

Second chance 681

Chapter 681:

O'Connor walked slowly around the body. He looked at the bloody river rock. Then he turned his gaze to Cailin, sitting on the bench with zip-tied hands.

He walked over to her. He didn't ask if she was okay. He didn't ask what happened.

"Cailin Morton," O'Connor said, his voice a flat, practiced monotone. "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney..."

Cailin stared directly into the detective's eyes. She didn't blink.

"I want Callum Vance," Cailin interrupted, her voice steady and cold. "And until he is sitting next to me, I will not say a single word."

O'Connor nodded slowly. He gestured to two uniformed officers. "Get her out of here. Take her down to the 19th."

The officers hauled Cailin to her feet. They marched her toward the glass doors, pushing through the crowd of gawking nurses, doctors, and Holloway executives who had gathered at the entrance to the garden.

As Cailin was shoved through the doorway, her eyes swept over the sea of faces.

Standing in the back row, partially hidden behind a tall doctor, was a woman in blue scrubs.

The woman slowly pulled her surgical mask down, revealing her face.

It was Charla.

Charla looked directly at Cailin. A slow, terrifying, utterly victorious smile spread across Charla's face. Her eyes danced with psychotic glee.

Cailin's amber eyes locked onto Charla. The temperature in Cailin's blood dropped to absolute zero. The trap had snapped shut, but the war had just begun.

The interrogation room at the NYPD 19th Precinct was a sensory deprivation box.

The walls were painted a dull, institutional grey. A single, harsh incandescent bulb hung from the ceiling, casting stark shadows across the scarred metal table. The large, one-way mirror on the wall felt like a giant, judging eye.

Cailin sat rigidly in the metal chair. Her wrists were now secured with heavy steel handcuffs, chained to a bolted ring on the table. The blood on her fingers had dried into dark, crusty flakes.

The heavy steel door groaned open.

Detective O'Connor walked in. He didn't sit down. He slammed a thick manila folder onto the metal table. The sound cracked like a whip in the small room.

He flipped the folder open, spreading glossy 8×10 crime scene photos across the table. They were graphic, high-resolution images of Amerigo's shattered skull and the blood-soaked river rock.

O'Connor leaned over the table, placing his hands flat on the metal, bringing his face uncomfortably close to Cailin's.

"We ran the rock through the rapid AFIS scanner," O'Connor said, his voice low and aggressive. "We pulled a partial print right off the smooth edge. It's a perfect match to your right index finger, Ms. Morton."

Cailin stared at the photos. Her expression did not change. She knew exactly how her print got there — she had brushed against the rock when she reached for Amerigo's pulse.

"I told you," Cailin said, her voice a flat, emotionless drone. "I am not answering any questions until my attorney, Callum Vance, arrives."

Chapter 682:

O'Connor let out a harsh, barking laugh. He pulled out a metal chair and scraped it loudly across the floor before sitting down.

"Callum Vance charges two thousand dollars an hour," O'Connor sneered. "He's a miracle worker. But even he can't make a star witness disappear."

O'Connor reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a digital audio recorder. He set it on the table and pressed play.

A woman's voice filled the small room. It was trembling, choked with hysterical, perfectly acted sobs.

"I... I was just walking in the garden," Charla English's recorded voice cried. "I was at the hospital for my psychiatric follow-up. I heard yelling. I hid behind the bushes. Cailin Morton was screaming at Mr. Holloway. She was demanding he sign over fifteen percent of the company shares to her immediately."

Cailin's eyes narrowed to dangerous slits. The sheer audacity of the lie was breathtaking.

"He refused," Charla's voice continued, breaking into a fresh wave of fake tears. "He said she was unfit. She went crazy. She picked up a rock from the garden bed and... she just started hitting him. Over and over. Then she ripped a black USB drive right out of his hand!"

O'Connor hit the stop button. The silence in the room was deafening.

