

Second chance 541

Chapter 541:

The drone's rotors unfolded with a mechanical whine that escalated to a scream. The machine lifted off its pad, dust and grass clippings swirling in its downdraft. Charla guided it forward, her eyes fixed on the screen, her mouth open in a silent snarl.

Aron's head snapped up.

He heard it before he saw it — the pitch of the rotors, the displacement of air. His hand shot out, shoving Davy sideways with a force that sent his brother tumbling off the bench.

"Move!"

The drone passed through the space where Davy had sat, its blades chewing a trench through the stone bench's backrest. Shards of granite sprayed like shrapnel.

Davy rolled, came up in a combat crouch his trainers had drilled into muscle memory. His eyes found the drone, tracked its arc as Charla fought the controls, bringing it around for another pass.

"Split!" Aron commanded.

They ran in opposite directions — Aron toward the hedge maze, Davy toward the central fountain. The drone hesitated, its simple targeting algorithm confused by the separation.

Charla's finger stabbed at the screen, selecting Aron. The larger threat. The one who had spoken.

The drone pivoted, rotors screaming, and dove.

Aron ran with everything he had, lungs burning, legs pumping. The hedge maze entrance was ten feet away. Five. He could feel the drone's shadow falling over him, the vibration of its rotors in his teeth.

He dove.

The drone's blades shredded the hedge where his head had been, leaves and wood chips exploding outward. Aron hit the ground hard, shoulder rolling, coming up against the maze's interior wall. His hand found the tactical pen in his pocket — useless against a machine, but better than empty fingers.

The drone hovered at the maze entrance, sensors scanning. It would find him in seconds.

Then the lights died.

Not gradually. Instantly. The entire garden's electrical grid cut out with a sound like a giant inhaling, and the drone's rotors sputtered, coughed, and went silent.

It fell from the air like a stone, crashing into the manicured lawn three feet from where Aron crouched.

Silence.

Then footsteps — unhurried, crunching on gravel.

Julian Holloway emerged from behind the tool shed, a titanium golf driver resting on his shoulder. He had used it to smash the main circuit breaker box. Sparks still dripped from the twisted metal where the driver's head had connected.

He walked to the crashed drone and prodded it with his shoe. The blades were bent, the housing cracked.

"Well," Julian said. "That was dramatic."

He turned toward the tool shed. His voice carried the lazy amusement of a man watching theater.

"Come out, Charla. I know you're there."

Silence. Then the shed door creaked. Charla emerged, the tablet still clutched in her bloody hands. Her face was white, her eyes too wide, the pupils blown.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said. Her voice was wrong — too high, a child's denial. "The machine malfunctioned. I was trying to help —"

Julian moved.

He crossed the distance between them in three long strides, grabbed Charla's throat with his free hand, and slammed her back against the shed's wooden wall. The impact drove air from her lungs in a sharp gasp.

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His face was inches from hers. The playboy mask had vanished. What remained was cold, assessing, and entirely predatory.

"Listen carefully, you psychotic bitch," Julian whispered. "There are no cameras here. No witnesses. I could snap your neck and tell everyone you slipped on the wet grass. Do you understand?"

Charla's fingers scrabbled at his wrist. She couldn't breathe. His thumb pressed against her carotid, a precise application of pressure that brought stars to her vision.

"The boys are under my protection now," Julian continued. "They flattered my ego, and I find I enjoy their company. If you touch them again — if you even look at them wrong — I will end you. Not dramatically. Not publicly. Just... over. A disappearance. Do you believe me?"

Charla managed a nod. Her vision was tunneling, grey at the edges.

Julian released her. She collapsed to her knees, gasping, one hand at her throat.

He wiped his palm on his trousers as if contaminated, then turned and walked toward where Aron and Davy had emerged from the hedge maze. They stood together, watching with identical expressions of cold evaluation.

“Come on, lads,” Julian called, his voice light again, the playboy restored. “Let’s find somewhere with working electricity. I believe I promised you a tour of my private collection.”

They followed him without looking back at Charla.

She remained on the ground, grass stains on her knees, the tablet’s cracked screen still showing the drone’s last frozen image. Her throat throbbed where Julian’s fingers had pressed. Her mind throbbed worse — a red pulse behind her eyes.

