

Second chance 671

Chapter 671:

Cailin looked down at the old man's hand gripping her wrist. She felt a strange, uncomfortable twisting in her gut, a phantom ache of a family she never knew. But she crushed it instantly.

She looked back up, meeting Sebastian's desperate gaze with absolute, unyielding coldness.

"My mother's name was Evelyn Morton," Cailin stated firmly, articulating every syllable. "She was a bookkeeper. She lived in a two-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn her entire life. She died of pancreatic cancer three years ago. She had absolutely nothing to do with the Sinclair family."

The words "died" and "Evelyn Morton" hit Sebastian like a physical execution.

The desperate, burning hope in his eyes was instantly extinguished. His grip on Cailin's wrist went completely slack. He slumped back against the plush leather seat, his shoulders collapsing inward. In the span of two seconds, he looked as though he had aged twenty years.

His trembling fingers gently stroked the edge of the faded Polaroid before he carefully placed it back into the silver case.

Cailin watched him break. She felt no triumph, only a cold, necessary survival instinct.

“Now,” Cailin said, her tone shifting to pure business. “Since we have established that I am not your long-lost relative, does your offer to help me extract my sons still stand?”

Sebastian let out a dry, hollow laugh. He closed the silver case with a sharp snap. The vulnerable, broken old man vanished, instantly replaced by the ruthless patriarch of the Sinclair Consortium.

“The Sinclair family does not provide charity, Ms. Morton,” Sebastian said, his voice returning to its smooth, icy baritone. “If you are not of my blood, then this conversation is over.”

Cailin wasn’t surprised. She expected nothing less from a billionaire.

She didn’t argue. She grabbed the heavy chrome door handle and pulled.

Cailin stepped out of the Rolls-Royce, pulling Elia with her. The damp, exhaust-filled air of the parking garage hit her face.

Hilliard was standing exactly where she had left him. He immediately stepped forward, his eyes scanning her face, looking for any sign of distress.

Behind her, the tinted window of the Phantom hummed upward, sealing Sebastian in the dark.

Inside the car, Sebastian stared at Cailin’s retreating back. His eyes were narrowed into dangerous, calculating slits.

He pressed the intercom button on the armrest.

“Corbin,” Sebastian commanded, his voice vibrating with absolute, terrifying certainty. “She is lying. I saw it in her eyes. I want you to dig into Evelyn Morton. I want every tax return, every medical file, every utility bill for the last thirty years. Find out where Evelyn Morton was twenty-five years ago.”

The Rolls-Royce shifted into gear and glided silently out of the parking garage, leaving a massive, invisible net slowly descending over Cailin’s hidden past.

The rain started the moment Cailin and Hilliard stepped out of the underground garage and onto the Manhattan pavement. It was a cold, driving downpour that instantly soaked through Cailin’s clothes.

She sat in the back seat of Hilliard’s armored SUV, holding a sleeping Elia against her chest. The rhythmic thumping of the windshield wipers did nothing to calm the frantic racing of her heart.

Chapter 672:

Cailin held a burner phone to her ear, her bandaged fingers awkwardly pressing the keys. She dialed the third underground real estate broker on her list.

“I need a Class-A secure safe house,” Cailin demanded the moment the line connected. “Manhattan or Brooklyn. Cash upfront. Double your usual commission.”

"I'm sorry, Cali," the broker's voice crackled through the speaker, sounding genuinely nervous. "I can't help you. Every single high-security short-term rental in the tri-state area was block-booked an hour ago by a shell corporation. The market is completely locked down."

Cailin ended the call. She threw the burner phone onto the leather seat beside her.

Her jaw clenched so tightly her teeth ached. It wasn't a coincidence. Preston Holloway was using the massive liquidity of the Holloway Group to physically corner her. He was cutting off her oxygen, forcing her out into the open where his contractors could easily grab her and Elia.

Hilliard sat in the front passenger seat. He watched Cailin through the rearview mirror. His amber eyes were dark, tracking the rising panic in her posture.

