance.

"You're too late, Holloway!" the man screamed over the sound of the slowing helicopter rotors. "The house is wired! You step inside, you all burn!"

Hilliard didn't look at the detonator. His eyes were dead.

"Take this piece of trash," Hilliard ordered his men, his voice slicing through the cold air like a scalpel. "Break his fingers one by one until he gives you the secondary frequencies. Then take him to the Anchorage facility. I want to know everything."

The spotter's jaw dropped. The color drained completely from his face. "No! Wait!" he shrieked as two guards grabbed him by the armpits and dragged him away into the darkness.

Hilliard turned slowly, facing the massive, decaying facade of the abandoned mansion.

Suddenly, a blinding, high-intensity spotlight snapped on from the second floor. The beam cut through the darkness, hitting Hilliard squarely in the chest.

In the center of a massive, shattered floor-to-ceiling window, Kane appeared.

He had one hand wrapped ruthlessly in Cailin's hair, the other gripping the back of Ashely's neck. He shoved both women forward until their torsos hung precariously over the jagged glass edge of the window frame.

A fifteen-foot drop to the concrete driveway waited below them.

Cailin's hair whipped in the freezing wind. She didn't struggle. She looked straight down the beam of light, her amber eyes locking onto Hilliard's.

Kane raised a megaphone to his mouth. The electronic feedback shrieked across the lawn.

"Welcome to hell, Holloway!" Kane's voice boomed. "The game begins now!"

The harsh glare of the spotlight washed out the color of the night, turning the standoff into a stark, high-contrast nightmare.

Kane's voice crackled through the megaphone, dripping with sadistic glee.

“Order your snipers to stand down! Drop your weapons!” Kane roared. “Or I press this button and turn this entire building into a crater!”

Chapter 634:

Kane held up a black detonator switch, his thumb resting heavily on the red trigger.

Hilliard didn't blink. He slowly raised his right hand, his fingers forming a sharp, distinct tactical signal. Instantly, the three red laser dots that had been painting Kane's chest and forehead vanished. The Shadow Squad lowered their rifles, melting back into the darkness.

“Good boy,” Kane mocked. He tossed the megaphone aside. His voice was loud enough to carry in the sudden, dead silence.

Kane pulled his combat knife. He dragged the flat of the blade slowly back and forth across the space between Cailin's and Ashely's necks.

“You burned my brother alive in Syria,” Kane shouted, his eyes wide and manic. “Today, you get to feel what it's like to have your heart ripped out while you watch.”

Kane shoved both women harder against the window frame. Ashely gritted her teeth, her hands scrambling uselessly against the sill.

"The rules are simple," Kane announced. "You choose one. Point to the woman you want to live. I let her walk out the front door. The other one stays here and burns with me."

A collective, silent gasp seemed to suck the air out of the lawn. Gavin, standing ten feet behind Hilliard, felt his stomach drop into his shoes. It was the ultimate, sickest form of psychological torture.

Ashely heard the rules. Her survival instinct violently overrode her terror, but her loyalty to her best friend was stronger.

"Hilliard!" Ashely screamed, her voice tearing at her vocal cords. She kicked her legs, trying to lean further out the window. "Don't you dare pick me! You owe Cailin your life! Save her, you son of a bitch!"

She turned her bruised face toward Cailin, spitting venom at Kane. "I'm not afraid to die! Save Cailin, Hilliard!"

Beside her, Cailin was a statue of ice.

She didn't scream. She didn't beg. She looked down at Hilliard, standing in the mud in his Kevlar vest. Her amber eyes were completely devoid of fear. There was only a profound, crushing sorrow.

She slowly shook her head. Her lips moved, forming the words silently.

Don't. Take Ashely and go.

Down on the lawn, Hilliard's brain was a supercomputer running a million calculations a second. His eyes tracked Kane's micro-expressions, the tension in his shoulders, the grip on the detonator.

Hilliard knew the mind of a killer. A man who wanted to inflict maximum agony wouldn't honor a choice. The game was a paradox. Kane wanted to know what Hilliard loved most, so he could destroy it.

"Ten seconds, Holloway!" Kane screamed, losing his patience.

To force the issue, Kane pressed the tip of the combat knife into the flesh of Cailin's shoulder.