“She gave us the motive, the weapon, and the stolen property,” O’Connor said, staring intently at Cailin. “You wanted the money. He said no. You killed him. Where is the drive, Cailin?”

Cailin took a slow, deep breath, forcing her heart rate to remain steady. Charla had orchestrated a masterpiece. She had woven the truth of the USB drive into a flawless tapestry of lies.

“Charla English is a documented sociopath who kidnapped my daughter three weeks ago,” Cailin stated, her voice dripping with absolute contempt. “She has a vendetta against me. Her testimony is worthless. If she was standing right there, why aren’t her fingerprints on the rock?”

O’Connor slammed his hand on the table. “Don’t play lawyer with me! We pulled the security feeds for the roof garden. The cameras in that specific sector went completely black exactly three minutes before the murder. Someone manually cut the hardline power to the server rack on the floor below. A dirty, inside job that reeks of paid-off hospital staff. We know you run with an underground syndicate. You planned this!”

Cailin’s stomach dropped. The camera blackout. Charla didn’t have the technical skills for that. She had hired a professional cleaner crew. The trap was airtight.

Before O’Connor could launch another verbal assault, a massive, concussive boom echoed from the hallway outside.

The heavy steel door of the interrogation room didn’t just open; it was violently forced inward by a hydraulic ram wielded by a Shadow Squad operative. The lock shattered, and the door slammed against the concrete wall with a deafening crash.

Hilliard Holloway strode into the room.

Chapter 683:

He looked like a god of war descending into a slaughterhouse. His amber eyes were completely black with rage. The air in the small room instantly felt suffocatingly dense. Behind him stood three men in immaculate, thousand-dollar suits — Manhattan's most lethal criminal defense team, led by Callum Vance.

O'Connor leaped out of his chair, his hand instinctively dropping to the service weapon on his hip.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!" O'Connor roared. "This is a restricted interrogation area! Get out before I arrest all of you!"

Hilliard didn't even look at the detective. He walked straight to the metal table.

He looked down at Cailin. He saw the heavy steel handcuffs digging into her bruised, bandaged wrists. The muscle in his jaw ticked. A terrifying, lethal calm settled over his features.

Hilliard shrugged off his custom suit jacket. He stepped behind Cailin and gently draped the heavy wool over her shoulders, shielding her from the harsh light and the cold air of the room. The gesture was incredibly tender, a jarring contrast to the violent aura radiating from his body.

Callum Vance stepped forward. He didn't speak. He simply slapped a thick, bound legal document directly onto O'Connor's chest.

“What is this?” O’Connor demanded, swatting the paper away.

“That,” Vance said, his voice dripping with aristocratic arrogance, “is a Writ of Habeas Corpus, signed exactly four minutes ago by a New York State Supreme Court Justice. You are holding my client on the uncorroborated hearsay of a woman with a documented history of psychiatric institutionalization. You have no video evidence. You have a partial print that is entirely consistent with my client rendering first aid.”

O’Connor’s face turned purple. “This is a First-Degree Murder investigation! You can’t just bail her out!”

Hilliard slowly turned his head. He locked eyes with O’Connor.

“The judge already signed it,” Hilliard said. His voice was a low, vibrating rumble that seemed to shake the concrete floor. “If you do not take those cuffs off my wife in the next five seconds, Detective, I will personally fund a class-action lawsuit against the NYPD that will bankrupt the police union pension fund for the next three generations.”

O’Connor stared at Hilliard. He looked at the signature of the Supreme Court Justice on the document. He knew he was beaten. The sheer, crushing weight of absolute capital had just bulldozed the legal system.

Gritting his teeth, O’Connor pulled a small key from his pocket. He leaned over and unlocked the handcuffs.

The heavy steel fell away with a loud clank.

Cailin rubbed her raw wrists. She stood up. She didn't look at Hilliard. She didn't say thank you. She pulled his jacket tighter around her shoulders and walked straight toward the open door.

Hilliard followed a step behind her, a silent, massive shadow.