"Preston froze all your credit lines associated with the Holloway trust," Hilliard said. His voice was a low, steady rumble that cut through the sound of the rain. "He is trying to force you onto the street."

Hilliard turned his upper body to face the back seat. He winced slightly as the movement pulled at the severe burns on his shoulder, but he ignored the pain.

"Driver," Hilliard commanded. "Take us to the Tribeca penthouse."

He looked directly at Cailin. "It has military-grade biometric security. Preston's men cannot breach the elevators. You and Elia will stay there until I tear Preston's throat out and get the boys back."

Cailin let out a sharp, humorless laugh. The sound was bitter and cold.

“Move into your penthouse?” Cailin mocked, her eyes flashing with absolute hostility. “So I can trade Preston’s cage for yours? I would rather sleep in a subway station.”

Hilliard’s jaw tightened. The veins in his neck pulsed. “This is not a negotiation, Cailin. You are being hunted. I am offering you absolute protection.”

“Protection?” Cailin sneered. She pointed a bandaged finger directly at his chest, right where the fractured sternum lay beneath his ruined shirt. “You can barely breathe without coughing up blood. Your shoulder is roasted meat. You can’t even protect yourself, Hilliard. How the hell are you going to protect us against an army of corporate mercenaries?”

The words hit Hilliard with the force of a physical blow. His pride, his absolute need to be her shield, was shredded by her brutal honesty.

His amber eyes darkened into a terrifying, violent storm. He leaned over the center console, his massive frame invading the space of the back seat.

“I will not let you wander the streets with my daughter,” Hilliard snarled, his voice dropping to a lethal whisper. “If I have to physically tie you to a chair in that penthouse to keep you safe, I will do it.”

Cailin’s survival instincts exploded.

Chapter 673:

Her right hand dropped instantly to the side of her tactical boot. Her fingers slipped under the leather hem, wrapping around the textured grip of a ceramic combat knife. She pulled it free in a fraction of a second, hiding the blade against her forearm.

The air in the SUV turned toxic. The tension was a physical wire, pulled so tight it was about to snap.

Suddenly, the driver slammed both feet onto the brake pedal.

The massive armored SUV locked its tires. The vehicle skidded violently across the wet asphalt, the anti-lock brakes stuttering with a deafening, grinding screech.

Hilliard was thrown forward against the dashboard. He grunted in agony as his fractured chest slammed into the glove compartment. He instantly drew his Glock, his eyes scanning the street ahead.

Three heavily modified, matte-black tactical off-road vehicles had blown through the red light. They formed a solid steel barricade across the intersection, completely boxing in Hilliard's SUV. Thick steel bullbars gleamed in the streetlights.

The doors of the tactical vehicles flew open simultaneously.

Fourteen men poured out into the rain. They were massive, moving with terrifying military precision. They wore black tactical vests over civilian clothes. They held compact handguns, not submachine guns, keeping them at a low, professional ready, an overwhelming but not overtly warlike display of force.

Hilliard's driver and the Shadow Squad operative in the back reached for their weapons, but they were hopelessly outgunned.

The rear door of the center tactical vehicle slowly swung open.

Kegan Aguirre stepped out into the downpour.

He wore a long, black cashmere trench coat. He held a large black umbrella over his head. He walked with a slow, arrogant swagger, completely ignoring the armed men surrounding him.

He walked straight to the rear passenger window of Hilliard's SUV. He tapped the thick bulletproof glass with the knuckle of his index finger. He offered a slow, mocking smile.

Cailin saw Kegan's face. The paralyzing tension in her shoulders instantly evaporated. She slid the ceramic knife back into her boot.

She reached for the door handle.

"Lock the doors!" Hilliard roared at the driver, his voice cracking with panic.

He was a second too late. Cailin hit the manual override switch and shoved the heavy armored door open.

She stepped out into the rain, pulling Elia tightly against her side.

Kegan immediately stepped forward. He tilted the large black umbrella, holding it entirely over Cailin and Elia. The freezing rain instantly soaked Kegan's expensive coat and plastered his dark hair to his forehead, but he didn't seem to notice.