Direct action had failed. Julian had chosen sides. The boys had allies now, protection she couldn’t penetrate with simple violence.

But there were other kinds of violence. Other weapons.

Charla's hand found her phone. Her fingers, still trembling, opened the encrypted messaging app. She sent an update to her contact.

"Plan update," she typed, her thumb smearing blood on the screen. "Targets now have additional protection. Julian Holloway. He is now a secondary objective. Increase payment. Failure is not an option."

Rain hammered against the Brooklyn safe house's reinforced windows, a continuous drumming that suggested the sky had developed a personal grievance against the city.

Kegan had brought her here last night, leaving her in Ashely's capable care after the breakdown at the cemetery. He had business of his own, shadows to chase, but he had promised to return. For twenty-four hours, Cailin had barely slept, her grief a constant, cold presence. But it was a grief she now wore like armor. She forced herself to eat, to analyze the data Aron sent, to function. The investigation into her mother's past was not an escape, but another front in her war. She would not allow herself the luxury of collapse again.

Inside, the lighting was deliberately dim — Cailin's request, her eyes still sensitive after the neurotoxin exposure. A single desk lamp cast a yellow cone over the scattered contents of her mother's legacy: photographs, legal documents, and a frayed black leather journal that had survived three decades and Eleanor Morton's attempted destruction.

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Cailin sat hunched in an ergonomic chair, wrapped in a gray cashmere sweater that swallowed her frame. She had lost weight again. The bones of her wrists showed too clearly, fragile as bird wings.

The journal's final pages lay before her, decoded at last by Kegan's quantum decryption array. Her mother's handwriting — familiar from childhood birthday cards, from notes left on kitchen counters — filled the space in increasingly desperate strokes.

"They erased my memory," Cailin read aloud, her voice hoarse. "I don't know who I am anymore. But I know I have to run. The Sinclair family — they're not what they seem. They're in everything. Energy. Shipping. The hospitals where they say I'm crazy."

Ashely looked up from her position by the door, where she had been cleaning her Glock. "Sinclair? As in Sinclair Energy? They're bigger than Holloway. Older. Meaner."

Cailin's finger traced a name that appeared three times, each instance underlined with increasing violence.

"Nathaniel Royce," she said. "He promised to hide me. But I don't know what he wanted in return. I don't know if I paid it."

She turned to her laptop, fingers moving across the keyboard. The search interface was Kegan's design, accessing databases that didn't officially exist. She typed the name into twelve separate archives.

Nothing.

Not suppressed. Not classified. Erased. Nathaniel Royce had been scrubbed from digital existence with a thoroughness that suggested institutional power beyond even Sinclair's reach.

The dead end hit her like a physical blow.

Cailin's hands stopped moving. Her breathing, already shallow, became erratic. The room's dimensions seemed to shift, walls pressing inward, ceiling dropping.

"Hey." Ashely was beside her, hand on her shoulder. "Cali. Stay with me."

But Cailin was already gone.

The image came without warning, as it always did. The gray sky over the cliff's edge. Elia's pink jacket, a small, bright speck against the churning sea below. She wasn't struggling — she was held tight in Rourke's arms, her face turned up toward Cailin, her mouth open in a scream stolen by the wind. There was only the fall, the endless, sickening plummet toward the rocks and water.

The migraine was instantaneous, a white-hot spike driven through her left temple. Cailin cried out — a sound torn from somewhere beneath language — and collapsed.

The chair went over. Her shoulder hit the floor, then her head. The journal and coffee cup scattered, porcelain shattering against concrete.

"Cali!" Ashely's voice came from far away, as if underwater. "Is it the PTSD? Where's your medication?"

Cailin's fingers clawed at her chest, tearing at the sweater, trying to reach the pain that wasn't physical, that couldn't be touched. "Pills," she gasped. "The orange bottle. Please."

Ashely scrambled to the medical cabinet, yanked it open, and rummaged through labeled containers. Her hand emerged empty.

"It's gone," she said, the words sharp with panic. "Cali, the bottle's empty. When did you last refill?"

Cailin curled into herself, knees to chest, forehead pressed against the cold floor. The hallucination was coming. She could feel it building, a pressure behind her eyes like storm clouds gathering.

