

Second chance 911

Chapter 911:

“And Jackson,” he added, his voice softening almost imperceptibly, “arrange for the best tutors to be brought to the estate for the children. And a child psychologist. I want their routine uninterrupted. No one, and I mean no one, outside of this room is to know the full extent of Ms. Morton’s condition. Is that clear?”

He ended the call. The mask of the CEO fell away, and for a moment he was just a man. He leaned his head back against the cool wall, rubbing his temples with a weary, trembling hand. The weight of it all was crushing.

Kegan’s phone vibrated. He glanced at the screen, a report from his own intelligence team. “My people have a preliminary trace on the attacker,” he said, his voice grim. “The trail goes cold near a private airfield. The same one Tiffany Reed used to flee New York.”

“The Vances,” Hilliard said. It wasn’t a question.

“It has to be,” Kegan snarled. “I’m going to—”

“You’re going to do nothing,” Hilliard cut him off, his voice regaining its steel. “Not without concrete proof. If you move on them now, they’ll bury the evidence so deep no one will ever find it. We investigate from the outside. Financials. Personnel movements. We find the weak link.”

The scene shifted, the sterile light of the hospital replaced by the oppressive, wood-paneled darkness of a study in the Vance estate.

Cornelius Vance sat behind his massive desk, a thick cloud of cigar smoke obscuring his face. Standing before him, like prisoners awaiting sentencing, were his wife, Isadora, and her daughter, Giselle.

The silence was a weapon.

Cornelius let it hang in the air for a full minute before he tossed a thin file onto the desk. It slid across the polished wood and stopped in front of Isadora. A report detailing her recent, secret communications with Tiffany Reed.

“Explain this,” he said, his voice a low rumble. “And explain how and why Peggy Vance, a known fugitive, was on my property.”

Isadora’s face was pale, but her composure was flawless. “I felt sorry for her, Cornelius. She was a distant relative, mentally unstable. I was trying to help her get treatment discreetly.”

Cornelius let out a short, humorless laugh. His cold eyes shifted to Giselle, who flinched as if struck. “And you? What was your role in this act of charity?”

Giselle started to stammer, her eyes wide with terror. “I... I just...”

"Giselle knew nothing," Isadora cut in smoothly, her voice firm. "This was my decision alone. The fault is entirely mine."

Cornelius watched his wife's performance, his face unreadable. He knew she was lying. He could see the lie in the slight tremor of her hand, in the way she shielded Giselle with her body. But he also knew that now was not the time to tear his own house down. The wolves were at the gate.

He rose from his chair, a towering, intimidating figure. He walked around the desk and stopped in front of Isadora. He used one finger to tilt her chin up, forcing her to meet his gaze.

Chapter 912:

His voice was as cold as a Siberian winter. "I don't care what you did. I don't care why you did it. Right now, I want you to clean up every single loose end. Erase every trace."

He leaned in closer, his voice dropping to a deadly whisper. "Because I give you my word, Isadora. If Sinclair or Aguirre find one shred of credible evidence that links this family to that woman's poisoning, I will hand you over to them myself. To preserve the honor of this house."

A flicker of genuine fear finally broke through Isadora's mask. She knew he meant it.

He turned and left the study without another word, leaving the two women enveloped in a cloud of cigar smoke and terror.

Giselle's legs gave out, and she sank into a chair, her body trembling. "Mother," she whispered, "what are we going to do?"

Isadora's fear was already crystallizing, hardening into something sharp and venomous. Her expression shifted from terror to a cold, calculating resolve.

"There's only one way," she said, her voice low and steady. "We need a scapegoat." Her eyes were no longer those of a frightened wife, but of a cornered predator.

"The perfect scapegoat," Isadora murmured, more to herself than to Giselle, "must meet three criteria. They need access to the kind of specialized resources required. They need a clear, believable motive to harm Cailin. And most importantly, they must be connected to us, but ultimately... expendable."

Giselle's eyes widened in horror as the realization dawned. "You mean... Tiffany?"

A thin, cruel smile touched Isadora's lips. "Precisely. I've already had my people reach out to her."

The scene dissolved, reforming in a sterile, windowless room in a safe house miles outside the city. Tiffany Reed was pacing like a caged animal, her nerves frayed to the breaking point.

The door opened and one of Isadora's men, a man with cold, empty eyes, walked in. He didn't waste time with pleasantries. He laid out Isadora's "proposal."

Tiffany listened, her face contorting from confusion to disbelief, and finally to hysterical rage. "You want me to take the fall for this? For everything? Are you insane?" she shrieked. "No! Absolutely not!"