Hilliard shoved his door open and stumbled out into the street. The cold rain hit his raw burns like acid, and he bit back a gasp of pure agony.

He lunged toward Cailin, his hand reaching out desperately to grab her arm.

Two of Kegan's mercenaries stepped seamlessly into Hilliard's path. They didn't raise their guns. They simply slammed their fists into Hilliard's chest, shoving him violently backward.

Hilliard stumbled, his boots slipping on the wet asphalt.

Kegan looked down at Hilliard. The mocking smile vanished, replaced by absolute, freezing contempt.

Chapter 674:

“Look at you,” Kegan sneered, his voice carrying over the sound of the rain. “A king without a castle. You can’t even provide a roof for the woman you claim to love. You’re pathetic, Holloway.”

Hilliard ignored Kegan. His amber eyes, wild and bloodshot, locked onto Cailin.

“Cailin!” Hilliard yelled, his voice tearing at his throat. “Are you really going to trust a European warlord over me? He’s a criminal!”

Cailin stopped at the door of Kegan’s vehicle. She turned her head slowly.

The rain washed over her pale face. Her eyes were completely empty. There was no anger, no hatred. Just absolute, terrifying indifference.

“Kegan is a criminal,” Cailin said, her voice perfectly steady. “But at least he didn’t hand my sons over to the enemy.”

The words acted like a physical blade, sliding cleanly between Hilliard’s ribs and piercing his heart.

Hilliard froze. The breath left his lungs. He stood paralyzed in the middle of the street, the rain washing the blood from his suit.

Cailin didn’t look back again. She climbed into the back of the tactical vehicle with Elia.

Kegan stared at Hilliard for one more second. He slowly raised his hand and drew his thumb across his own throat in a deliberate, mocking gesture.

He climbed in and slammed the door.

The three tactical vehicles roared to life. They reversed in perfect synchronization, spun their tires on the wet pavement, and accelerated away into the dark.

Hilliard Holloway stood alone in the pouring rain, surrounded by the deafening silence of the city, watching the only thing that mattered to him disappear into the night.

Three days later.

The morning sun poured through the floor-to-ceiling bulletproof windows of Kegan's Upper East Side safe house. The light reflected off the pristine white marble floors, making the massive living room feel sterile and cold.

Elia sat on a thick, fluffy rug near the window. She was quietly snapping together colorful plastic bricks, building a massive, uneven Lego castle.

Cailin stood by the window, staring down at the microscopic yellow cabs crawling along the avenue below. She held a mug of black coffee in her hands. The thick medical gauze had been replaced by thinner, flesh-colored surgical dressings, but her fingers still moved with a stiff, painful hesitation.

Her eyes were hollow. Dark, bruised circles hung beneath them.

For seventy-two hours, she had utilized every dark-web contact, every encrypted channel Kegan possessed, trying to get a signal into the Holloway Estate. Nothing worked. Preston had upgraded the estate's digital firewall to military-grade specifications. Aron and Davy were completely cut off from the outside world.

The heavy oak door of the study clicked open.

Kegan walked out. He wore a soft, charcoal cashmere sweater, looking entirely out of place for a man who commanded a private army. He held an encrypted tablet in his hand. His jaw was set in a hard, grim line.

He walked over to the window and handed the tablet to Cailin.

"My inside man at Mount Sinai just forwarded this," Kegan said, his voice low.

Cailin looked at the screen. It was a highly classified medical log. The patient name at the top read: Amerigo Holloway.

Chapter 675:

The charts displayed a catastrophic cascade of red numbers. Liver function failing. Kidneys shutting down. The jagged green line of the EKG was erratic, struggling to maintain a rhythm.

"If Amerigo dies," Cailin murmured, her brain instantly shifting into tactical analysis, "Preston loses his last leash. The board will be in chaos. Preston will move to consolidate power immediately."

"And he'll use your sons to do it," Kegan added darkly.

Before Cailin could respond, the burner phone resting on the glass coffee table buzzed.

