

Second chance 971

Chapter 971:

The hangover was brutal, a nauseating, disorienting wave of it washing over her. She was in her own bed. Her expensive red gown was in a heap on the floor.

She tried to piece together the night before, but her memory was a frustrating, terrifying blank. She remembered the gala. She remembered Hilliard. She remembered feigning drunkenness and being led to the elevator.

And then, nothing.

A jolt of panic shot through her. She frantically checked her body. She was wearing a hotel bathrobe. There were no signs of a struggle, no soreness, no evidence of anything. The suite was empty.

She grabbed her phone from the nightstand. There was one unread message, sent at 3 a.m., from Hilliard.

Her heart hammered against her ribs as she tapped it open.

“You were too drunk to stand. You passed out the moment we got to your room. I had the hotel maid service help you change. Get some rest. H.”

Giselle stared at the screen, her mind reeling.

So nothing happened? He just dropped her off and left?

A wave of crushing disappointment washed over her. But then, it morphed into something else.

He had resisted. Even in that situation, with her practically throwing herself at him, he had maintained his control. He was a gentleman.

The man was even more disciplined, more of a challenge than she had imagined. Her obsession, rather than being dampened, flared brighter. He was a prize worth winning. The story was so perfectly plausible, so in character for a man of his stature, that she never once questioned it.

A slow, pleased smile spread across her face. She typed a reply, her tone a perfect mix of apology and flirtation.

Thank you, Hilliard. I was completely out of line. Next time, I promise to make it up to you.

Feeling triumphant, she dialed her mother's number to report her "progress," casually mentioning that she had blacked out from drinking too much.

Eleonora's voice on the other end was cool and clipped. "I have already taken care of the hotel staff. No one saw you leave with Hilliard. You felt unwell and retired to your room early. Alone. Do you understand, Giselle?"

A chill went down Giselle's spine. She understood perfectly. "Yes, Mother."

She hung up, any lingering questions about her memory gap erased, replaced only by a burning desire to conquer Hilliard Holloway.

She had no idea that as she sent her flirty text, a microscopic camera lens hidden in the frame of the painting across the room was capturing every word on her screen.

In a dark, secure monitoring room across the city, Hilliard Holloway watched the live feed. He saw her message pop up on his screen.

A smile touched his lips. It was a cold, empty thing, devoid of any warmth or humor.

The fish had taken the bait. The hook was set.

He calmly switched off the monitor.

Chapter 972:

The pale light of his encrypted phone reflected in Hilliard's eyes, cold and sharp. He had killed the monitor feeds, but the game was still playing out in the palm of his hand. He tapped the screen, his thumb hovering over the reply that would dictate their next move: "Rest up today. I'll come to your brownstone tonight at nine."

SEND.

The message shot into the digital ether. He spent the daylight hours in calculated preparation, locking away the blueprints of the Van Doren estate into his eidetic memory.

When night finally descended, he stood, the motion fluid and precise. He adjusted the custom cufflink on his right wrist, the metal cool against his skin. It was slightly heavier than its partner, the weight a small, deadly secret.

He shrugged on a black cashmere coat, the expensive fabric settling over his broad shoulders like a shadow.

Hilliard walked out of the monitoring room. The sharp clap of his leather shoes on the concrete floor echoed in the silence, a cold, rhythmic beat counting down to something final.

A bulletproof SUV idled at the curb, a dark beast in the Manhattan night. Jackson held the door open. Hilliard ducked inside without a word.

The vehicle melted into the river of traffic, heading for the old-money elegance of the Upper East Side. It pulled up to Giselle's meticulously maintained brownstone, its windows dark.

Hilliard stepped out of the car. The night wind whipped at the hem of his coat. He looked up at the building, his eyes cataloging the subtle gleam of security cameras hidden in the ornate architecture.

He pressed the brass bell.

The heavy oak door swung inward less than three seconds later.

Giselle stood there, framed in the warm light of the foyer. She wore a wine-red silk robe that clung to her curves, her blonde hair artfully disheveled. Her eyes shone with a raw, undisguised thrill.

A perfectly engineered smile touched Hilliard's lips, a mask of warmth that didn't reach his eyes. He stepped across the threshold.

Giselle shut the door, the sound a heavy, final thud. She immediately moved closer, her body heat radiating toward him as she reached for his coat.

