

Second chance 731

Chapter 731:

A man walked into the room, and the atmosphere shifted instantly. He was not an explosive force like Hilliard; he was a creeping frost. Dressed in a silver-grey suit that seemed woven from twilight, Silas Sinclair moved with a chilling, predatory stillness. His ice-blue eyes swept the room, not with arrogance, but with the detached curiosity of a biologist studying a petri dish. He was a different kind of predator, one who killed with spreadsheets and surgical drone strikes, not just brute force.

Charla's eyes lit up with a manic, desperate hunger. This was Sebastian Sinclair's heir, a man whose power dwarfed Hilliard's. If she could just get his attention, maybe he could shield her from the impending murder trial and the ruin of her family. She pushed her shoulders back, plastered a sickeningly sweet smile on her face, and stepped directly into his path.

"Mr. Sinclair," Charla cooed, her voice a high-pitched, breathy whisper. She reached out, intending to loop her arm through his in a brazen display of familiarity.

Silas did not even blink. He did not look at her. He simply shifted his shoulders a fraction of an inch to the left and kept walking.

Charla's hands grasped empty air. Her six-inch heels wobbled on the thick Persian rug, and she stumbled forward, spilling a splash of expensive champagne down the front of her own dress.

A few suppressed snickers rippled through the crowd. Charla's face burned a violent, ugly red. The humiliation tasted like battery acid in the back of her throat. She ground her back teeth together so hard her jaw ached.

Silas ignored the whispers. He walked straight to the panoramic glass window at the front of the lounge, his cold, dangerous eyes scanning the room like a radar.

A concealed door on the side of the lounge clicked open.

Cailin stepped out. She was no longer the embattled mother from the courthouse. She was Cali, the chief auctioneer. She wore a skin-tight black couture gown that moved like liquid shadow, and her face was concealed behind her signature black lace half-mask.

The temperature in the room seemed to spike. Every male investor in the lounge turned their heads, their eyes tracking her with undisguised greed.

The moment Silas saw her, the cold indifference in his eyes sharpened into a focused, possessive intensity. He pushed off the glass window and closed the distance between them in three silent, decisive strides.

Cailin was looking down, pressing a finger to her earpiece to confirm a security detail with Gavin. She did not see the wall of tailored grey wool until she slammed directly into it.

The impact knocked the breath out of her. A faint, sterile scent of expensive cologne and cold ambition washed over her. Her heart skipped a violent beat, and her combat instincts flared. She tried to step back.

Silas's hand shot out, his fingers clamping down on her narrow waist like a chilled steel vise. He pulled her flush against his lean, hard chest, stopping her retreat instantly.

Cailin glared up at him through the eyeholes of her mask.

"Let go of me," she ordered, keeping her voice to a lethal, barely audible whisper.

Silas did not loosen his grip. Instead, he lowered his head, his lips brushing the shell of her ear.

"My father sent his regards, cousin," he murmured, his voice a dark, silky vibration against her skin. "He's concerned about your security arrangements."

Chapter 732:

Cailin let out a short, cold breath. She lifted her right foot and drove the stiletto heel of her shoe directly down onto the arch of his expensive leather oxford. She ground her heel in with vicious force.

Silas let out a low, muffled hiss deep in his chest. But he did not let go. His fingers dug harder into the fabric of her dress at her waist.

"You have the Sinclair fire," he whispered, his eyes burning with a sick, assessing light. "He will be pleased."

Cailin shoved her hands against his chest and shoved him backward. She smoothed down the front of her dress, her movements sharp and precise.

“Enjoy the auction, Mr. Sinclair,” she said in a loud, perfectly neutral, professional tone, drawing a thick, invisible line between them.

To the rest of the room, the brief physical clash looked like a highly charged, deeply sexual moment of flirtation between a global power broker and a mysterious woman.