The man simply took out a small digital recorder and pressed play.

Tiffany's own voice filled the room, sharp and clear, discussing payment details and logistics with the man who had stabbed Cailin. "...make sure it looks like a robbery gone wrong..."

The blood drained from her face. She sank onto the edge of the bed, her body trembling. She had been set up from the very beginning.

"Cooperate," the man said, his voice flat, "and the Vance family will ensure you are charged only with conspiracy to commit kidnapping. You'll serve a minimal sentence in a comfortable facility. Upon your release, a new identity and a seven-figure trust fund will be waiting for you."

He leaned in slightly. "Refuse, and this recording, along with your offshore bank records, will be anonymously delivered to both Kegan Aguirre and the FBI. You know how they will deal with you."

It was a choice between a gilded cage and a shallow grave.

Chapter 913:

Tiffany broke. Sobs wracked her body. Through her tears, she nodded, the movement jerky and defeated.

She did as she was told. She took the phone the man offered her and, following a script provided by Isadora, made the call. She played the part of a desperate woman, confessing to Isadora that her jealousy of Cailin had driven her to act alone, and now she was begging for the family's protection.

Every word was a lie. And every word was being recorded by Cornelius Vance's private surveillance team.

Back in the dark study of the Vance estate, Cornelius listened to the playback, his face an unreadable mask.

He knew it was a performance. A perfectly crafted piece of theater designed by his wife to absolve herself of all sin. He saw through the deception with absolute clarity.

But he also saw its utility.

A single, contained culprit. A believable motive. It was a clean solution. It would appease the Aguirres and the Sinclairs, and it would sever all ties between the incident and the House of Vance. It was a necessary sacrifice.

He summoned Isadora to the study and played the recording for her without a word.

She feigned shock and heartbreak perfectly, railing against Tiffany's "betrayal" and "ingratitude."

Cornelius cut her off mid-performance. “Deal with her,” he said, his voice devoid of emotion.

He then added a final, humiliating twist. “You will deliver her to Kegan Aguirre personally. To show the sincerity of our family’s regret.” It was both a solution and a punishment, a leash tightening around his wife’s neck.

Isadora’s eyes flashed with humiliation, but she lowered her head in a gesture of perfect submission. “Of course, my husband.”

She immediately called Kegan, her voice laced with manufactured sorrow, informing him that she had “found the person responsible” and wished to hand her over.

Kegan received the call with cold suspicion. He didn’t believe a word of it, but he agreed to the meeting. He would see what kind of game the Vances were playing.

In her hospital room, Cailin felt the numbness creep higher. It had reached her forearm now, a dead, heavy weight that didn’t feel like a part of her anymore. A deeper, more primal fear was taking root.

Hilliard had brought in a team of the world’s top neurologists. They hovered over her, ran tests, and spoke in hushed, serious tones. But in the end they could only offer the same useless platitudes. “We need more time to observe.” “The body is a complex system.”

They knew nothing. And Hilliard’s desperate hope was visibly fraying.

Cailin turned her head and looked out the window at the gray New York skyline. Her body was becoming a prison, its walls closing in on her day by day.

She turned back to Hilliard. "I want to see the children," she said, her voice quiet but firm.

Chapter 914:

He looked at her, at the fragile plea in her eyes, and his heart felt like it was being squeezed in a vise. He couldn't refuse her. But the thought of his children seeing her like this, seeing her fade, was a new and special kind of hell.

After her call with Kegan, Isadora found Giselle in her private office, staring blankly at a fashion magazine.

"I need you to arrange something for me," Isadora said, her voice a low, conspiratorial whisper.

She laid out the plan. On the way to the rendezvous point with Kegan, the vehicle transporting Tiffany was to be intercepted. A staged attack. Violent, but with no fatalities.

Giselle looked at her mother, horrified. "But... why? You made a deal. You're handing her over."

Isadora smiled, a chilling expression devoid of warmth. "Handing her over is the performance, darling. Tiffany is a liability. In Kegan Aguirre's hands, she's a bomb waiting to explode. He would break her eventually."

Her eyes glittered with cunning. “This way, we show our good faith, we tried to deliver the culprit, but she was brazenly rescued. It casts suspicion elsewhere. And more importantly,” she added, her voice dropping, “it allows us to take Tiffany off the board. Permanently.”

Giselle felt a cold dread creep up her spine. Her mother’s capacity for cruelty was bottomless. But she was trapped in the web of it, and she nodded numbly, promising to make the arrangements.