Hilliard sidestepped the overtly intimate gesture, his movement smooth and seemingly casual. He hung the coat himself on a nearby rack, his gaze sweeping the ground floor, noting the placement of every security sensor.

"I wasn't sure you'd actually come," Giselle said, her voice a low purr.

She led him toward a lavish living room, dominated by a marble fireplace. Two glasses of aged bourbon sat waiting on a low table, ice sweating in the dim light. She handed one to him.

Hilliard accepted the glass, swirling the amber liquid. The ice clinked softly. "A beautiful home," he said, his voice a low, appreciative rumble. "You have impeccable taste."

The flattery landed exactly as he intended. Giselle preened, her vanity swelling. "I designed it all myself. My father gave me complete freedom."

"He must trust your judgment implicitly," Hilliard murmured, taking a slow sip. He let the compliment hang in the air before adding, "I imagine he affords you the same freedom in your work for the Van Doren Group."

He had pivoted. The hook was cast.

Chapter 973:

Giselle, eager to prove her worth, to show she was more than just a pretty face, took the bait. "More than freedom. I oversee the family's most sensitive research and development projects."

Hilliard's eyes darkened for a fraction of a second. He leaned back, feigning a casual skepticism. "Sensitive, or just confidential? There's a difference. It's hard to imagine Donovan letting anyone near the real crown jewels."

The subtle challenge worked like a key in a lock. Giselle's back straightened. She couldn't stand the thought of him underestimating her.

She set her glass down with a sharp click. "Let me show you something."

She led him not toward the stairs, but to a massive, floor-to-ceiling bookshelf in a study off the main hall. Her hand pressed against a specific leather-bound volume, and a section of the wall slid silently inward, revealing a sleek, stainless-steel elevator door.

She scanned her thumbprint. The doors hissed open.

The elevator descended into the earth, the temperature dropping with every foot. It opened into a small, sterile, climate-controlled storage room.

Behind a sheet of thick, bulletproof glass, bathed in a cold blue light, sat a rack of small, frozen vials.

"This," Giselle said, her voice filled with pride, "is the future. A compound that can fundamentally rewrite cellular structure."

Hilliard's gaze sharpened, locking onto the labels. He saw the chemical prefix: RK. It matched the intelligence Seraphina Moreau had given him about a rare neurotoxin. He watched Giselle's face as she spoke, saw the flicker of something ugly and cruel in her eyes, a sick excitement. It confirmed everything.

His heart gave a single, hard thud against his ribs. He stepped closer, his dark eyes memorizing the alphanumeric codes on the vials.

Just as Giselle was about to elaborate, a sharp vibration buzzed from the pocket of her robe.

She glanced at the screen, and her expression soured. With an apologetic gesture to Hilliard, she stepped into the far corner of the small room to take the call.

It was Eleonora. Her voice was sharp, imperious, and loud enough for Hilliard to catch snippets. A harsh interrogation about her guest, about her plans for the evening.

Giselle argued back in a hushed, angry whisper, defending her right to entertain Hilliard.

Her back was to him.

It was all the time he needed. Ten seconds.

Hilliard's hand moved smoothly to his cuff. He slipped the scanner from its housing. It was no bigger than his thumbnail. He pressed it against the digital control panel outside the glass, the device humming silently as it copied the access protocols and security data.

He had it.

When Giselle turned around, her face flushed with annoyance, he was standing exactly where she had left him, swirling the ice in his bourbon.

“My mother,” she sighed, rolling her eyes. “She’s pathologically controlling.”

Hilliard’s expression was a mask of perfect sympathy. “Then perhaps I should stay,” he said, his voice a low, suggestive murmur. “It would be a shame to have your evening ruined. And it would certainly keep her spies from reporting that I left too early.”

Chapter 974:

Giselle’s eyes widened. She saw it as a monumental step, a signal that he was choosing her. Her face lit up with a triumphant, ecstatic glow.

“I’d like that,” she breathed. “I’d like that very much.”

She personally led him upstairs to a guest suite, her hand lingering on his arm just a moment too long.

Hilliard stepped inside. The moment the door clicked shut and the lock engaged, the mask of warmth vanished from his face. It was replaced by a look of cold, hard focus. He pulled a micro-computer from his coat and began decrypting the stolen data.

Across town, in the war room of the Van Doren estate, a silent alarm flashed on Eleonora's private tablet.

Giselle's subterranean lab had been accessed. Off-schedule.