"Manhattan," she forced out. "Presbyterian private hospital. Dr. Voss has emergency authorization. Biometric backup on file."

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"You can't go out there. Holloway's people —"

"If I lose consciousness," Cailin interrupted, each word costing her, "I can't protect them. Aron. Davy. They need me functional. I need those pills."

She pushed herself up, using the desk edge as leverage. Her legs shook, barely supporting her weight. She moved to the bathroom, ran cold water, and splashed it across her face until her reflection showed something approaching alertness.

The ceramic knife went into her boot. The black cap pulled low. The raincoat that would hide the tremors.

Ashely watched her with helpless fury. "I'm driving. And if anyone looks at you wrong, I'm shooting them."

They left through the garage, into the storm.

In the car, Cailin leaned against the passenger window, watching Manhattan's skyline emerge through the rain. The buildings were gray silhouettes, indistinct as memory.

Nathaniel Royce. The name circled in her mind, a vulture seeking carrion. Whoever he was, whatever he had done to help her mother — he was connected to Sinclair. And Sinclair, somehow, was connected to her.

The answers were out there. She would find them.

After she survived tonight.

The VIP corridor of Manhattan Presbyterian's private wing smelled of money and antiseptic, a combination that suggested illness was merely another luxury service.

Cailin moved through it like a ghost, black cap pulled low, shoulders hunched inside her raincoat. The orange pill bottle was secure in her pocket, filled now with thirty days of high-dose sertraline and prazosin — enough to keep the nightmares at bay. Enough to function.

She kept her eyes on the floor, counting tiles. One hundred twenty-three to the elevator. She had reached ninety-seven when the voice stopped her.

“Cailin?”

The sound was wrong. Too sharp, too delighted, too close.

Cailin’s body reacted before her mind, muscles tensing, weight shifting to the balls of her feet. She did not turn. She walked faster.

High heels clicked behind her, rapid, pursuing.

“Don’t you dare walk away from me, you gutter rat.” Charla English’s hand closed on Cailin’s shoulder, fingers digging in with manicured strength. “Hilliard sent me. He heard you had a breakdown and wanted me to deliver this — a restraining order. He’s finally realized what a pathetic, unstable creature you are.”

Cailin stopped. She turned.

Charla stood in full Chanel armor, sunglasses pushed to the top of her head, a white bandage visible on her left palm where the kitchen knife had slipped. Her eyes were bright with the particular madness of someone who had been humiliated and was desperate to pass that humiliation downward.

“The great Cailin Morton,” Charla sneered, her gaze dropping to the bulge in Cailin’s pocket. “What’s that? Antidepressants? Anti-anxiety medication?” She laughed, a sound like breaking glass. “The little bastard falling off the cliff finally broke you, didn’t she? Do you see her when you close your eyes? Do you hear her screaming for Mommy?”

The words landed precisely where Charla had aimed. Cailin felt the impact in her sternum, a physical blow that stopped her breath.

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Then something else rose. Something that had been waiting.

Cailin’s hand moved in a blur of motion. The backhand strike connected with Charla’s cheek with a crack that echoed off the marble walls. Charla’s sunglasses flew, skittering across the floor. Her head snapped sideways, lipstick smearing across her teeth.

“You —” Charla raised her own hand, nails extended like claws.

Cailin caught her wrist mid-swing. Her other hand found Charla’s throat, fingers closing with the precision of someone who had been trained to kill efficiently. She drove forward, slamming Charla’s spine against the corridor wall with enough force to drive air from her lungs in a sharp gasp.

The orange bottle fell from Cailin's pocket. White pills scattered across the marble like seeds, like teeth, like small bones.

"Listen to me, Charla." Cailin's voice was barely above a whisper, but it carried absolute finality. "I am going to say this once. If I did not have more important matters to attend to, I would use this —" her free hand drew the ceramic knife from her boot, pressing the blade against Charla's carotid "— to open your throat and watch you bleed out on this floor. Do you believe me?"

Charla's eyes were wide, white showing all around the iris. She tried to speak, managed only a wet gurgle.

"The pressure you're feeling," Cailin continued, "is your pulse against my blade. Remember it. It will be the last thing you feel before you die, when I finally have time to finish this properly."