It wasn't a text. It was a voice call from an unknown, spoofed number.

Cailin set her coffee down. She picked up the phone and pressed it to her ear. "Speak."

"Ms. Morton," a dry, impeccably polite British voice echoed through the speaker.

Cailin recognized it instantly. It was Charles, the Holloway family's head butler.

"Mr. Amerigo Holloway's time is drawing to a close," Charles said, his tone devoid of any emotional inflection. "He has requested the presence of you and your daughter, Elia, for a final farewell."

Cailin let out a short, humorless laugh. "Tell the old devil I'll send a wreath. I have no interest in watching him burn."

She moved to hang up the phone.

"Ms. Morton, please," Charles interjected, his voice dropping an octave, losing its polished sheen. "The master anticipated your refusal. He instructed me to convey a specific message."

Charles paused for exactly two seconds.

"He said this meeting concerns the immediate transfer of his fifteen percent voting shares. And, more importantly, it concerns the final, legal placement of your two sons."

Cailin's hand froze. The phone was pressed so hard against her ear the plastic dug into her skin.

Her sons.

He had found her pressure point and driven a spike right through it.

"I'll be there in an hour," Cailin said, her voice a flat, dead monotone. She hung up the phone.

She looked up at Kegan.

Kegan had heard the entire conversation. His face darkened with immediate, violent objection. "Absolutely not. It's a trap. Preston controls the hospital security. You walk in there, he'll lock the floor down and you'll never walk out."

"I have to go," Cailin said, turning away from the window. "Amerigo holds the trust. If he signs those boys over to Preston before he dies, I will spend the next ten years fighting an army of corporate lawyers in federal court while my sons are brainwashed in that estate."

"Cailin, listen to reason—"

"I am listening to my sons!" Cailin snapped, her voice cracking with raw, maternal desperation. "I am not leaving them in that house!"

She walked over to the rug and knelt down beside Elia. She forced her facial muscles to soften, hiding the terror behind a gentle smile. She reached out and stroked Elia's hair.

"Hey, baby," Cailin whispered. "We have to go take a ride. We have to go see a very sick, very bad grandpa."

Chapter 676:

Elia stopped playing with her Legos. She looked up, her large eyes wide with sudden apprehension. She shrank back slightly, her small shoulders tensing. But she looked at her mother's face, saw the absolute determination there, and gave a small, brave nod.

Kegan watched them. He let out a harsh breath, running a hand through his hair in frustration. He knew he couldn't stop her.

"Fine," Kegan growled. He pulled his own phone from his pocket. "But you aren't walking in there alone."

He dialed a number. "Alpha team. Suit up. Full tactical under civilian cover. We are moving the package to Mount Sinai in twenty minutes."

An hour later, a convoy of four unmarked, matte-black armored sedans pulled into the underground parking garage of Mount Sinai Hospital.

Cailin stepped out of the center car, holding Elia's hand tightly. Twelve of Kegan's Ghost operatives formed a tight, impenetrable diamond formation around them. They wore tailored suits, but the heavy bulges of concealed automatic weapons were clearly visible under their jackets.

They rode the private VIP elevator to the top floor.

The doors slid open. The hallway was packed. Dozens of Holloway family executives, distant cousins, and high-priced lawyers milled about, waiting like vultures for the patriarch to die.

When Cailin stepped out, flanked by a private army, the hallway went dead silent. Whispers erupted like hissing snakes, but the sheer, intimidating physical presence of Kegan's men parted the crowd like the Red Sea.

Charles stood outside the heavy double doors of the master suite. He bowed slightly as Cailin approached.

"Only you and the child, Ms. Morton," Charles said, glancing nervously at the armed men.

Cailin nodded to the Ghost team leader. The operatives stopped, forming a physical barricade across the hallway, blocking anyone else from approaching.

Cailin pushed the heavy oak doors open and stepped inside.

The smell of death was overpowering. It was the sickly-sweet scent of decaying cells and heavy antiseptics.

Amerigo Holloway lay in the center of the massive hospital bed. He looked like a skeleton draped in translucent, yellowing parchment. His eyes were sunken deep into his skull, but as the door clicked shut, they snapped open.