The visitor log showed one name: Hilliard Holloway.

Eleonora's finely sculpted eyebrows drew together. A man who would go to war with the world for Cailin Morton did not suddenly develop a casual interest in biochemistry.

A cold knot of dread tightened in her stomach.

She picked up a secure, encrypted phone.

"I want a full background sweep on Hilliard Holloway," she said, her voice like ice. "I want to know every single person he's spoken to in the last forty-eight hours. Every word."

The first weak rays of morning sunlight sliced through the blinds of the guest room. Hilliard unplugged the micro-drive, his eyes bloodshot from a night spent staring at lines of code.

He ran a hand over his face, the rasp of his stubble loud in the quiet room. He straightened his slightly rumpled shirt collar and opened the door.

Downstairs, Giselle was sitting at a small breakfast table, a cup of coffee cradled in her hands. She looked up as he descended the staircase, her face lighting up.

She stood, moving to intercept him, her shoulder brushing deliberately against the lapel of his suit jacket as he passed.

"You're up early," she murmured, a playful pout on her lips.

"An early board meeting," Hilliard said, his tone cool and dismissive. He didn't slow his stride.

In the brief moment of contact, a tiny, almost invisible smear of coral-pink lipstick transferred from her lips to the dark wool of his inner lapel. A mark of ownership. A silent declaration.

Hilliard, his mind already on the decrypted data and the coming war, felt nothing. He didn't notice the faint, cloying scent of her perfume or the tiny stain she'd left behind. He simply walked to the front door and let himself out.

His SUV sped back toward his penthouse. He shed the jacket as soon as he was inside, tossing it onto the arm of a leather sofa before disappearing into his study to connect with his security team.

Half an hour later, the chime of the private elevator announced an arrival.

Mia had come for Cailin's medical authorization forms. The housekeeper let her into the vast, silent living room to wait.

Her eyes immediately fell on the discarded jacket. It was a beautiful piece of custom tailoring, impossibly expensive.

Chapter 975:

As she drew closer, a scent hit her. Not Hilliard's familiar, clean scent of sandalwood and expensive soap, but something else. A heavy, cloying fragrance of winter roses.

Mia's blood ran cold. She knew that scent. It was Giselle Van Doren's signature, a limited-edition perfume she flaunted at every social event. Mia remembered Giselle deliberately bumping into her at a gala once, leaving the same suffocating smell on her own dress.

Her hands shaking with a sudden, violent rage, Mia snatched the jacket from the sofa.

And there it was.

On the dark inner lapel, a smear of coral-pink lipstick. It was like a wound against the black fabric.

A strangled sound escaped Mia's throat. She felt as if the air had been punched from her lungs. She threw the jacket to the floor as if it were contaminated. She grabbed the file folder she'd come for and stormed out of the penthouse, slamming the door behind her.

She drove through the streets of Manhattan like a madwoman, a hot, furious blur of tears in her eyes. It wasn't fair. It was monstrous. How could he?

She burst into Cailin's room at Mount Sinai without knocking, her chest heaving.

Cailin was propped up against the pillows, her face as white as the starched sheets. She looked impossibly fragile. She saw Mia's expression and her own brow furrowed in concern.

"Mia? What is it?"

Mia marched to the bedside, her voice trembling with a rage she couldn't contain. "Are you still holding out hope for him, Cailin? After everything, do you still think there's a chance?"

Cailin's gaze fell to her hands, which were clenched tightly in the thin hospital blanket. "No," she said quietly. The lie was a stone in her throat. The white-knuckled grip on the blanket told the real story.

Mia couldn't hold it in any longer. The words tumbled out, hot and poisoned.

"I was just at his apartment. His jacket, it smelled of her. That goddamn winter rose perfume. And Cailin, there was lipstick on it. Her lipstick."

The world stopped.

For Cailin, it felt as if a heavy iron mallet had swung down and shattered her breastbone. The air left her body in a silent gasp. Her hand flew to her chest, clutching the rough fabric of her hospital gown as if to hold herself together.

A searing pain, sharper than any poison, ripped through her. She forced her hand down, forced her fingers to uncurl. A smile, a ghastly, broken thing, twisted her lips.

“He’s a grown man, Mia,” she said, her voice a dry, rasping whisper. “He can be with whomever he chooses.”

Mia saw through the brittle facade. Her own anger dissolved into a wave of profound, heartbreaking pity. She sat on the edge of the bed and wrapped her arms around her friend’s frail shoulders.