She released her grip. Charla slid down the wall, landing hard on her designer skirt, one hand at her throat, gasping.

Cailin stepped back. She did not look at the scattered pills. She walked to the elevator, pressed the button, and waited with the patience of someone who had already left this interaction behind.

The doors opened. She entered. As they closed, she saw Charla fumbling for her phone, aiming the camera at the white pills on the marble floor.

Let her, Cailin thought. Let her collect her evidence. It changes nothing.

The elevator descended.

But as Cailin fought her own demons in the descending car, a new, far more insidious threat was already making its move on the city — a ghost wearing her daughter's face.

Charla remained on the floor, throat throbbing, cheek burning, humiliation a living thing crawling beneath her skin. She took twelve photos from different angles. She would send them to Hilliard. She would show him what his precious ex-wife had become — a drug-addicted wreck, a lunatic.

She would make him see that Cailin Morton was nothing. Less than nothing.

And then she would find a way to make those two little bastards in the estate pay for everything.

Fifth Avenue at 2:47 PM was a river of black umbrellas and darker intentions.

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The bulletproof Maybach moved through it like a shark through murky water, its special diplomatic plates granting immunity from traffic laws that constrained lesser vehicles. Inside, the cabin was warm, scented with leather and the faint vanilla of the air freshener the child had selected from the compartment.

Silas Sinclair sat with his legs crossed, reviewing documents on a tablet. The screen showed energy futures, shipping manifests, the thousand threads of his family's empire. He could have been any young

executive, except for the watchfulness in his posture and the way his eyes constantly returned to the window — and to the small girl beside him.

She wore a new coat, cream-colored cashmere, measured and cut for her in the six hours since his team had retrieved her from the upstate orphanage. A perfect fit for a perfect pawn. He had spent those hours drilling her, coaching her, refining the story until it was second nature. She held a piece of paper in both hands, careful not to crease it further. The paper showed a tall figure and a smaller one, connected by a red circle. Inside the circle, a crude but recognizable caramel apple. The drawing was a prop, created by one of his family's art forgers, but the girl clutched it with the conviction of a true believer.

"You're certain?" Silas asked. Not for the first time. He was testing her one last time.

The girl looked up. Her eyes were a carefully selected shade of autumn honey, and they held something that Silas had learned to recognize in his own mirror after difficult decisions — a well-rehearsed certainty born of necessity.

"Daddy works in the tallest building," she said. Her voice was small but clear, the lines delivered flawlessly. "He has the biggest office. He can see the whole city."

Silas followed her gaze through the rain-streaked window. The Holloway Group tower rose before them — glass and steel and the arrogance of old money. He had researched Hilliard Holloway extensively in the past twenty-four hours. The man's reputation suggested someone who would not welcome complications. Someone who would be shattered by the ghost of a dead daughter.

He could not deliver her into that uncertainty directly. The first contact had to be a failure. It had to look real.

“Elia,” he said, setting aside the tablet. He withdrew a phone from his inner pocket — matte black, no branding, encrypted to military specification. “This has one number programmed. Mine. If anyone frightens you, if anyone is unkind, you press this button.” He showed her the red emergency key. “I will come for you. No matter what. Do you understand?”

The girl took the phone. It was heavy in her small hands. She nodded, once — the gesture precise and adult.

“Good.” Silas pressed the intercom. “Stop at the corner. We’ll let her walk the last block.”

The Maybach glided to the curb, indistinguishable from a hundred other black cars except to those who knew how to look. The door opened. Cold air rushed in, carrying rain and exhaust and the particular smell of Manhattan in autumn.

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The girl stepped out. Her shoes — also new, also perfect — found the wet pavement. She did not look back at the car. She walked toward the tower with the steady pace of someone who had already decided not to be afraid.

Silas watched her through the window. She was so small. The building was so large. The disparity was perfect.

“Circle the block,” he told the driver. “Slow. I want visual contact maintained until she’s inside.”

The Maybach pulled away, merging with traffic, then cutting across two lanes to position itself where Silas could watch the building's entrance through binoculars.

The girl reached the plaza. The Holloway Group logo — a stylized H, wings implied — loomed above her, fifteen feet tall, backlit against the gray sky. She walked past it without looking up.