They walked down the precinct hallway, pushing through the double glass doors leading to the street.

The moment the doors opened, the night exploded into blinding white light.

The concrete steps of the 19th Precinct were completely overrun.

Chapter 684:

Dozens of satellite broadcast vans choked the narrow Manhattan street. A sea of reporters, cameramen, and aggressive paparazzi surged forward against the police barricades. The moment Cailin stepped through the glass doors, a relentless, strobe-like barrage of camera flashes turned the dark night into blinding daylight.

A wall of sound hit them — a chaotic, overlapping roar of shouted questions.

“Ms. Morton! Did you murder Amerigo Holloway for the trust fund?!”

“Cailin! Is it true Charla English witnessed you bludgeoning the old man to death?!”

“Are you going to plead insanity?!”

The harsh, flashing lights stabbed at Cailin’s retinas. She instinctively raised her right hand to shield her eyes. As the oversized sleeve of Hilliard’s jacket slipped down, the angry, red indentations from the police handcuffs were exposed on her pale wrist.

A photographer from a tabloid shouted, “Get the wrists! Look at the struggle marks!” The rapid-fire clicking of camera shutters intensified, a predatory sound of a media mob smelling blood.

Hilliard moved with terrifying speed.

He stepped directly in front of Cailin, using his massive, broad shoulders to completely eclipse her from the cameras. He reached out with his uninjured arm and pulled her flush against his chest, wrapping the lapels of his jacket tightly around her head, burying her face in the crook of his neck to shield her from the blinding flashes.

The Shadow Squad operatives, who had been waiting at the bottom of the steps, surged upward. They formed a brutal, physical wedge, shoving reporters backward with zero regard for their safety, clearing a path down the stairs.

A reporter from Fox News, desperate for a viral soundbite, shoved his microphone past a bodyguard's shoulder, aiming it directly at Hilliard's face.

"Mr. Holloway!" the reporter screamed. "You are harboring the prime suspect in your own grandfather's murder! Aren't you terrified that the Holloway Group's stock is going to completely collapse tomorrow morning?!"

Hilliard stopped dead on the second step.

The Shadow Squad operatives froze. The entire mob of reporters, sensing the sudden shift in the atmosphere, went dead silent. The only sound was the rapid clicking of camera shutters.

Hilliard slowly turned his head. His amber eyes locked onto the Fox News reporter. The look in his eyes was not anger. It was a cold, absolute promise of annihilation.

"My wife is innocent," Hilliard stated. His voice was not a shout, but the low, lethal baritone carried perfectly across the dozens of extended microphones. It was a live broadcast to millions of viewers.

Hilliard's gaze swept over the sea of cameras, his jaw set in stone.

"Any media outlet, any publication, any individual who prints a single word condemning her before a trial," Hilliard promised, his voice dripping with absolute, arrogant power, "will receive a bankruptcy liquidation notice from my legal team by tomorrow afternoon."

He looked back at the Fox News reporter, his eyes narrowing into terrifying slits.

“As for the Holloway Group stock,” Hilliard said, his voice dropping to a chilling whisper that echoed across the nation. “Let it burn to ashes. It isn’t worth a single strand of her hair.”

Chapter 685:

A collective gasp rippled through the press corps. It was a declaration of war against Wall Street, against the justice system, against his own family legacy. He was publicly sacrificing a hundred-billion-dollar empire for a woman accused of murder.

Cailin, pressed tightly against his chest, felt the deep vibration of his voice through his ribs. Her body stiffened. She had expected him to protect her, to use his power. She had not expected this. This wasn’t protection; it was self-immolation. It was an act of such absolute, suicidal devotion that it defied all logic. A strange, suffocating warmth bloomed in the center of her chest, a dangerous crack in the emotional armor she had spent years building. For a terrifying second, the cold calculation of Cali was drowned out by the overwhelming sensation of being valued above all else.