He stared at Cailin. A wet, rattling wheeze escaped his throat.

He slowly raised a trembling, bony finger. He pointed past Cailin, toward a heavy, motorized wheelchair sitting in the corner of the room.

“Put me... in the chair,” Amerigo gasped, every syllable a monumental effort. “Take me... to the roof garden. Alone.”

Cailin stared at the dying monster. She felt no empathy. She walked to the bed, her face a mask of cold stone, and reached for the sterile sheets.

Cailin locked her arms under Amerigo’s armpits. The man weighed almost nothing. His bones felt as brittle as dry twigs beneath his thin hospital gown.

She hoisted him into the motorized wheelchair, ignoring the sharp spikes of pain shooting through her own healing hands. She strapped him in, grabbed the handles, and pushed him out of the suite.

They bypassed the crowded main hallway, taking a private service elevator directly to the hospital’s rooftop.

Chapter 677:

The doors opened to the roof garden. It was a sprawling, meticulously manicured oasis suspended above the concrete jungle of Manhattan. High glass walls blocked the wind, creating a silent, greenhouse-like atmosphere. The late autumn sun was surprisingly bright, casting long, sharp shadows across the pristine stone pathways.

The garden was completely empty.

Cailin pushed the wheelchair along a winding path, stopping near a large, white marble statue of an angel with folded wings. The sunlight hit Amerigo's face, bringing a sickly, flushed color to his pale, sunken cheeks. He closed his eyes, his chest heaving as he greedily sucked in the fresh air.

He raised his trembling right hand.

Cailin stepped around to the front of the wheelchair.

Amerigo slowly opened his fist. Resting in the center of his palm was a small, matte-black USB drive.

"This," Amerigo wheezed, his voice a dry, scraping whisper, "contains the cryptographic keys to the Holloway offshore accounts. The Caymans. Switzerland. Luxembourg. Unregistered capital. Untraceable."

Cailin's amber eyes locked onto the small piece of plastic. She knew exactly what that was. It was the dark heart of the Holloway empire. The slush funds used to bribe politicians, crush competitors, and fund their private armies.

"I am transferring the fifteen percent voting shares... and every cent on this drive... into a blind trust," Amerigo gasped, his watery eyes fixing on Cailin with a terrifying, manic intensity. "The beneficiaries... are Aron and Davy."

Cailin didn't flinch. "And what is the price, Amerigo?"

A ghastly, skeletal smile stretched across the old man's face.

"You will be the executor of the trust," Amerigo whispered. "But you must swear... on their lives... that you will use this capital to destroy Preston. You will groom my grandsons. You will teach them to be ruthless. You will ensure they take back the Holloway Group and rule it with an iron fist."

Cailin stared at him. A cold, bitter laugh escaped her lips.

"You are dying, and you are still trying to play god," Cailin mocked, her voice dripping with absolute venom. "You want to turn my sons into monsters just to preserve your pathetic legacy. I don't want your blood money. I just want my boys."

Amerigo's eyes widened in fury. His chest convulsed. He began to cough violently, a wet, tearing sound that seemed to rip his lungs apart. A thick glob of dark, bloody phlegm splattered onto the collar of his hospital gown.

He gripped the armrests of the wheelchair, leaning forward, his face twisting into a mask of pure malice.

"If you refuse," Amerigo hissed, his breath smelling of copper and decay, "Preston will assume legal guardianship tomorrow. He will send them to the Blackwood Academy in Switzerland. It is a behavioral modification camp for the elite. They will break your sons' minds. They will erase you from their memories. They will become Preston's obedient dogs."

The words struck Cailin like a physical blow to the stomach.

She knew about Blackwood. It wasn't a school; it was a psychological torture facility designed to strip children of their empathy and mold them into sociopathic corporate weapons.

Chapter 678:

Her maternal instincts screamed. She could not let that happen. She needed the capital on that drive to hire the army of lawyers required to fight Preston in federal court.