The revolving doors were heavy. She pushed, found the resistance too great, pushed harder. They yielded. She entered the cathedral of commerce, suddenly very aware of her smallness.

The lobby was marble and gold and the hushed voices of people who handled more money before lunch than most families saw in lifetimes. The girl walked to the central desk, where a woman in a severe suit was speaking into a headset.

She waited. The woman did not look down.

"Excuse me," she said.

The woman continued her conversation.

The girl reached up, placed both hands on the marble edge, and pulled herself upward until her chin cleared the surface. The movement cost her balance; her toes scrabbled for purchase on the desk's base.

“I need to see my Daddy,” she said, loud enough to carry. “His name is Hilliard Holloway.”

The receptionist’s conversation stopped mid-sentence. She looked down. Her expression cycled through surprise, assessment, and dismissal.

“Sweetheart,” she said, with the particular condescension adults used for children they did not believe, “Mr. Holloway doesn’t have appointments with —”

The elevator chimed.

Its doors opened, and Charla English stepped out, still wearing her hospital confrontation clothes, makeup repaired but eyes wild with the energy of someone who had been violated and was desperate to reclaim power.

She saw the desk. The small figure. The hands on the marble.

She saw the face.

Charla’s heart stopped. Literally stopped — one missed beat, then two, then a panicked gallop that sent blood roaring in her ears.

No. No, no, no. She drowned. I paid for her to drown. She is dead. She has to be dead.

But the face was unmistakable. The eyes. The bones. The particular way she held her head, chin lifted, defiant even at five years old.

If Hilliard sees her — if he knows — he will kill me. Slowly. He will make it last for days.

Charla moved. Her heels clicked across marble, rapid, too loud. She reached the desk and inserted herself between the girl and the receptionist, a physical barrier.

“What is happening here?” she demanded, her voice pitched to carry authority she no longer possessed. “This is a place of business, not a daycare center.”

The girl looked up at her. There was no recognition in the child’s eyes — of course not, she had never seen Charla before — but there was assessment. The same cold calculation Silas had noted.

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“Do you know my Daddy?” she asked. “Can you take me to him?”

The word Daddy hit Charla like acid. She felt it burn through her composure, her planning, her desperate constructed sanity.

“Your father,” she said, spacing the words with poisonous precision, “is not here. And you are not his daughter. You are a fraud, sent by criminals to extort money. Security!”

She reached down, grabbed the girl's arm, and yanked. The child was lighter than expected, easier to move. Charla pulled her away from the desk, toward the doors, her fingers digging into small muscle and bone.

"I have a picture," the girl protested, trying to free her arm. "I drew it, see —"

Charla's other hand struck the paper from her grip. It fluttered to the floor, the caramel apple landing face-down on marble. Her heel came down on it as she walked, grinding crayon wax and paper into the polished surface.

"Remove this child from the premises," she commanded the approaching security guards. "She is trespassing. She is attempting fraud. Throw her out."

The guards were large men in black uniforms. They looked at Charla, recognized her from news coverage — Holloway's fiancée, the future mistress of this empire — and their hesitation vanished.

One took the girl's left arm. The other took her right. They lifted her, feet dangling, and carried her toward the revolving doors.

"Let me go!" She kicked, connected with a shin, earned a grunt but no release. "I want my Daddy! Please!"

The doors pushed outward. Cold rain hit her face, shocking after the lobby's climate control. The guards walked to the curb — not roughly, but not gently either — and set her down on wet concrete.

"Go home, kid," one said. "Wrong building."

They turned and walked back inside. The doors revolved, swallowed them, and left the girl alone.

She sat on the pavement. Her knees hurt — she had scraped them, small burns of pain. Rain soaked through her cream coat, darkening it to gray. The paper with her drawing lay somewhere inside, probably ruined, probably thrown away.

She did not cry. She had learned not to cry in difficult situations. Crying made you weak. Crying made you miss opportunities.

But she was very cold, and very alone, and she did not know what to do next.

Inside the Holloway Group lobby, Charla watched the doors close on the small figure with a satisfaction that tasted like copper pennies and old fear.

She had done it. The child was gone. Hilliard would never know.

She turned toward the executive elevators, already composing her approach. She would find him in his office, present her evidence of Cailin's drug use, and reclaim her position as his confidante and ally. The

setback at the hospital was temporary. The setback with the drone was temporary. Everything was temporary except her eventual victory.