Hilliard didn’t wait for a response. He tightened his grip on Cailin and marched down the remaining steps, shoving past the stunned reporters, and practically threw her into the back of the waiting, armored Maybach.

He climbed in after her, and the heavy door slammed shut, instantly cutting off the chaotic roar of the street.

The Maybach accelerated smoothly away from the curb.

Inside the soundproof cabin, the silence was heavy and thick. Hilliard turned to Cailin. The violent, dominating aura vanished instantly. His eyes were filled with frantic, desperate concern.

“Did they hurt you in there?” Hilliard asked softly, his eyes scanning her wrists.

Cailin pulled the jacket off her head. She took a slow, deliberate breath. The terrifying realization that she was starting to rely on his protection spiked her adrenaline. She ruthlessly crushed the rising emotion, forcing her facial muscles into a mask of impenetrable ice. She had survived by being calculating, and she could not afford to soften now. She looked at him, her amber eyes flat and analytical. She ignored his question entirely.

“You just committed corporate suicide on live television,” Cailin said coldly. “Preston will use that soundbite to permanently strip you of your board seat by morning.”

Hilliard let out a hollow, exhausted laugh. He leaned his head back against the leather headrest. “I have already lost everything that matters, Cailin. If I couldn’t stand between you and them tonight, I have no reason to exist.”

Cailin looked away, staring out the tinted window at the blurred city lights. She forced herself to ignore the sudden, painful tightening in her chest. She couldn’t afford to feel anything for him right now.

“Charla didn’t act alone,” Cailin said, her voice shifting into pure, tactical calculation. “She knew exactly when the cameras went down. She knew about the USB drive. Someone high up in the hospital security apparatus gave her the window.”

Hilliard’s eyes hardened. He immediately pulled out his phone and dialed Gavin.

"I need a full, illegal wiretap on Charla English's communications," Hilliard ordered the moment Gavin answered. "Burn through any firewall. I want to know who she talked to in the last forty-eight hours."

Chapter 686:

While Hilliard spoke, Cailin pulled her encrypted burner phone from her pocket. She opened a secure, dark-web messaging app. She typed a rapid sequence of code, connecting directly to the hidden server Kegan had set up for Aron and Davy.

She typed a single, brief message:

Initiate Trojan Horse. Hack Mount Sinai main security server. Find the deleted three minutes from the roof garden feed. Do not get caught.

She hit send.

Miles away, in a luxurious VIP lounge at a private airstrip, Charla English sat on a plush leather sofa. She was sipping a glass of vintage champagne, watching a muted television screen replay Hilliard's explosive press conference.

Her manicured nails dug into the leather upholstery. Her eyes burned with a toxic, psychotic jealousy.

“You threw it all away for that bitch,” Charla whispered to the screen, her voice trembling with hatred. “You’re both going to rot.”

She set the champagne glass down. She reached into her designer purse and pulled out the black USB drive, still faintly smeared with Amerigo’s dried blood.

She opened her sleek laptop and inserted the drive into the port.

A prompt appeared on the screen, demanding a twelve-digit alphanumeric decryption key.

Charla smiled. She had paid a fortune to a dark-web data broker to acquire Amerigo’s master password. She typed the sequence in with trembling, greedy fingers and hit Enter.

The screen froze.

Suddenly, a massive, flashing red skull appeared on the monitor. Underneath it, bold white text read: FATAL ERROR. UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS. KILL SWITCH INITIATED.

Charla’s eyes widened in pure horror. “No! No, no, no!”

A sharp, high-pitched whine emitted from the USB port. A second later, a distinct pop echoed in the quiet lounge, followed immediately by the acrid smell of burning plastic and ozone. A thin wisp of black smoke curled up from the side of the laptop.

The internal microchip of the USB drive had violently short-circuited, melting the memory banks into a useless lump of slag.

In the back of the Maybach, Cailin's phone vibrated.

She looked down at the screen. An automated alert popped up from the hidden backdoor program Kegan had installed on the drive's firmware just hours before. The encrypted message flashed across the display: Asset 1 — Hardware Destroyed.