Cailin gritted her teeth. Her jaw locked. She slowly reached her hand out toward the black USB drive resting in Amerigo's palm.

Suddenly, a sharp gust of autumn wind whipped over the glass walls.

Amerigo shivered violently. His frail body shook like a leaf in a storm. His teeth began to chatter uncontrollably.

"Cold," Amerigo gasped, his hand closing tightly over the USB drive, pulling it back to his chest. "Get me... a heated blanket. From the nurse's station. Now."

Cailin's hand hovered in the air. She looked at the shivering, pathetic old man. The urge to leave him there to freeze was overwhelming, but she needed that drive.

“Wait here,” Cailin said coldly.

She turned on her heel and walked briskly down the stone path, her boots clicking against the pavement. She pushed through the heavy glass doors leading back into the hospital corridor, her mind already calculating how to transfer the funds the moment she had the drive.

Out in the roof garden, Amerigo sat alone in his wheelchair. He closed his eyes, tilting his head back to feel the weak warmth of the sun.

Behind the large marble angel statue, the thick, manicured bushes rustled softly.

A figure stepped out from the shadows.

It was a woman wearing standard blue hospital scrubs, a stolen ICU security badge dangling from her collar. She had spent the last two days exploiting a night-shift janitor’s gambling debts, forcing him to give her access codes and memorize the blind spots in the service corridors. She had slipped up through the laundry elevator just moments before Kegan’s men secured the perimeter. A surgical mask covered the lower half of her face, and a disposable hairnet hid her hair. But her eyes — wide, bloodshot, and burning with a psychotic, unhinged hatred — were unmistakable.

It was Charla English.

She held a heavy, jagged landscaping river rock in her right hand. The stone was the size of a grapefruit, weighing nearly five pounds.

Charla moved with terrifying, silent speed. Her rubber-soled shoes made no sound on the stone path. She stepped directly behind Amerigo's wheelchair.

Amerigo sensed the shift in the air. His eyes snapped open. He tried to turn his head.

He was too late.

Charla raised the heavy river rock high above her head with both hands. She brought it down with every ounce of hysterical, adrenaline-fueled strength she possessed, smashing it directly into the back of Amerigo Holloway's skull.

Crack.

The sound of the skull fracturing was sickeningly loud, like a heavy melon being dropped onto concrete.

Amerigo's body jerked violently forward. A geyser of dark, arterial blood erupted from the back of his head, spraying across the pristine white marble of the angel statue.

He didn't even scream. He slumped forward, his chin hitting his chest, his arms dangling uselessly over the sides of the wheelchair.

Chapter 679:

Charla stood over him, her chest heaving with ragged, frantic breaths. She stared at the blood pooling on the ground. There was no horror in her eyes, only the manic, terrifying thrill of absolute power.

She reached down, her fingers prying open Amerigo's dead, twitching hand. She snatched the black USB drive from his palm and shoved it deep into the pocket of her scrubs.

Charla heard the faint sound of the glass doors opening at the far end of the garden.

She dropped the bloody river rock onto the grass next to the wheelchair. She spun around, vaulted over the low decorative hedge with surprising agility, and sprinted toward the emergency fire exit stairwell, vanishing into the shadows.

A second later, Cailin stepped back out into the sunlight, holding a folded blue heated blanket in her arms.

Cailin walked briskly down the stone path, the blue heated blanket clutched against her chest. The autumn sun cast long, peaceful shadows across the manicured lawns of the roof garden.

"I got the blanket," Cailin called out, her voice flat and devoid of any warmth.

She rounded the corner of the large marble angel statue.

The wheelchair was facing away from her. Amerigo's head was slumped forward at a sharp, unnatural angle, his chin resting heavily on his chest. He wasn't shivering anymore. He wasn't moving at all.

A cold, sharp spike of adrenaline pierced Cailin's stomach. The absolute stillness of his body triggered every survival instinct she had honed in the underground.

She dropped the blanket. It hit the stone path with a soft thud.

Cailin rushed forward, stepping around to the front of the wheelchair.