Cailin hissed through her teeth as the blade broke the skin. A thin line of dark blood spilled over her collarbone, stark against her pale skin.

Hilliard saw the blood. A violent tremor rocked his entire body. His jaw locked.

He took a deep, ragged breath. He raised his right arm, his hand perfectly steady.

Chapter 635:

He pointed his index finger directly at the second-floor window.

The wind seemed to die completely. The silence was absolute, heavy, and suffocating.

Hilliard's finger remained locked, pointing at the right side of the window frame.

He picked up a megaphone from the hood of the nearest SUV and pressed the button. His voice boomed across the lawn, cold, metallic, and completely devoid of human emotion.

"I choose Ashely. Let her go."

The words hit the second floor like a physical shockwave.

Ashely froze for a fraction of a second. Then a sound of pure, unadulterated horror erupted from her lungs. It was a hideous, devastated shriek.

"No!" Ashely screamed, her bruised face twisting into a grotesque mask of grief. She turned her head as far as Kane's grip would allow, glaring at Hilliard. "Are you insane?! I told you to save her. You can't let her die here!"

Cailin's body swayed slightly. She had already accepted death.

Suddenly, Gavin's radio crackled. He had an open comms link to the mobile command to monitor Elia's status, and the sound of Hilliard's voice carried through the speaker in the chopper. A guard's panicked shout was followed by a child's high-pitched, tearing scream ripping through the comms.

“Daddy, no!” Elia shrieked over the radio, her voice cracking with pure devastation. “You promised! You made a pinky promise to save Mommy! You chose the wrong lady!”

The child’s scream twisted like a knife in Hilliard’s gut. He squeezed his eyes shut for a microsecond. The muscle in his cheek twitched violently. But he didn’t turn around. He didn’t lower his arm. He kept his eyes locked dead on Kane.

Up in the window, Kane stared at Hilliard. The mercenary’s face went blank.

Then Kane threw his head back and roared with laughter. It was a wet, psychotic sound that echoed off the trees.

“Hahaha! Holloway! You cold-blooded, magnificent bastard!” Kane wiped a tear from his eye. “You’d throw away the mother of your children for this used-up socialite!”

Kane’s laughter abruptly stopped. His eyes went dead.

“But you guessed my rules wrong.”

Kane violently yanked Ashely backward by her hair, pulling her away from the window sill. Ashely shrieked in pain.

Kane reached down to the floor and hoisted up a heavy canvas tactical vest, packed thick with blocks of grey C4, wired together with red and blue cables.

"I told you I wanted you to feel the pain of losing what you love," Kane snarled. He slammed the explosive vest against Ashely's chest. "Since you chose her to live..."

Kane forced Ashely's arms through the straps and yanked the steel buckles tight, locking the vest onto her body.

"...she has to die."

Kane hit a switch on the collar of the vest. A bright red digital timer illuminated in the darkness.

05:00.

Ashely looked down at the blinking red numbers. The furious defiance melted off her face completely. Her eyes bulged. The reality of the trap crashed into her brain.

Chapter 636:

Her knees gave out completely. She collapsed onto the floor, the heavy explosives dragging her down. She let out a guttural, animalistic wail of absolute, mind-shattering terror.

Down on the lawn, Gavin gasped, staring at Hilliard in shock.

Hilliard slowly lowered his arm. There was no surprise on his face. His reverse-psychology trap had sprung perfectly. He had fed Ashely to the wolf to keep Cailin alive.

The digital timer on Ashely's chest pulsed with a blinding red light.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

The sound was sharp, rhythmic, and terrifying. Ashely thrashed on the floor like a dying fish. Her fingernails tore at the heavy canvas straps of the vest, breaking her nails down to the quick, leaving bloody smears on the C4 blocks.

"Get it off! Get it off me!" Ashely howled, her voice shredding. She tried to unbuckle the clasps, but Kane had secured them with industrial steel wire. It was a dead-end trap.

Kane stepped forward, planting his heavy combat boot directly onto the center of Ashely's back. He pinned her to the floor, ignoring her muffled screams.

He looked down at Hilliard, a twisted look of respect in his eyes.

“Brilliant calculation, Holloway,” Kane yelled down. “You used her life to buy your ex-wife’s. You’re just as much of a monster as I am.”