Cailin's lips curved into a slow, terrifying smile. The trap had failed.

The twenty-minute drive from the precinct had been incredibly tense. Hilliard had spent most of it locked in an agonizing negotiation with Sebastian Sinclair on a secure line, offering a series of undeniable corporate concessions just to secure permission to bring her here, to his own impenetrable fortress, rather than returning her to the Sinclair estate. Now, the black armored Maybach glided down the concrete ramp into the subterranean parking garage of the Tribeca penthouse, its heavy tires hissing against the damp epoxy floor.

Inside the soundproof cabin, the faint glow of the encrypted smartphone still illuminated Cailin's pale face. The triumphant smile that had touched her lips just seconds ago — a cold, sharp reaction to the successful destruction of Charla's USB drive — instantly froze.

Chapter 687:

The phone vibrated violently against her bandaged palm. A new priority override window shattered the screen's interface. It was a direct, heavily encrypted ping from Aron.

Cailin stopped breathing. She tapped the flashing icon.

The text was brief, devoid of any childlike syntax. It read: Trojan failed. Hospital security server room caught fire ten minutes ago.

A cold, heavy stone dropped directly into Cailin's stomach. Her thumb hovered over the glass, her pulse suddenly hammering against the sides of her throat. She typed a single question mark.

A second message appeared, this one routed through Davy's terminal: Fire suppression system was tampered with. It did not spray water. It sprayed industrial-grade acid. All physical storage drives are dissolved. Data recovery impossible.

The smartphone slipped from Cailin's numb fingers. It hit the thick floor mat with a dull thud.

The oxygen in the car vanished. Cailin fell back against the leather seat, her chest heaving as she tried to pull air into her seizing lungs. Charla had not just hired a hacker. She had hired a top-tier cleaner crew. They had physically melted the only evidence that could prove Cailin did not murder Amerigo Holloway.

Hilliard turned his head. The rainwater from the precinct steps still clung to the shoulders of his ruined suit. He saw the absolute, hollow terror in her amber eyes.

"What happened?" Hilliard demanded, his voice a low, vibrating rumble.

Cailin turned her head slowly. She looked at him, her vision blurring at the edges.

“The security footage is gone,” Cailin whispered, her voice cracking. “They melted the servers with acid. I have nothing. I cannot clear my name.”

The muscles along Hilliard’s jaw locked with a sickening pop. He drove his right fist downward, smashing it into the center console. The heavy plastic cracked under the sheer, brutal force of the blow. The violent energy in the confined space was suffocating.

Before Hilliard could speak, his private cell phone rang. The screen displayed Gavin’s emergency protocol number.

Hilliard snatched the phone and pressed it to his ear. “Speak.”

“Sir,” Gavin’s voice came through the speaker, ragged and breathless. “There was an incident on the interstate heading toward the Holloway estate. A catastrophic car crash.”

Hilliard’s spine went completely rigid. “Who?”

“Charles,” Gavin reported, the word heavy with dread. “The head butler. The state troopers on the scene said his brakes completely failed. The vehicle went over the embankment. He was killed on impact.”

The silence in the Maybach was absolute. Cailin could not hear the words coming through the earpiece, but she watched the color drain from Hilliard's face. She watched his amber eyes darken into a terrifying, bottomless black.

Hilliard slowly lowered the phone. He looked at Cailin.

"Charles is dead," Hilliard stated, his voice stripped of all humanity. "Car crash. Brake failure."

Cailin's body began to tremble. The tremors started in her hands and violently spread to her shoulders. She pressed her bandaged hands against her face. The physical sensation of a noose tightening around her neck was so real she gagged.

Chapter 688:

It was a perfect, flawless loop. The footage was dissolved. The only witness who knew Amerigo had summoned her for the trust documents was dead. Charla had built an airtight concrete box around her, and the lid had just slammed shut.