Charla watched from across the room. Her chest heaved. The sight of Silas touching the masked woman, the raw hunger in his posture, sent a spike of pure, unadulterated hatred straight into her brain. She had lost everything — her wealth, her freedom, her reputation — and now this mysterious woman was effortlessly capturing the very billionaire Charla desperately needed to save herself.

She reached into her designer clutch. Her trembling fingers found the cold glass of the small bottle hidden inside. Industrial-grade sulfuric acid. Her shadow backers had provided it, giving her one final, ruthless ultimatum: ruin the chief auctioneer and destroy the reputation of The Vault, or they would revoke her bail and leave her to rot in a federal cell.

Blair saw the twisted, demonic look on Charla’s face and took a step back, her hands shaking.

“Charla, we can’t do this here,” Blair whispered, her voice cracking with panic. “There are too many guards.”

"If you back out now," Charla hissed, her spit flying, "I'll make sure the video of your father embezzling from my family's fund finds its way to the district attorney. You'll be visiting him in federal prison for the next twenty years. Now do exactly what I told you."

The overhead speakers chimed with a soft, electronic tone. A voice announced that the main auction hall was now open.

Charla took a deep, ragged breath. A cruel, ugly smile stretched across her face. She turned and melted into the crowd heading toward the main doors, dragging a terrified Blair behind her.

The hidden service corridor on the second floor of the main auction hall was dark and narrow. It offered a perfect, unobstructed view of the VIP seating area on the ground floor through a series of tinted glass panels.

Charla and Blair slipped into the corridor just as the lights in the main hall began to dim.

Chapter 733:

The heavy metal door of the fire stairwell banged open. Carter, Blair's boyfriend and a mid-level financial executive, stumbled into the corridor. He was sweating profusely, his chest heaving as if he had just run a marathon. He had used a guest pass meant for a hedge fund manager to slip away, his mind screaming with a terrible premonition ever since he'd seen Charla corner Blair in the lounge. He lunged forward and grabbed Blair's wrist with a bruising grip.

"Blair, you have to stop this right now," Carter pleaded, his voice a frantic, desperate whisper. "We need to leave this building."

Blair tried to yank her arm away, but Carter held on tight.

“You don’t understand what you’re messing with,” Carter warned, his eyes wide with genuine terror. “The security down there? They aren’t mall cops. They’re ex-Navy SEALs. Kegan Aguirre runs this place. If they catch you tampering with the systems, they won’t call the police. They’ll make you disappear. You’ll wish you were dead.”

Blair looked down through the glass panels at the massive men in black tactical gear patrolling the floor. A cold sweat broke out on the back of her neck. Her stomach churned with sudden, violent fear.

Charla saw Blair hesitating. She marched over, her heels clicking sharply on the concrete floor, and shoved Carter hard in the chest.

“Get your hands off her, you pathetic coward,” Charla spat.

Charla turned her manic eyes on Blair. “He’s a loser, Blair. He’ll keep you trapped in a middle-class nightmare forever. You do this for me tonight, and I’ll wire two million dollars into your account by morning. I’ll get you into the Sterling Country Club. You’ll never have to look at a price tag again.”

The promise of money and the crushing weight of Charla’s blackmail collided in Blair’s weak mind. She looked at Carter’s pleading face, then at Charla’s demanding glare.

Blair ripped her wrist out of Carter’s grip.

"I'm doing it," she said, her voice shaking but final.

Carter stared at her. The desperation in his eyes died, replaced by a hollow, sickening realization that the woman he loved was already gone. He backed away slowly, shaking his head, and disappeared into the dark stairwell.

Charla let out a sharp, victorious snort. She walked to the glass panel and pressed her hands against it, her eyes locking onto the impassive, silver-haired figure sitting in the absolute center of the front row.

Down on the first floor, Silas Sinclair sat in his VIP chair like a statue carved from pale marble. He did not look at the catalog. He did not speak to anyone. His ice-blue eyes were fixed dead ahead.