Kane reached out and grabbed Cailin by the collar of her shirt. He hauled her back to the edge of the shattered window, pressing the combat knife hard against her throat.

“But the game isn’t over,” Kane announced. “The vest has an anti-tamper mercury switch. If she tries to take it off, it blows. If the timer hits zero, it blows.”

Kane pointed the knife down at Hilliard.

“Take off the Kevlar. Drop your sidearm. You walk into this building alone. You come up to the second floor.” Kane’s eyes burned with suicidal fanaticism. “If you don’t, or if your snipers take a shot, I slit her throat and drop her out the window. We all die together.”

Down on the grass, Gavin grabbed Hilliard’s bicep.

“Boss, you can’t,” Gavin pleaded, his voice panicked. “It’s a suicide run. The building is rigged with tripwires and booby traps. He has no intention of letting anyone walk out of there.”

Up on the second floor, Cailin stared down at Hilliard. She saw the absolute, unyielding resolve in his amber eyes. She saw the sick, euphoric death wish in Kane’s face.

It was a dead end. Kane was going to take Hilliard straight to hell with him.

Cailin's survival instinct vanished, replaced by a fierce, desperate need to protect the father of her children.

She fought against Kane's grip, ignoring the sharp sting as the knife sliced a millimeter into her neck. She leaned out the window, her voice tearing from her throat.

"Hilliard! Don't you dare!" Cailin screamed, her voice cracking with raw desperation. It was the first time she had called his name. "It's a trap! Stay away!"

Hilliard didn't move.

Chapter 637:

"Get back in the car!" Cailin yelled, tears of pure frustration finally spilling over her lashes. She tried to use cruelty as a shield. "Take Elia and get the hell out of here! I don't want you! I don't need you to die for me!"

Hilliard looked up at her. He saw the tears. He heard the lie in her cruel words.

He reached up to the collar of his tactical vest.

Click. Click.

He unbuckled the heavy Kevlar carrier and let it slide off his shoulders. The heavy armor hit the mud with a wet, heavy thud. He reached to his hip, drew his Glock 19, and tossed it onto the grass.

Stripped of his armor, stripped of his weapons, he raised his empty hands.

Without a single word, Hilliard stepped over the police tape and walked straight toward the dark, gaping maw of the abandoned mansion's front doors.

The heavy, rotting mahogany front doors groaned as Hilliard pushed them open.

The interior of the mansion was pitch black. The air was thick, suffocating. The stench of mildew was completely overpowered by the sharp, highly combustible fumes of raw gasoline.

Hilliard's combat boots made no sound on the marble foyer. His eyes rapidly adjusted to the darkness. He moved with agonizing precision, scanning the floorboards for the faint glint of fishing line or the unnatural bump of a pressure plate. Every step was a calculated risk against a hidden booby trap.

Above him, the rhythmic beep... beep... beep of the C4 timer echoed through the hollow house.

Three minutes left.

Hilliard reached the base of the grand staircase. The wood was warped and decaying. He tested his weight on the first step, listening for the telltale click of a trigger. Nothing. He began the slow, agonizing climb.

He crested the top of the stairs and stepped into the dim light of the second-floor grand hall.

Kane stood near the shattered window. Ashely was a sobbing, hyperventilating heap on the floor, clawing uselessly at the bomb strapped to her chest.

Cailin stood in front of Kane, his arm wrapped around her neck, the knife pressed to her skin.

When Cailin saw Hilliard step into the room, a fresh wave of tears blurred her vision. He had actually come. He had walked into a guaranteed death trap, unarmed, just for her. She bit her lip until it bled, her eyes screaming at him: You absolute fool.

Hilliard met her gaze. His amber eyes were soft, completely devoid of the Wall Street tyrant. He gave her a microscopic nod. I'm right here.

"I'm here," Hilliard said, his voice calm, echoing in the large room. He held his empty hands out. "Let her go, Kane. You have me."

Kane smiled. It was the smile of a man who had already accepted his own death.

“You really are a lovesick dog, Holloway,” Kane sneered.

Kane didn’t lower the knife. Instead, he reached into his pocket with his free hand and pulled out a small, cylindrical device with a metal spoon lever held down by his thumb.