The breath was instantly sucked from her lungs.

Amerigo's eyes were wide open, staring blankly at the pavement. A massive, horrific pool of dark red blood was expanding rapidly across the collar of his hospital gown, dripping steadily onto the footrest of the wheelchair. The white marble base of the angel statue behind him was splattered with a gruesome arc of crimson droplets.

"No," Cailin whispered.

She lunged forward. Pure combat reflex took over. She reached out with her right hand, pressing two fingers hard against the side of Amerigo's neck, searching for the carotid artery.

The skin was already growing cool. There was no pulse. Nothing but dead, silent flesh.

As she pulled her hand back, she saw the thick, sticky blood coating her index and middle fingers. It had seeped into the edges of her flesh-colored bandages.

Cailin's eyes darted rapidly, scanning the immediate area.

Two feet away, resting on the perfectly trimmed green grass, was a large landscaping river rock. One side of the stone was slick with fresh blood and matted with strands of thin, silver hair.

It was a blunt-force execution. And it had happened in the exact three minutes she was gone.

Cailin immediately looked down at Amerigo's right hand, which hung limply over the armrest.

The palm was open. The black USB drive was gone.

The realization hit her with the crushing weight of a collapsing building. This wasn't just a murder. It was a perfectly orchestrated trap, and she was standing dead center in the kill zone.

Chapter 680:

She had to move. Now.

Cailin spun around, her boots pivoting sharply on the stone.

The heavy glass doors leading to the hospital corridor burst open.

Two hospital security guards, responding to an automated perimeter alarm triggered by the fire exit door Charla had used, rushed out onto the roof garden.

They stopped dead in their tracks.

Their eyes locked onto the horrific scene: the murdered billionaire slumped in the wheelchair, the bloody rock on the grass, and Cailin Morton standing directly over the body, her hands dripping with fresh blood.

“Hey!” the lead guard yelled, his voice cracking with panic. He immediately ripped the radio from his shoulder strap. “Code Blue! Code Blue! Roof garden! We have a homicide! Amerigo Holloway is down!”

The second guard didn’t hesitate. He drew his yellow X26 Taser from his belt, leveling it directly at Cailin’s chest. The twin red laser dots danced erratically over her sweater.

“Put your hands in the air! Do not move!” the guard screamed, his finger trembling on the trigger.

Cailin’s jaw clenched. Her muscles coiled, her brain instantly calculating the distance between her and the guard, the trajectory of the taser prongs. She could close the gap and disarm him in 1.5 seconds.

But she didn't move.

If she fought hospital security, she would be labeled a fleeing murderer. It would be the final nail in her coffin. She forced her body to relax. She slowly, deliberately raised her blood-stained hands into the air.

Within sixty seconds, the roof garden was swarming.

A crash team of doctors sprinted out, shoving past Cailin. They pulled Amerigo from the chair, laying him flat on the stone, and began frantic chest compressions. The lead doctor took one look at the massive, caved-in fracture on the back of the skull and slowly shook his head, stepping back.

The hospital's head of security, a burly man with a red face, marched up to Cailin. He looked at her bloody hands with absolute disgust.

"Cuff her," he ordered his men.

"You don't have the authority to arrest me," Cailin said, her voice a low, dangerous hiss. "I am waiting for the NYPD."

"I have the authority to secure a crime scene," the security chief spat.

Two guards grabbed Cailin's arms, twisting them roughly behind her back. The sudden, violent motion sent a blinding flash of agony through her healing lacerations. A guard pulled a thick, heavy-duty plastic zip-tie from his belt and ratcheted it brutally tight around her wrists, cutting off the circulation.

Cailin was shoved down onto a nearby wooden bench. She sat in silence, her face a mask of impenetrable ice, watching the chaos unfold.

Ten minutes later, the heavy glass doors opened again.

A team of NYPD detectives from the 19th Precinct Homicide Squad strode onto the roof. They were led by Detective O'Connor, a grizzled man with sharp, cynical eyes. He flashed his gold shield at the security chief and immediately took control of the scene.