The stage lights flared to life.

Cailin walked out from behind the velvet curtains. She moved with absolute authority, her black gown sweeping the floor. She stepped behind the podium and picked up the solid ivory auction gavel.

She struck the sound block once. The sharp crack echoed through the massive vault, instantly silencing the room.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Cailin's voice flowed through the microphones, smooth and commanding. "We are altering the schedule. Tonight's grand finale will be presented now. I present to you: The Eye of the Deep."

Chapter 734:

Two armed guards rolled a bulletproof glass display case onto the center of the stage. Resting on a bed of black velvet was a massive, flawless blue diamond ring set in vintage platinum. The stone radiated a cold, mesmerizing light that seemed to suck the air out of the room.

“This is a historically significant, unheated blue diamond,” Cailin announced. “The starting bid is fifty million dollars.”

A collective gasp rippled through the crowd.

Instantly, a paddle shot up from a Saudi oil magnate in the third row. “Sixty million!”

“Seventy!” shouted a tech billionaire from Silicon Valley.

The price skyrocketed with terrifying speed. Within sixty seconds, the bids hit ninety million dollars.

Silas did not move. He leaned back in his chair, his long fingers resting lightly on the armrests. He wasn’t looking at the blue diamond. His eyes were locked entirely on Cailin’s lips as she called out the numbers.

The bidding stalled at one hundred and twenty million.

Silas tilted his head a fraction of an inch.

Standing directly behind him, a man in a nondescript suit raised his numbered paddle. His face was a blank, emotionless mask.

“One hundred and fifty million,” the man stated, his voice completely flat.

The entire auction hall went dead silent. Heads snapped toward the front row. Even Cailin paused, her fingers tightening around the ivory gavel.

A Russian oligarch on the far side of the room gritted his teeth, his face turning red. He thrust his paddle into the air. “One hundred and sixty million.”

Silas did not even turn his head to look at the man. He simply raised his index finger off the armrest.

His representative immediately spoke again. “Two hundred million dollars.”

The number hit the room like a physical shockwave. It was an obscene, suffocating amount of money. It was not a bid; it was a display of absolute, crushing dominance. The Russian oligarch slowly lowered his paddle, the fight completely drained out of him.

Up on the second floor, Charla gripped the railing so hard her acrylic nails dug into her own palms. Her entire body was vibrating.

Two hundred million dollars.

Her diseased mind twisted the reality in front of her. She convinced herself, with absolute certainty, that the powerful Silas Sinclair was buying the legendary ring for her. It was his way of announcing his intentions, of choosing her as his partner in the city's new power structure.

On the stage, Cailin looked down at Silas. The cold, possessive hunger in his eyes made her skin crawl. Her stomach tightened. This was a message, a public branding. He was claiming her for the Sinclair family in front of the entire world.

"Two hundred million, going once," Cailin spoke rapidly into the microphone. "Going twice. Sold."

She slammed the gavel down with a loud bang.

"The item goes to the representative of Mr. Sinclair. Please proceed to the back office for the transaction," Cailin said, already stepping away from the podium.

But Silas did not move toward the back office.

He stood up. He calmly buttoned the center button of his suit jacket.

Then, in front of five hundred of the wealthiest people on the planet, Silas Sinclair stepped over the velvet security rope and walked directly toward the stage.

Chapter 735:

Silas moved with the slow, deliberate grace of a glacier carving through a mountain. His soft-soled footsteps on the wooden stairs leading up to the stage were nearly silent, making his advance all the more menacing.

The massive auction hall was paralyzed in a stunned, breathless silence. Two of The Vault's security guards stepped forward instinctively to block his path. Silas did not slow down. He simply shifted his gaze to them — a look so cold, so devoid of any recognizable emotion, that the guards froze in their tracks and stepped aside.