The handover was set for a desolate stretch of highway upstate. A black SUV, flanked by two other Vance security vehicles, sped through the night. Inside, Tiffany Reed sat between two guards, her face pale with terror.

Suddenly, two massive semi-trucks, their lights off, roared out of a side road. They slammed into the escort vehicles with the force of a battering ram, sending them spinning into the ditch. The lead SUV was boxed in.

Before the Vance guards could even draw their weapons, the back of the trucks flew open. A dozen men in black tactical gear and balaclavas swarmed out, armed with assault rifles. They moved with brutal, efficient speed.

They didn’t shoot to kill. They used flashbangs and overwhelming force to disorient and subdue the guards. The whole operation was a whirlwind of controlled violence.

One of the masked men ripped open the SUV door and dragged the screaming Tiffany out. He threw her into the back of a waiting panel van, which then peeled out, its tires screeching, and disappeared into the darkness.

The entire ambush took less than ninety seconds.

A quarter-mile down the road, Kegan and his team watched the entire scene unfold on a thermal drone feed. Kegan's hand slammed against the reinforced window of his vehicle, the impact echoing in the tense silence.

"They're playing us," he snarled, his voice a low, dangerous growl. He knew, with absolute certainty, that this was a Vance-orchestrated puppet show.

Back at Mount Sinai, the children arrived.

Chapter 915:

Hilliard had the room prepared. The harsh medical equipment was discreetly hidden. The lighting was softened. Cailin, with the help of a nurse, had put on a touch of makeup to hide the gray pallor of her skin. She wore a soft, silk bed jacket over her gown. She was an actress preparing for the most important role of her life.

Aron, Davy, and Elia walked in, their small faces a mixture of awe and fear. But then they saw their mother's smile, and the tension in their little bodies eased.

"Mommy!" Elia cried, launching herself into Cailin's arms. Cailin hugged her daughter tight, burying her face in her soft hair, inhaling her scent. She fought back a wave of tears.

"When are you coming home?" Elia asked, her voice muffled against Cailin's shoulder.

“Soon, my love,” Cailin whispered, her voice miraculously steady. “Very soon.”

She played with them, reading a story, helping them with a puzzle. Hilliard stood in the corner, a silent sentinel, watching this beautiful, fragile tableau. Every laugh from his children, every pained smile from Cailin, was a fresh twist of the knife in his heart.

An hour passed in a fleeting, precious blur. A nurse came in to gently announce that visiting time was over. The children said their goodbyes with hugs and reluctant promises to be good.

The moment the door closed behind them, the smile on Cailin’s face dissolved. The strength that had held her up vanished. Her body sagged against the pillows, and a deep, rattling cough escaped her lips.

Hilliard was at her side in an instant, his hand on her back. “Cailin?”

The cough grew more violent, a terrible, tearing sound that seemed to come from the depths of her soul. She was choking on it, her body convulsing with each ragged gasp for air.

Then she suddenly arched forward, her body rigid.

A spray of dark, crimson blood erupted from her mouth, splashing across the pristine white sheets in a horrifying starburst. It wasn’t bright red. It was a deep, ominous color, thick and wrong.

Hilliard's mind went blank. The world narrowed to that single, sickening splash of red. His entire universe was collapsing into that one impossible stain.

"Cailin!" he choked out, his hand fumbling for the emergency call button. He pressed it again and again, his thumb numb and clumsy. "It's okay, you're okay, it's okay..." he chanted, the words meaningless, a desperate, useless prayer.

Her eyes fluttered, her consciousness fading. She saw the look on his face, not concern, not worry, but pure, undiluted terror. In his eyes, she saw her own death.

Doctors and nurses burst into the room. The quiet sanctuary became a chaotic scene of urgent commands and rattling equipment. They pushed Hilliard aside. He could only stand there, helpless, as the heart monitor beside her bed began to scream, its shrill, flat-line alarm a harbinger of the end.

Chapter 916:

The GPS tracker on Cailin's parachute rig had been her only lifeline. When Hilliard's recovery team finally located her in the desolate drop zone, his heart plummeted. She was an unmoving figure tangled in a sea of nylon silk, having lost consciousness mid-descent. It was a sheer miracle the automatic activation device had deployed her reserve chute just in time. The frantic medevac flight to the nearest trauma center had been an agonizing blur of roaring engines and raw panic, the terrifying sight of the blood she had begun coughing up haunting Hilliard's every breath.