Chapter 976:

Cailin leaned into the embrace, but her body was stiff, unyielding. Her eyes were wide and vacant, staring at the blank wall opposite her bed. The last, flickering ember of warmth inside her had been extinguished. It was one thing for him to be cold, to be cruel for the sake of his family. But this, to be with the daughter of the woman who had murdered her mother, while she herself lay dying, it was a level of betrayal she hadn’t known was possible.

She gently pushed Mia away. She picked up a tissue from the bedside table and dabbed at a tiny bead of blood that had appeared at the corner of her mouth. Her movements were numb, mechanical.

“Don’t,” she said, her voice flat and cold as stone. “Don’t ever say his name in this room again.”

Mia nodded, tears streaming down her face. She backed away, giving Cailin space, her heart breaking for her.

Cailin turned her head to look out the window at the bleak, grey sky. The light in her eyes was gone. All that remained was a pure, focused, all-consuming hatred for the Van Doren family.

A soft, polite knock sounded at the door.

Dr. Finch pushed it open, a medical chart in his hand.

Dr. Alistair Finch entered, pushing a stainless-steel medical cart. The quiet whirl of its wheels was unnervingly loud in the tense silence of the room.

Cailin pulled her gaze from the window. Her eyes, now devoid of any warmth, fixed on the doctor. The man with Van Doren blood.

Finch avoided her stare. He busied himself with the chart, his head bent low, but Cailin saw the fine sheen of sweat on his forehead.

He picked up a syringe, his movements practiced but tight. As he drew the clear analgesic from a vial, his fingers trembled. It was a micro-movement, a barely perceptible tremor, but in the hyper-focused stillness of the room, it was as loud as a scream.

Cailin saw it.

She didn't extend her arm for the injection. Instead, she spoke, her voice dangerously low.

"Last night," she said, her tone conversational but edged with steel, "my fingertips turned black. For about a minute. And there was a pain in my chest, like a fist clenching around my heart."

She described the specific, esoteric symptoms with chilling accuracy.

Finch froze. His thumb, resting on the plunger of the syringe, twitched. A single drop of the clear liquid beaded at the tip of the needle. His eyes widened in a fleeting, unguarded moment of panic.

Cailin's gaze was like a scalpel. She leaned forward slightly, the movement costing her a monumental effort.

She didn't name the poison. She didn't have to. She used a cold, calculated guess designed to sound like an accusation steeped in dark certainty.

“A poison fit for a king, I’d imagine,” she mused, her voice a soft, venomous whisper. “Something crafted to erase a person so quietly that the world would call it fate. The kind of weapon only a family like yours would keep in its arsenal.”

The implication hit Alistair Finch like a physical blow. It was too close, terrifyingly, impossibly close to the truth.

His hand jerked violently. The syringe slipped from his grasp, clattering onto the stainless-steel tray with a sharp, metallic shriek.

He fumbled for it, his face ashen, his professional composure utterly shattered.

Cailin’s heart sank, a cold, heavy stone of certainty. His reaction was a confession.

Chapter 977:

With a surge of adrenaline-fueled strength, she lunged forward and grabbed a handful of his white lab coat. He was trapped.

Her voice was a low, brutal hiss, each word a hammer blow. “You knew. You’ve known all along, haven’t you? You knew this was your family’s work.”

Finch shook his head frantically, his words a strangled mess of denial. “No, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

A cold, humorless smile touched Cailin's lips. She released him, her hand falling away. She pointed a trembling finger at the fallen syringe.

"Your hands just told me everything I need to know, Doctor."

He stumbled back against the wall, breathing in ragged, panicked gasps. His defenses were gone.

He closed his eyes, a look of profound, soul-deep misery on his face. He didn't deny it this time. He just whispered, his voice cracking, "Please. Don't ask any more questions. You don't understand. They'll kill us all."

That single, desperate plea was the final nail in the coffin. It was an admission. Van Doren. It was them.

Cailin fell back against the pillows, her chest heaving. The rage was a physical thing, a fire in her blood. She looked at the pathetic, trembling man before her, a doctor who had betrayed his oath, a cog in a murderous machine.

"A healer," she spat, the words dripping with contempt. "You're an accomplice to murder."

Tears welled in Finch's eyes. "I've been trying to slow it down," he pleaded, his voice thick with shame. "The doses I've been giving you, they're not just for pain."