Up in the dark corridor, Charla pressed her face against the glass. She was breathing in short, erratic gasps. She ran a hand through her hair, trying to fix her appearance, waiting for the moment Silas would turn around and hold the ring up to the balcony for her.

Silas reached the bulletproof display case. He did not wait for the handlers. He reached out with his long-fingered hand, bypassed the velvet cushion, and picked up the two-hundred-million-dollar blue diamond.

He did not turn toward the balcony. He did not look at the crowd.

He walked straight toward Cailin.

His lean frame completely blocked her from the audience. He backed her up until her spine hit the edge of the heavy wooden podium. There was nowhere left to run.

Cailin's heart hammered against her ribs like a trapped bird. She forced her chin up, refusing to show fear.

"The transaction desk is in the back, Mr. Sinclair," she said, her voice dropping to a harsh, freezing whisper. "Get off my stage."

Silas let out a low, dark chuckle that vibrated in his chest. It was a sound completely devoid of warmth.

"My father believes in gestures," he said, his voice a silken threat. "This is a welcome home gift. For his niece."

He spoke the last word with precise, cutting emphasis, loud enough for the front rows to hear the shocking revelation.

Gasps and frantic whispers erupted from the crowd. Cailin's blood ran cold. It wasn't a proposal. It was an unveiling — a public declaration of her lineage that chained her to a family of monsters.

Suddenly, his left hand shot out. His fingers wrapped around Cailin's left wrist with the crushing force of a steel trap.

Cailin gasped, her eyes widening behind the lace mask. She tried to yank her arm back, but his grip was absolute. It was a physical manifestation of his power, locking her in place.

“Let go of me,” she hissed, her heavily bandaged right hand hovering uselessly, unable to strike or pry his fingers loose because of her severe injury.

Silas ignored her struggles completely. He brought his right hand up, holding the massive blue diamond ring between his thumb and forefinger. He aligned it perfectly with the ring finger of her trapped left hand.

“Every queen needs a crown,” Silas whispered, his voice a dark, gravelly command that sent shivers down her spine, “or in your case, a signet. To remind the world who you belong to.”

Before Cailin could clench her fist, Silas shoved the platinum band over her knuckle. He forced it down the length of her finger with brutal, unstoppable determination.

Chapter 736:

The ring slid into place, cold and heavy.

Cailin’s breath hitched. She immediately reached over with her heavily bandaged right hand. The thick gauze made her movements clumsy. As she tried to grasp the massive diamond, a sharp jolt of pain shot through her injured thumb.

Gritting her teeth, she abandoned the attempt to yank it forcefully and instead awkwardly pushed the band upward with the side of her palm.

The ring slid off her left finger and dropped into her palm. It wasn't a lock. It was an insult — a piece of property he could bestow and she was expected to accept.

She held the ring on her open left palm, a two-hundred-million-dollar weight of defiance.

Panic flared in her chest. She knew she couldn't throw it back at him without causing an international incident. She was trapped, not by a mechanism, but by politics and power.

This was no ordinary ring. It was a statement to Argent, to the world, that Cailin Morton was now a Sinclair asset. He was painting a massive, glowing target on her back and dragging her children deeper into the crossfire.

Silas looked down at the ring in her palm. A look of sick, twisted satisfaction washed over his face. He lowered his head, caught her injured right wrist with mock gentleness, and pressed a hot, lingering kiss against the thick white bandages wrapping her knuckles. It was a calculated display of dominance, mocking her vulnerability while branding her in front of the world.

The crowd erupted. Applause, cheers, and whistles bounced off the vaulted ceiling. The billionaires and socialites thought they were witnessing the most dramatic family reunion of the century.

On the second floor, Charla's delusion shattered into a million jagged pieces.

She stared at Silas kissing the masked woman's bandaged hand. She heard his words echo in her mind — niece. The blood drained from her face, leaving her looking like a corpse. Her lungs seized. It felt as if a physical blade had been driven straight through her sternum.