Hilliard paced the corridor outside the emergency room like a caged lion. Every beep and shout from behind the closed doors was a fresh spike of terror. He felt utterly, completely useless.

Kegan arrived, his face a thundercloud of fury. He took one look at the scene, the frantic nurses, the grim-faced doctors, Hilliard's ashen face, and his own blood ran cold. "What happened?" he demanded.

"She... she started coughing up blood on the chopper," Hilliard managed, his voice hollow. For the first time, there was no animosity between them. They were just two men united in a shared, desperate fear.

The doors swung open. A doctor, his scrubs stained, his face etched with exhaustion, stepped out. "We've stabilized her," he said, and the two men sagged with relief. "For now."

The relief was short-lived. "But the toxin is accelerating its attack on her system. It's becoming more aggressive. We can't stop it. The next time she crashes..." He didn't need to finish the sentence.

Just as the last vestiges of hope seemed to evaporate, Kegan's satellite phone rang. It was his brother, Caleb.

"I found something," Caleb's voice said, calm and steady. "It's not a cure. But it might buy us time. It's a military-grade experimental inhibitor, designed to counteract nerve agents. It's incredibly dangerous. The side effects are brutal. It's like drinking poison to cure poison."

"Get it here," Kegan said without a second's hesitation. "Now."

Thirty minutes later, the thumping of rotor blades echoed over the hospital. A helicopter landed on the roof, and a locked metal case was rushed down to the ER.

The doctors studied the chemical breakdown with alarm. "This could cause permanent cardiac damage," the lead physician warned. "It could stop her heart."

"The poison is already doing that," Hilliard said, his voice flat. "Do it."

They injected the clear, viscous fluid into Cailin's IV line. On the monitors, the frantic, jagged lines of her vital signs began to smooth out, settling into a slow, steady rhythm.

A few minutes later, Cailin's eyes fluttered open. The searing pain in her body had subsided to a dull, throbbing ache, but she felt a profound weakness, a deep, cellular exhaustion. She looked at Hilliard and Kegan, at their faces, a strange mixture of relief and profound sorrow.

"What..." she rasped, her throat raw. "What is really wrong with me?"

Before Hilliard could deploy another carefully constructed lie, a new voice, cool and elegant, cut through the tense air from the doorway.

"You've been poisoned, Cailin Morton."

They all turned. A woman stood there, a vision of impossible chic in a white Chanel suit. She had silver-blond hair pulled back in a severe chignon, and eyes the color of a winter sky. Her beauty was startling, but it was her aura of cold, untouchable authority that commanded the room. Two imposing bodyguards stood silently behind her.

Chapter 917:

Kegan stared at her, his face a mask of shock and something else... annoyance. "Seraphina? What the hell are you doing here?"

The woman, Seraphina, ignored him completely. She walked directly to Cailin's bedside, her movements fluid and graceful. She looked down at Cailin, a flicker of something like professional sympathy in her cool eyes.

"My name is Seraphina Morrow," she said, her voice clear and precise. "I'm a toxicologist. You've been dosed with a bespoke compound poison, a weapon designed for assassination."

The words landed like stones in the silent room. Cailin's worst fears, the ones she'd seen in the search results, were confirmed. Her heart hammered against her ribs.

"Who the hell are you?" Hilliard demanded, stepping forward, his voice laced with fury. "Why would you tell her that?"

Seraphina finally deigned to look at him, her gaze dismissive. "Because coddling her with lies will only make her die faster. Ignorance is not a cure."

She turned her attention back to Kegan, her voice dripping with disdain. "That inhibitor you just used? It's a derivative of a compound known as 'Hellfire.' Every dose you give her is burning through her remaining life force like a lit fuse."

The color drained from Kegan's face.

Cailin took a deep, shuddering breath, forcing herself to meet the woman's icy gaze. "Is there a cure?"

Seraphina was silent for a moment. The silence was more terrifying than any answer.

Finally, she spoke. "There is no known cure." She paused, letting the finality of the words settle. "But..."

A sliver of hope.

"The family that designed this poison, the Vances, they would not create a weapon without a failsafe. They will have a master chemist, a toxicologist on their payroll who knows the formula, who knows its weaknesses. This person is your only chance."

She looked at the three of them, her expression grim. "You need to find him. His name is Dr. Alistair Finch."

The atmosphere in the private waiting room was electric with a new, desperate purpose. Hilliard and Kegan, their rivalry momentarily forgotten, were already on their phones, barking orders, mobilizing their vast intelligence networks.