“Get out,” Cailin interrupted, her voice suddenly flat and devoid of all emotion. “Get out of my room. I don’t want your pity. I don’t want anything from a killer’s family.”

He scrambled to pick up the tray, his hands shaking so badly the vials rattled. He fled the room like a hunted animal.

The moment the door clicked shut, Cailin’s hands clenched the bedsheets, her knuckles turning white.

It was Eleonora. It had to be. And Giselle was the one who delivered the poison. And Hilliard, Hilliard with his jacket smelling of Giselle’s perfume, was sleeping with the executioner. He had allied himself with the monsters who were killing her.

The thought was a black hole, sucking away the last of her will to fight, the last of her will to live.

She ripped the IV needle from the back of her hand. A bloom of dark blood welled up, but she felt no pain.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed. The floor was shockingly cold against her bare feet. She had to get out. She had to do something. She couldn’t die in this bed, waiting.

She staggered toward the small closet, her body swaying, the room tilting around her.

Just as her fingers touched the cool wood of the closet door, it was pushed open from the outside.

A tall, imposing figure filled the doorway.

Silas Croft.

Chapter 978:

Silas Croft took in the scene at a glance: Cailin, barefoot and swaying, the back of her hand bleeding freely onto the pristine white floor. His face, already etched with grim lines, hardened into granite.

He strode into the room, his presence so powerful it seemed to suck the air out. He took her by the shoulders, his grip firm and unyielding, and steered her back to the bed. He pressed her down onto the mattress with an authority that allowed for no argument.

Cailin struggled, a wild, cornered look in her eyes. "Let me go!"

Silas ignored her, grabbing a handful of tissues from the bedside table and pressing them firmly against the wound on her hand.

"Be still," he commanded, his voice a low, rumbling thunder. "Rage is a poor weapon. It will get you killed long before it ever touches your enemies."

His words, and the sheer force of his will, seemed to penetrate her frantic state. She stopped struggling, her breathing coming in harsh, ragged gasps, and stared up at the formidable old man.

He pulled a chair to the bedside and sat, his large frame seeming to dwarf the small room. From the inner pocket of his impeccably tailored suit, he produced a thick, black file folder.

He tossed it onto the bed. It landed with a soft, heavy thud.

"My people have been busy for the last forty-eight hours," he said. "This is what they found on the Van Doren family."

Cailin's hands trembled as she reached for the folder. She opened it. The first page was a photograph of Eleonora Van Doren, her face a mask of aristocratic coldness.

Silas pointed a thick finger at the picture. "This woman," he said, his voice laced with a deep, chilling hatred, "is a viper. She runs the family's wetwork. Their network of assassins."

Cailin's fingers flipped through the pages. She saw redacted police reports, death certificates, all officially ruled as accidents or suicides. Business rivals, political opponents, anyone who had crossed the Van Doren family. And Eleonora's shadow was behind every single one.

"She used the family's biochemical assets to eliminate her rivals and seize control of the board," Silas explained, his voice a grim monotone.

A cold dread settled in Cailin's stomach. "And Donovan?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper. "Where is he in all of this?"

Silas's expression grew complex. "Donovan is a ruthless king on the corporate battlefield. But in his own home, he turns a blind eye. He allows Eleonora to handle the darker aspects of their family business." He detailed Eleonora's obsessive, pathological possessiveness of her husband. Any woman who got too close, who was perceived as a threat, met with an unfortunate end.

Cailin's breath caught in her throat. She saw the sparse, heavily censored notes in the file about her own mother, Genevieve.

She looked up, her mind racing, connecting the dots. "She's killing me for the same reason," she said, her voice sharp with a sudden, horrifying clarity. "It's not random. There's something about me, something I represent, that threatens her."

Chapter 979:

Silas looked at his granddaughter, at the fierce intelligence burning in her eyes, and gave a slow, solemn nod. "Your instincts are correct."

"But what?" Cailin pressed. "What could it be? Is it just because I'm a Croft?"

Silas stood and walked to the window, turning his back to her. He stood in silence for a long, heavy minute. The only sound in the room was the quiet, relentless ticking of the clock on the wall.

When he turned back, his eyes were red-rimmed. He looked at Cailin, but it felt as if he were looking through her, at a ghost from the past.

“What I am about to tell you,” he said, his voice raspy with unshed grief, “will change everything you think you know about your life.”