Chapter 638:

“You see this?” Kane held it up. “It’s a dead man’s switch. It’s wired to the main charges on the load-bearing pillars downstairs. If you rush me, if I die, my thumb relaxes. The spoon pops. The whole house comes down on our heads.”

Hilliard froze. A cold sweat broke out across his forehead. It was a perfect stalemate. He couldn’t attack. He couldn’t negotiate.

Kane’s eyes stayed locked entirely on Hilliard, drinking in the sight of his enemy’s absolute helplessness.

He didn’t notice the subtle shift in Cailin’s posture.

Behind her back, Cailin’s thigh muscles bunched. Because her hands were bound tightly behind her, she had to contort her body. She shifted her hip, sliding her bound hands agonizingly down the back of her legs. Her fingertips brushed the thick leather cuff of her tactical boot.

She pinched the curved glass shard she had stolen from the basement electrical box.

She pulled it up, hiding it in the palm of her bound hands. The sharp edge immediately sliced into her own palm, but the pain was a distant, irrelevant static.

With Kane distracted by his own monologue, Cailin pressed the razor-sharp edge of the glass against the thick nylon zip tie binding her wrists.

She began to saw.

Back and forth. The glass bit into the plastic, and into her own flesh. Hot blood slicked her palms, making the glass slippery, but she gripped it harder, using her rage and her desperation to fuel the agonizing friction.

Beep... beep... beep...

One minute and thirty seconds left.

Cailin's hands were slick with her own blood. The glass shard cut deep into her thumb, but she didn't stop sawing. She felt the nylon fibers of the zip tie beginning to fray, giving way under the relentless, desperate friction.

Snap.

The thick plastic band broke.

In the exact millisecond her hands sprang free, Cailin didn't run. She didn't scream. She dropped her center of gravity, twisting her torso violently to the left, slipping out from under Kane's arm. The combat knife sliced through the air, missing her throat by a fraction of an inch.

Before Kane could react, Cailin pivoted back. She drove her blood-soaked fist upward in a vicious, blinding arc, slamming the jagged glass shard directly into the radial artery of Kane's wrist—the hand holding the dead man's switch.

Kane let out a deafening, agonized roar.

Blood sprayed in a high-pressure arc. The sudden, catastrophic pain severed his nerve control. His fingers spasmed open.

The dead man's switch slipped from his grasp, tumbling toward the floor.

Hilliard exploded into motion. He launched his massive frame across the room like a linebacker, diving toward the floor, his hand snapping out.

He caught the metal cylinder mid-air. His thumb clamped down brutally hard on the spoon lever, securing the switch just inches before it hit the ground.

Kane, clutching his spurting wrist, stumbled backward. His eyes were wide with shock and pure, unadulterated madness. He looked at Hilliard holding the switch, then looked at the timer on Ashely's chest.

Forty-five seconds.

"Then we all burn!" Kane shrieked.

Chapter 639:

He kicked out violently, his heavy boot smashing into a rusted, fifty-gallon drum sitting near the wall. The drum tipped over. Gallons of raw, amber gasoline flooded across the floorboards, soaking into the wood.

Kane pulled a Zippo lighter from his vest. He flicked the wheel. The flame sparked to life.

With a maniacal laugh, Kane dropped the lighter into the expanding puddle of fuel.

WHOOSH.

A wall of fire erupted instantly, climbing ten feet into the air. The heat was a physical, crushing force. Kane was instantly engulfed, his mad laughter turning into horrific, bubbling screams as he burned alive.

The flames raced across the floor, surrounding Ashely. She shrieked, batting at the fire as it caught the hem of her torn blouse.

Thirty seconds.

The intense heat reached a small, pressurized propane tank sitting near the window.

The tank ruptured.

The explosion wasn't massive, but the concussive shockwave in the enclosed space was devastating. The blast hit Cailin squarely in the chest.

She was lifted completely off her feet. The force hurled her backward, straight through the shattered remains of the floor-to-ceiling window.

"Cailin!" Hilliard's vocal cords tore as he screamed her name.

He scrambled up from the floor, his left hand still gripping the dead man's switch in a death grip. He lunged toward the window, throwing his upper body over the jagged glass sill.

Cailin was falling into the black void.