"Find everything on a Dr. Alistair Finch. I want his location, his habits, his blood type. Now."

The information came back within minutes, and it was grim. Dr. Finch was more than on the Vance payroll; he was a virtual prisoner. He lived and worked exclusively within the main Vance estate, a fortress protected by a small army of private security. He never left.

Hilliard and Kegan locked eyes across the room. The same cold, ruthless conclusion formed in both their minds.

"We can't ask him," Hilliard said, his voice flat.

"So we take him," Kegan finished.

They began to plan, their minds working in a strange, terrifying unison. They spoke of security patrols, electronic countermeasures, exfiltration routes. It was the blueprint for a military raid.

Seraphina watched them, her expression unreadable. These two powerful, dangerous men, united in their desperate bid to save one woman. She didn't join their war council. Instead, she turned and walked quietly back into Cailin's room.

Chapter 918:

Cailin was lying still, her eyes open, staring at the ceiling. She was unnervingly calm.

Seraphina closed the door behind her. The sound of the latch clicking seemed to seal them off from the world of false hope being built in the next room.

“They won’t find a cure,” Seraphina said, her voice low and soft. It wasn’t a guess; it was a statement of fact.

Cailin slowly turned her head, her eyes meeting Seraphina’s. There was no surprise in them, only a deep, weary knowing. “You mean...”

Seraphina sat down in the chair Hilliard had vacated. She leaned in, her voice barely a whisper. “I mean there is no cure. Not from Dr. Finch. Not from anyone. He may be able to formulate treatments to slow it down, to manage the symptoms. But he cannot reverse the damage. This poison was designed to be absolute.”

She explained the science of it, the way the molecules bonded irreversibly with nerve cells. A slow, systematic demolition of the body’s command structure.

Cailin listened without flinching. Her chest rose and fell in a single, deep breath. Her fingers tightened on the sheet. When Seraphina was finished, the last bit of color had drained from Cailin’s face, leaving it as pale and translucent as porcelain.

“How long?” she asked, her voice a faint whisper.

Seraphina met her gaze, offering her the one thing no one else would: the unvarnished truth. “Without Dr. Finch’s intervention, the inhibitor will buy you a week. Maybe. If he can help, if he gives you everything he’s got, perhaps a month.”

A month. Thirty days.

Cailin slowly closed her eyes. A single, perfect tear traced a path from the corner of her eye into her hairline. That was all the grief she allowed herself. When she opened her eyes again, they were clear, calm, and filled with a terrifying resolve.

“Thank you,” she said to Seraphina. “For telling me.”

She took another breath. “Now I need you to do something for me. I need you to lie.”

Seraphina stared at her, confused.

“Don’t tell them,” Cailin said, her voice gaining a strange strength. “Let them believe Finch is the cure. Let them have that hope.”

“Why?” Seraphina asked, truly baffled.

A faint, heartbreaking smile touched Cailin’s lips. “Because I can’t bear to see their hope die. And because... if they think they can save me, they will burn the world down to do it. They will get their justice.”

She was going to use her own death as a weapon. Her last few weeks on earth would be the fuel for their vengeance against the House of Vance.

Seraphina was speechless. She had seen power, wealth, and ruthlessness. She had never seen courage like this. In the face of her own annihilation, this woman was thinking only of others. After a long, silent moment, Seraphina gave a slow, solemn nod.

"I will do as you ask." A silent pact was formed between them. An alliance forged in the face of death.

Chapter 919:

"One more thing," Cailin said, her eyes searching Seraphina's. "Who are you? Really? What is your connection to Kegan?"

Seraphina's cool composure wavered for just a second. A shadow passed through her eyes. She smoothed the lapel of her perfect white suit.

"The Morrors are one of the Four Dynasties," she said, her voice flat. "The Aguirres are another. Our families have... arrangements."

She met Cailin's gaze. "By contract, I am Kegan's intended. His fiancée."

Cailin stared at the beautiful, powerful, enigmatic woman before her. Her ally. Her executioner. And, in a world she was about to leave, her rival.

The door opened. Hilliard and Kegan walked in, their faces grim but energized, full of plans and false hope.

Cailin looked at them, the father of her children, and the man who wanted to be her husband. And she prepared to deliver the performance of a lifetime, hiding her own death sentence behind a brave, hopeful smile.

"We have a plan," Hilliard announced, his voice filled with a conviction he didn't truly feel but desperately wanted to project. "You just rest. We're going to bring Dr. Finch here. He's going to fix this."