Hilliard reached across the seat. He extended his large, warm hands, desperate to pull her shaking body into his chest, to offer the physical shield of his own flesh.

Cailin violently shoved his hands away.

She scrambled backward, pressing her spine against the opposite door. Her eyes were wide, feral, and bloodshot.

“Is this your protection?” Cailin screamed, her voice tearing at her throat. “Is this the impenetrable Holloway security? Your family is a rotting corpse, Hilliard! They let a murderer walk right in, kill your grandfather, and frame me, and your people did nothing!”

Hilliard’s hands hovered in the empty air. He took the verbal blows without flinching. He could not defend himself. The corruption and incompetence within his own empire had handed Charla the knife she used to stab Cailin in the back.

Cailin hit the door release. She stumbled out of the Maybach before it even came to a complete stop in the private bay. The cold, damp air of the garage hit her face, but it did not clear the panic.

She practically ran toward the private biometric elevator, her boots slapping loudly against the concrete. Hilliard shoved his door open and followed, his long strides easily keeping pace behind her.

The elevator doors opened directly into the Tribeca penthouse.

Cailin stormed into the massive, dark living room. She hurled her purse onto the white sofa. She began to pace in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows, her movements jerky and frantic, like a trapped animal calculating the dimensions of its cage.

Hilliard closed the heavy oak door. He stood in the entryway. He watched her pace, the physical pain in his fractured chest completely eclipsed by the agony of watching her unravel.

"I will put every private intelligence firm in this city on the payroll tonight," Hilliard said, his voice a steady, grounding force in the dark room. "We will find the mechanic who cut Charles's brakes. We will trace the acid."

Cailin spun around. A harsh, bitter laugh ripped from her chest.

"By the time your mercenaries find a single fingerprint, I will be sitting in a cell at Rikers Island!" Cailin shouted, pointing a shaking finger at the glittering Manhattan skyline. "She has a witness. She has a motive. She has my fingerprint on the murder weapon. I have nothing!"

Hilliard crossed the room in three massive strides. He did not ask for permission. He grabbed her shoulders, his large hands gripping her tight enough to halt her frantic pacing, but gentle enough not to bruise.

He forced her to look up. He forced her to meet his eyes.

"Listen to me," Hilliard commanded, his voice dropping to a register of absolute, terrifying certainty. "As long as my heart is beating in my chest, no one is putting you in a cage. I will buy the district attorney. I will buy the judge. I will buy the entire judicial system of New York State before I let them take you."

Chapter 689:

Cailin stared into his amber eyes. She saw the psychotic, unyielding obsession burning there. The sheer force of his will forced the panic in her chest to recede by a fraction of an inch.

But her logical brain knew the truth. Capital could delay the law, but it could not erase physical forensic evidence.

Before Cailin could formulate a response, a sound shattered the heavy silence of the penthouse.

It was a violent, rhythmic pounding on the heavy oak door in the entryway.

“NYPD!” a harsh voice bellowed through the thick wood. “Open the door!”

The pounding on the heavy oak door echoed through the penthouse like cannon fire.

Hilliard instantly shoved Cailin behind him. His broad shoulders completely blocked her from the entryway. He crossed the living room in long, aggressive strides and stopped in front of the door. He did not open it. He stared at the security monitor mounted on the wall.

Six heavily armed NYPD officers stood in the corridor. They wore tactical vests. Standing at the front of the formation was Detective O’Connor. He held a thick stack of papers stamped with a bright red seal.

Hilliard hit the intercom button.

“Unless you have a warrant signed by a Manhattan Supreme Court judge, you are trespassing,” Hilliard growled, his voice a lethal threat transmitted through the speaker. “Take one step onto my property and my security will neutralize you.”

O’Connor looked directly into the camera lens. He did not look intimidated. He looked victorious.

O’Connor held the paperwork up to the lens.

“This is a direct indictment from the Grand Jury, Mr. Holloway,” O’Connor barked. “Signed twenty minutes ago. Open the door or we will breach it.”