Cailin gripped the bedsheets, her knuckles white. She braced herself. “After the last few days,” she said, her voice hollow, “I don’t think there’s anything left that can break me.”

Silas took a deep, shuddering breath. He began to speak of the past, of a deceptive marriage between his daughter, Genevieve, and a weak, cruel man named Warren Ashford. He spoke of lies and control, of a family built on a foundation of deceit.

Cailin listened, a growing sense of dread coiling in her stomach. She felt as if she were standing on the edge of a vast, dark abyss.

Silas paused, his gaze locking with hers.

Then, with a voice as steady and final as a judge’s gavel, he delivered the first blow.

“Garrett Ashford,” he said, referring to the man she had called father for most of her life, “is not your father.”

The world dissolved into a roar of white noise in Cailin’s ears. She stared at Silas, her lips parted, but no sound came out. The room felt like it was tilting, spinning away from her. She was adrift, her entire history a lie.

And she knew, with a terrifying certainty, that the final, devastating truth was yet to come.

The silence in the room was absolute, a crushing weight. Cailin's breathing was a shallow, desperate flutter in her chest. She stared at Silas's lips, waiting for the final, world-shattering word.

Silas closed his eyes for a brief second, as if steeling himself. Then he opened them, and with a voice devoid of anything but grim finality, he said the name.

"Your biological father is Donovan Van Doren."

The words detonated in the center of Cailin's brain. Her body jerked backward as if struck, the back of her head hitting the hard wood of the headboard with a sickening thud.

She gasped, but no air came. Her lungs felt like they had collapsed. A dry, ragged retching sound tore from her throat.

No.

Her head shook violently from side to side. Her hands flew up to cover her ears, a futile attempt to block out the monstrous, impossible truth.

The patriarch of the family that had murdered her mother. The patriarch of the family that was murdering her. That man was her father? It was a joke. A sick, cosmic joke.

Chapter 980:

Silas moved forward. He gently but firmly pulled her hands away from her head, forcing her to face him, forcing her to face the ugly reality.

He slid a single sheet of paper from the bottom of the black folder and placed it in front of her.

A DNA comparison report.

The clinical, black-and-white numbers were a death sentence to her identity. 99.99% match. Father. Daughter.

She shoved the paper away as a violent wave of nausea overcame her. She leaned over the side of the bed and vomited, her body convulsing with dry, painful heaves. Tears, hot and uncontrollable, streamed down her face.

Silas stood over her, his hand resting gently on her back. "This is why she wants you dead, Cailin," he said, his voice thick with a terrible, weary sadness. "Your existence is a fatal threat to her position. You are the one secret she can't afford to have revealed."

Cailin wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. She pushed herself up, her empty eyes now blazing with a wild, terrifying hatred. It was a hatred for her own blood, her own cursed existence.

"I wish I had never been born," she spat, the words laced with a venom that was aimed at herself.

Silas straightened up, his expression hardening back into cold, resolute steel. "The blood of a Croft will not be spilled in vain," he declared. "I am going to their estate on Long Island. I am going to get the antidote, and I am going to get justice."

Cailin's hand shot out, grabbing the sleeve of his jacket. "No," she rasped. "You can't. Eleonora is insane. It's a death trap."

A humorless smile touched Silas's lips. "In New York City," he said, his voice filled with the quiet arrogance of immense power, "there is no one who would dare lay a hand on the head of the Croft family."

He gently pried her fingers from his sleeve. "I will return with the cure," he promised. "And with Donovan's head."

He turned and strode from the room. Outside the door, four armed bodyguards fell into formation around him, a moving wall of impenetrable security.

The door clicked shut, leaving Cailin alone in the suffocating silence. The world was spinning, collapsing in on itself.

She ripped out the new IV line in her hand without a second thought. She had to move. She couldn't just wait here to die.

She stumbled from the bed, a wave of dizziness from the poison washing over her. She pulled on a large trench coat from the closet, covering her thin hospital gown.

Leaning against the wall for support, she made her way out of the room, down the deserted corridor, and into an empty elevator.

She emerged on the ground floor, melting into a crowd of visitors, and slipped out into the cold afternoon air. She found her way to a secluded hospital garden, the wind a welcome shock against her feverish skin.

She collapsed onto a cold stone bench by a gurgling fountain, her body trembling with weakness, her lungs burning.