"No," Charla wheezed, her voice cracking. "No, no, no!"

The humiliation and the loss morphed instantly into a blinding, psychotic rage. She slammed her fist against the metal railing so hard the skin on her knuckles split open, smearing blood on the steel.

She whipped her head around to face Blair. Her eyes were completely unhinged.

"Do it!" Charla screamed, spit flying from her lips. "Do it right now! Drown that bitch!"

Down on the stage, Cailin violently ripped her injured hand out of Silas's grasp, wincing as the sudden jerk pulled at her stitches. She closed her left fist around the ring, hiding it from view, her entire body shaking with rage.

She tapped her earpiece with her uninjured left hand. "Cut the live feed," she ordered, her voice trembling with barely contained fury. "Drop the curtain. The first half is over."

Chapter 737:

Silas watched her bristle like a feral cat. He had marked his territory. He took one step back, gave her a slow, arrogant nod, and walked off the stage.

Cailin did not wait for the heavy velvet curtains to fully close. She grabbed the skirt of her gown and stormed off the stage, her high heels stabbing the floorboards like daggers. She headed straight for the VIP dressing rooms in the back corridor.

In the front row, Gavin tapped a few keys on his encrypted tablet, sending a coded alert to Hilliard in Prague: Sinclair public move. Cailin exposed.

Upstairs, Charla watched Cailin disappear into the backstage area. A venomous, lethal light sparked in her eyes. She turned and sprinted toward the employee stairwell, hunting her prey.

Blair, trembling from head to toe, pulled a black digital override device from her pocket and began walking toward the building's fire control terminal.

The auction hall continued to buzz with excitement, completely unaware that a deadly trap was about to spring.

Cailin shoved the heavy, soundproof door of the VIP dressing room open with her shoulder. She marched inside, her heels sinking into the plush carpet, and slammed the door shut behind her with a violent bang.

She marched straight to the vanity mirror. Her chest rose and fell in rapid, shallow breaths. She opened her clenched fist and slammed the Eye of the Deep onto the marble countertop. The two-hundred-million-dollar diamond bounced once with a heavy clink before settling, mocking her with its cold fire.

The dressing room door opened.

Kegan stepped inside. He reached behind him and pressed his thumb against the electronic lock panel. A sharp beep sounded, followed by the heavy thud of the deadbolt sliding into place.

Cailin spun around at the sound. She snatched a heavy crystal perfume bottle from the vanity, holding it like a club. Her eyes were lethal.

“What was that?” Cailin demanded, her voice shaking with rage. “How did Sinclair get that level of clearance? Why would Silas publicly claim me as his father’s niece?”

Kegan did not even glance at the weapon. He remained by the door, his posture rigid, his face a mask of grim professionalism.

He took a slow, deliberate step toward her.

“He didn’t just bypass the auction’s security,” Kegan said, his voice a low rumble of controlled fury. “He bypassed our digital firewall completely. His credentials came through a diplomatic channel so high it originated from the State Department. My men couldn’t block him without triggering an international incident. It was a ghost protocol. We were blindsided.”

Cailin’s hand trembled. This was the power of the Sinclair machine. They didn’t just break rules; they operated in a reality above them.

Kegan closed the distance between them. He did not try to disarm her. Instead, he reached out with his left hand, gently took the heavy crystal bottle from her grasp, and set it back on the vanity.

His touch was impersonal, steady. He was her general, not her captor.

Chapter 738:

“The damage is done,” Kegan stated. “Our priority now is containment. Gavin is already scrubbing your identity from the public feeds, but the people in that room — the leak is inevitable. By morning, Argent will know Cailin Morton is Cali. And they will know she’s a Sinclair by blood.”

Cailin let out a harsh, bitter laugh. “So my uncle Sebastian’s ‘protection’ is to paint a giant red target on my back and announce my lineage to the world? Calling me his niece doesn’t shield me — it exposes me.”