Hilliard's right hand shot out. His fingers clamped down like a steel vise around her slender wrist. Simultaneously, he violently threw his left leg sideways, hooking his heavy combat boot behind the reinforced steel radiator pipe bolted beneath the window sill. He slammed his torso hard against the sharp, broken edge of the window frame, the jagged glass digging deep into his chest and shoulder, using the searing pain as a second anchor point. The pipe groaned in protest as it became his only anchor.

The sudden, violent stop nearly dislocated Hilliard's shoulder. Cailin dangled in the freezing air, fifteen feet above the concrete driveway. Her boots kicked empty space.

Hilliard's bicep bulged, veins popping against his skin as he held her entire body weight with one arm, his chest pressed against the broken glass, his hooked leg the only thing keeping them both from being dragged into the abyss.

Behind him, the timer hit zero.

00:00.

The C4 detonated.

A blinding, white-hot flash erased the world. The second floor of the mansion was instantly vaporized in the blast.

The concussive shockwave of the C4 detonation hit them like a solid wall of concrete.

The reinforced steel radiator pipe and the brick facade beneath Hilliard's hooked leg finally gave way under the catastrophic force, disintegrating into burning shrapnel. Gravity violently reclaimed them. Hilliard didn't let go of Cailin's wrist. As they plummeted toward the concrete driveway, he twisted his massive frame in mid-air, wrapping his free arm around her head, forcing his own back to take the brutal impact of the fall.

Chapter 640:

They hit the ground hard. The sickening crunch of bone and cartilage echoed in his own ears as his sternum fractured under the force. The air exploded from Hilliard's lungs in a wet, tearing cough, and black spots danced across his vision. Above them, the second floor of the mansion rained down in a torrent of fire and ash. Before he could lose consciousness, the Shadow Squad swarmed them.

"Boss is down! Form a perimeter!" Gavin roared, his voice cutting through the chaos.

Medics dragged them out of the kill zone just as a search team, equipped with thermal imagers, spotted a heat signature under a massive section of reinforced ceiling. It had collapsed at an angle, forming a perfect, life-saving triangle. Prying it open, they pulled a weeping, soot-covered Ashely from the rubble. Miraculously, in the agonizing seconds before detonation, the extreme heat from the spreading floor fire had melted the synthetic straps of her bomb vest. She had desperately writhed out of it, kicking the explosive charge just far enough away before the blast threw her under the collapsing roof.

Three hours later, the acrid smell of smoke still clinging to her clothes, Cailin stood rigidly in front of the floor-to-ceiling bulletproof glass of the Upper East Side safe house. She stared down at the flashing red and blue police lights painting the wet asphalt of the street below.

The heavy, armored door to the apartment clicked open. Ashely, wrapped in a thick paramedic's blanket, walked in, her face pale and smudged with soot. Her eyes were wide with a residual, haunting terror. She collapsed onto the white leather sofa in the living room, letting out a long, shuddering breath.

"I can't believe we're alive," she whispered, her voice raw. "That noise... the heat..."

Cailin didn't turn around. Both of her hands were wrapped in thick, white medical bandages, covering the deep lacerations she had sustained sawing through the zip ties with broken glass. She reached for a glass of water on the console table. Her fingers twitched. A violent muscle spasm shot up her forearm. The glass slipped, clattering loudly against the polished mahogany surface.

"Easy," Ashely said softly. "The medics said you have severe tissue damage. You need to rest."

Cailin closed her eyes, trying to force her breathing to slow. But as she inhaled, her sharp senses caught something wrong. It wasn't the lingering smell of fire or the ozone from the city air. It was a faint, acrid chemical stench seeping from the central air conditioning vents. It smelled like industrial solvent.

Cailin's amber eyes snapped open. She whipped her head toward the ceiling vent above the entryway.

A sickly, pale yellow smoke was bleeding through the metal louvers.

"Ashely, get up!" Cailin barked, the absolute authority of "Cali" instantly taking over her voice.

Before Ashely could process the command, the yellow smoke thickened with terrifying speed. A deep, muffled popping sound echoed from inside the drywall. The fire alarm on the ceiling remained completely silent, its green LED light dead.

Cailin sprinted toward the smart lock panel by the front door and slammed her bandaged hand against the screen. It was pitch black. The electronic system was dead. Someone had physically severed the backup power lines from the outside.