Cailin looked up at him, then at Kegan, and managed a weak nod. The expression in her eyes was a complex mixture of gratitude, sorrow, and a deep, secret pity that they couldn't possibly understand.

They left, and the hospital floor was transformed into a fortress. Hilliard's corporate security and Kegan's mercenaries established a perimeter. No one got in or out without their approval.

Inside the room, the silence was heavy.

"This will help," Seraphina said, opening a sleek, carbon-fiber medical case. Inside, nestled in black velvet, was a set of long, impossibly thin silver needles. They gleamed under the fluorescent lights. "It will buy you some time until they return."

Cailin looked at the needles with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension.

“My family, the Morrrows, have spent generations blending ancient Eastern medicine with modern toxicology,” Seraphina explained as she sterilized Cailin’s skin with an alcohol swab. “This is a technique designed to temporarily block the primary neural pathways the toxin uses to spread. It will slow its progress. But,” she warned, her eyes meeting Cailin’s, “it will be painful.”

“Do it,” Cailin said without hesitation. Pain was an old friend. And any minute of clarity she could gain was a minute she could use to prepare.

Seraphina’s hands were steady and sure. She slid the first needle into a pressure point at the base of Cailin’s neck. Cailin grunted, a sharp, involuntary sound as a jolt, like electricity, shot down her spine. But she didn’t cry out. One by one, Seraphina inserted the needles into key points along her body, her movements precise and economical.

When she was finished, a fine sheen of sweat covered Seraphina’s brow. It was clearly a draining process for the practitioner as well.

Cailin took a slow, deep breath. The deep, cold numbness in her limbs felt... contained. Pushed back by a faint, warming sensation. The tightness in her chest had eased.

Chapter 920:

“Thank you,” Cailin whispered, the words filled with genuine gratitude. A bond, forged in a shared, terrible secret, was solidifying between them.

As Seraphina was adjusting Cailin’s blankets, she asked, her tone casual, “Have you thought about who might have done this? Specifically?”

A flicker of pure hatred ignited in Cailin's eyes. "Isadora Vance. And her daughter, Giselle."

Seraphina nodded slowly, as if Cailin had just confirmed her own calculations. "Isadora is the architect, the strategist. A woman of her standing wouldn't handle the poison herself. Too risky. Too... vulgar. The delivery system would have been her daughter."

Cailin pictured Giselle, the vapid, pretty socialite who always trailed in her mother's wake. It was hard to imagine her hands being capable of such a thing. But the poison was insidious, just like the family that wielded it.

"I may be able to get you confirmation," Seraphina said, a glint of steel in her eyes.

She took out her phone and dialed a number. A moment later, she put the call on speaker.

"Seraphina?" Giselle Vance's voice was sweet, but laced with a nervous, guarded tone. "Why are you calling me?"

Seraphina's voice was flat, devoid of emotion. "I'm at the hospital. I heard the news about Cailin Morton. It seems your mother's plan was a success. She's dying."

The silence on the other end of the line was absolute. It stretched for three, four, five seconds.

Then Giselle's voice, high-pitched with panic, burst through the speaker. "I don't know what you're talking about! My mother had nothing to do with this!"

The denial was telling. She defended her mother, not herself.

Seraphina smiled, a cold, predatory expression. "Didn't she? I have a sample of Cailin's blood. My family's labs have a particular interest in... novel compounds. It's amazing what you can find with the right equipment. Traces of DNA, for instance. Fingerprints on a molecular level."

It was a complete and utter bluff. But it was delivered with the unshakeable confidence of a royal flush. It was designed to shatter Giselle's fragile composure.

A small, choked, terrified sob came from the phone.

Then the click of the call being disconnected.

Seraphina lowered the phone, her expression grimly satisfied. She looked at Cailin.

"Now we're sure."

In Cailin's eyes, a new fire was burning. Not of hope, but of pure, focused vengeance.

The moment the call ended, Giselle Vance scrambled from her bedroom, phone still clutched in her trembling hand. She burst into her mother's private sitting room without knocking.

"She knows," Giselle gasped, her face pale with terror. "Seraphina Morrow. She knows it was me. She said she has proof!"

Isadora's face tightened. The Morrow family's resources were not to be underestimated. But she projected an aura of calm, patting her daughter's hand soothingly. "She's bluffing, darling. A classic psychological tactic."

But doubt had taken root. Isadora immediately called Seraphina herself, offering a multi-million dollar donation to a "charity of her choice" as a gesture of goodwill. A thinly veiled bribe.