The words hit the cold air of the room. Her jaw clenched so hard a muscle ticked violently in her cheek.

“It’s a declaration of war,” Kegan confirmed, his voice grim. “He’s telling Argent that you’re now a protected piece on the board. They can’t make a move on you without incurring the full wrath of the Sinclair empire. By establishing you as his niece, Sebastian has chained you with his name, not with a ring.”

Cailin did not flinch. She stared straight into Kegan’s dark eyes. “I am not a piece on anyone’s board. And I am not a Sinclair. I am Cailin Morton.”

The air in the room grew thick and heavy, charged with the violent collision of Cailin's will against the world's most powerful forces.

Outside in the dark corridor, Charla pressed her back against the wall next to the dressing room door.

She had crept down the service stairs. Through the slight gap in the door's ventilation louvers, she couldn't see Cailin's face, blocked as it was by Kegan's broad shoulders. But she heard every word.

She heard the name "Sinclair." She heard "niece." The words echoed in Charla's skull, driving her into a state of pure, toxic madness. This masked whore wasn't just Hilliard's obsession — she was a blood relative to a global dynasty.

Charla pulled her phone from her clutch. Her hands were shaking so violently she could barely unlock the screen. She hit speed dial.

Blair answered on the first ring, her breathing erratic.

"Blair," Charla hissed, her voice sounding like a demon crawling out of a grave. "Are you in the system?"

"Yes," Blair whimpered. "I have the override for the VIP zone."

"The second she steps out of this room," Charla ordered, her eyes wide and staring at the door, "you trigger the high-pressure sprinklers. I want the water to hit her so hard that cheap mask melts off her face. I want the reporters to see the bitch who thinks she's a queen get drowned like a rat."

Charla hung up the phone and backed away into the shadows of a large Roman pillar at the end of the hall. She waited like a venomous spider.

Inside the room, Cailin shoved both her hands against the vanity, leaning her weight on it. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, forcing her erratic pulse to slow.

"I need to get back out there," Cailin said, her voice dropping to a dead, emotionless flatline. "I will not let them see me run. I will finish the auction."

She turned to the mirror, adjusted the lace mask on her face, and smoothed her hair. She did not look at Kegan again.

Chapter 739:

Kegan watched her walk to the door. His dark eyes were shadowed, carrying a complex, turbulent mix of emotions. He was her sworn protector, but he was beginning to realize that the greatest threats were not men with guns, but men with names like Sinclair and Holloway.

Cailin hit the unlock button. The heavy door swung open. She stepped out into the corridor, her heels clicking on the marble floor, completely unaware of the red crosshairs locking onto her from the ceiling above.

Cailin walked down the panoramic corridor that connected the VIP dressing rooms to the main auction hall. Her posture was rigid, her steps fast and aggressive. She had left the two-hundred-million-dollar diamond on the vanity, a silent act of defiance.

At the far end of the corridor, a pack of elite society reporters and photographers had already gathered behind a velvet rope. They had smelled blood in the water. The Sinclair revelation had sent shockwaves through the building, and they were desperate to capture the first image of the mysterious auctioneer at the center of the storm.

Charla remained perfectly still behind the thick marble Roman pillar. She watched Cailin walk directly into the center of the corridor, right into the kill zone.

Charla's lips curled back in a grotesque, triumphant snarl. She pressed the button on her hidden earpiece.

"Now, Blair. Drown the bitch."

Deep in the building's mechanical room, Blair squeezed her eyes shut and slammed her palm down on the red emergency sprinkler override button.

Instantly, a deafening, mechanical siren began to wail throughout the VIP sector. Red strobe lights embedded in the walls flashed with blinding intensity.

A fraction of a second later, the ceiling above Cailin exploded.

Dozens of high-pressure industrial fire sprinklers blew their caps simultaneously. This was not a gentle shower. It was a violent, torrential blast of freezing, pressurized water designed to extinguish chemical fires.