Cailin stood in the center of the living room. The blood drained from her face, leaving her skin the color of ash. The words “Grand Jury” hit her like a physical blow to the stomach. A grand jury indictment meant the district attorney had bypassed the preliminary hearings entirely. They believed they had absolute, undeniable proof.

Hilliard stared at the screen. The muscles in his neck strained against his collar. He reached for the heavy deadbolt, his knuckles white.

He yanked the door open. He stood in the threshold, a massive physical barrier.

O’Connor stepped forward and shoved the indictment papers directly into Hilliard’s chest. Hilliard scanned the top page. His amber eyes narrowed into dangerous slits. The charge was Murder in the First Degree. No bail conditions were listed.

O'Connor pushed past Hilliard's shoulder. Two female officers followed him, walking straight toward Cailin. One of them unclipped a pair of heavy steel handcuffs from her belt.

Hilliard pivoted. He reached out to grab the officer's wrist, fully prepared to shatter her arm and deal with the consequences later.

Cailin lunged forward. She grabbed Hilliard's forearm with both of her bandaged hands.

She squeezed his arm. Her amber eyes were completely dead, devoid of panic or fear. It was the terrifying, absolute calm of a woman who had just accepted a war. She shook her head once. A silent command not to fight.

Cailin turned to the female officers. She slowly extended her wrists.

Chapter 690:

The cold metal clamped down over her skin. The ratchets clicked loudly in the quiet room, biting into the red marks left from her previous arrest.

O'Connor smiled. He pulled a small card from his pocket and began reading the Miranda rights in a bored, mocking tone. He looked at Hilliard.

"You can call all the expensive lawyers you want, Holloway," O'Connor sneered. "Nobody gets bail on a Grand Jury murder indictment. She's going straight to Rikers."

Hilliard stepped forward until his chest was an inch from O'Connor's face. The air around him dropped ten degrees.

"If she loses a single drop of blood while in your custody," Hilliard whispered, his voice vibrating with pure, homicidal intent, "I will ensure your entire bloodline ceases to exist."

The female officers grabbed Cailin by the biceps and turned her toward the door.

Cailin looked back over her shoulder. She met Hilliard's burning eyes. She did not speak, but her lips moved, forming a single, silent word.

Lawyer.

An hour later, the air inside the interrogation room at the Manhattan Detention Complex was freezing.

Cailin sat in a cold metal chair. The harsh fluorescent lights burned her retinas. The heavy steel handcuffs chained her wrists to the table.

The metal door groaned open. O'Connor walked in, followed by a man in a sharp, expensive suit. The man had the arrogant, polished look of an Assistant District Attorney.

The ADA did not sit down. He dropped a large, clear plastic evidence bag onto the center of the metal table.

Cailin stared at the bag. Inside was a crumpled blue hospital uniform. The entire right side of the fabric was stiff and stained with massive, dark patches of dried blood.

“We found this in the industrial dumpster in the alley behind your apartment building, Ms. Morton,” the ADA said, his voice smooth and lethal.

Cailin’s breath hitched. She recognized the uniform. It was the exact shade of blue Charla had been wearing in the roof garden.

The ADA pulled a forensic report from his folder and slid it across the table.

“We received this piece of evidence through an anonymous tip hours before we arrested you, and we had the lab run an immediate, expedited analysis. The blood is a perfect match for Amerigo Holloway,” the ADA stated, leaning forward, placing his hands flat on the table. “But that’s not the best part. The crime scene techs swabbed the inside collar of this uniform. They found a massive concentration of epithelial cells. Skin flakes. Sweat.”

He tapped the paper with his index finger.

“The expedited results are conclusive. We leveraged the FBI’s rapid response lab at Quantico. The preliminary match came back an hour ago. When the system has a perfect suspect, it tends to work a little faster for us. It’s a one hundred percent DNA match to you, Cailin.”