The water slammed into Cailin with the force of a physical blow. She gasped, her breath knocked out of her lungs by the sudden, freezing impact. Her black couture gown was instantly soaked, the heavy fabric clinging to her skin and dragging her down.

At the end of the hall, the reporters shrieked in panic, scrambling backward to protect their expensive cameras from the flood, slipping on the wet marble.

Charla stepped out from behind the pillar. She didn't care about the water soaking her own dress. She raised her phone and hit record, her eyes wide with manic anticipation. She was ready to capture the humiliation of the woman who had stolen everything from her.

Under the crushing weight of the water, the specialized medical adhesive holding Cailin's black lace mask began to dissolve.

Cailin felt the edges of the mask lifting. Panic, cold and sharp, pierced through her chest. She threw her hands up, desperately trying to press the mask back onto her skin.

But the water pressure was too violent. The adhesive failed completely. The black lace peeled away from her skin and was instantly washed down to the flooded floor.

The water curtain parted slightly.

Charla zoomed in with her camera, holding her breath.

Chapter 740:

The face revealed on the screen was not a stranger's. It was not an unknown rival. It was a face of breathtaking, cold beauty — amber eyes wide with shock, dark hair plastered against pale, flawless skin.

It was a face Charla saw in her worst nightmares.

It was Cailin Morton.

The phone slipped from Charla's numb fingers and shattered on the wet marble floor.

Charla's knees buckled. She collapsed against the pillar, sliding down until she hit the freezing water. Her brain simply stopped processing reality. The underground mistress, the mysterious Cali, the woman Silas Sinclair had just claimed as his own... was Hilliard's supposedly dead ex-wife.

"No," Charla whispered. The word tore out of her throat as a ragged, inhuman screech. "No! It's you! It can't be you!"

Her entire worldview, her arrogant superiority, her belief that she had finally won — it all disintegrated into ash. She had not destroyed a rival. She had just publicly unmasked the queen.

A few brave photographers, hearing Charla's scream, raised their long lenses through the mist and began firing their flashes in rapid succession.

Cailin wiped the water from her eyes. The shock faded, instantly replaced by a lethal, freezing clarity. She looked through the falling water and locked eyes with the pathetic, screaming woman on the floor.

Charla. It was always Charla.

Before the cameras could get a clear, focused shot of Cailin's face, a blur of black tactical gear tore through the water curtain.

Two members of the Shadow Squad, part of the detail Gavin had assigned to the auction, moved with terrifying efficiency. They hadn't been expecting this kind of attack, but their response was instantaneous.

One operative threw a heavy, black ballistic blanket over Cailin's head, completely shielding her face and upper body from the flashing cameras.

The other operative wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her soaked body out of the direct deluge and creating an impenetrable physical barrier between her and the reporters.

Kegan's voice crackled through their earpieces, calm and lethal amid the chaos. "Extract the asset. Secure the package. Now."

The operatives did not waste a single word. One bent his knees, scooped Cailin up into his arms, and carried her through the torrential downpour. He kicked open the door to a private, secure service elevator at the end of the hall and stepped inside.

The doors slid shut, leaving Charla alone in the flooded corridor, screaming hysterically into the wailing sirens.

The heavy steel doors of the service elevator slid shut, sealing with a pneumatic hiss. The deafening wail of the fire alarms and the chaotic shouts of the reporters were instantly cut off, leaving only the sound of Cailin's chattering teeth in the small, metallic box.

The operative's ruined suit jacket was still draped over Cailin's head. He held her tightly against his chest, his arms locked around her like iron bands. Freezing water dripped from the blanket, pooling on the floor.

The initial shock of the water blast began to wear off, and Cailin's combat instincts violently rebooted. The wet fabric clinging to her face and the impersonal, restraining weight of the guard's arms triggered a sudden, blinding wave of claustrophobia.