The revolving doors made their distinctive sound. Charla glanced back, expecting to see the girl trying to re-enter, ready to signal security for permanent exclusion.

Instead, she saw chaos.

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A black vehicle — massive, armored, unmistakably expensive — had mounted the curb directly in front of the building. Its engine was still running, headlights blazing. A man was emerging from the rear door, moving with the fluid violence of someone who had never learned to walk slowly.

Silas Sinclair did not feel the rain. He felt nothing except the sight of his asset sitting on wet concrete — knees bleeding, coat ruined — and the absolute certainty that someone would pay for this deviation from the plan.

He reached her in seven strides. He dropped to one knee in the puddle she sat in, uncaring of his trousers, his shoes, the thousand-dollar fabric of his shirt.

“Little angel,” he said. His voice was soft. His hands, when they touched her shoulders, were gentle. It was all part of the performance. “Who hurt you?”

The girl looked up. Her face was pale, her lips slightly blue with cold, but her eyes were dry. “They said I was a liar. They said I don’t have a Daddy here.”

Silas removed his coat — cashmere, charcoal, worth more than the security guards' annual salaries — and wrapped it around her. It swallowed her completely, hanging to the pavement. He lifted her, stood, and turned toward the building.

Charla had emerged. She stood in the shelter of the entrance canopy, watching with the particular stillness of prey that has realized it is being hunted.

Silas walked toward her. His stride was unhurried. His face was empty of expression, which was worse than anger.

"Excuse me," Charla began, her voice carrying that automatic assumption of social dominance. "This is private property. That child is —"

Silas's hand moved.

The strike was open-palmed, delivered with precise calculation of force and angle. Charla's head snapped sideways. She stumbled, caught herself on the door frame, her hand flying to her cheek where a red print was already rising.

"You struck me," she said, disbelief overwhelming sense. "Do you know who I am? I am Hilliard Holloway's fiancée. I will have you arrested. I will have you destroyed."

Silas smiled. It was not a pleasant expression.

Two men had emerged from the Maybach. They wore no uniforms, carried no visible weapons, but their posture suggested professions that did not require advertising. They positioned themselves behind Silas, hands loose at their sides.

“Ms. English,” Silas said. “You have made two errors. First, you touched what belongs to me. Second, you assumed that Hilliard Holloway’s name carries weight with me.”

He reached into his pocket, withdrew a handkerchief — white silk, monogrammed with a stylized S — and wiped his palm with deliberate thoroughness. The handkerchief dropped to the wet pavement.

“I am Silas Sinclair,” he said. “And Hilliard Holloway will soon learn that some mistakes are beyond his capacity to correct. Tell him I will be in touch.”

Charla’s hand fell from her cheek. The name registered. Sinclair. The energy conglomerate. The shipping empire. The family that had been powerful when the Holloways were still trading furs.

Her mouth opened. Closed. No sound emerged.

“Take the child to the car,” Silas told his men, not looking at the girl. “Turn the heat to maximum. She is hypothermic.”

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They moved to obey, gentle with the girl, professional in their efficiency.

Silas remained, facing Charla. The rain had soaked through his shirt, revealing the lean muscle beneath and the posture of someone trained to violence as thoroughly as to business.

“Your building is impressive,” he said, glancing up at the tower. “Your security is adequate. Your judgment, however, is catastrophic.” He leaned closer — close enough that she could smell his cologne, something expensive and cold. “That child will never enter this building again. She will never speak your name. She will forget you existed. But you will remember this moment. You will remember that you had something precious in your hands, and you threw it into the rain because you were afraid.”

He straightened. “When Hilliard asks what happened here — and he will — tell him Sinclair sends his regards. Tell him we will discuss this further, at a time of my choosing.”

He turned and walked to the car. The door closed behind him with the solid finality of a vault.

The Maybach pulled away, merging into traffic, disappearing toward the West Side Highway and the private estates beyond.

Charla remained in the doorway, one hand pressed to her burning cheek, the other clutching her phone with white-knuckled desperation. She should call Hilliard. She should get ahead of this, construct a narrative, explain away —

Explain what? That she had thrown a child into the rain? That she had struck that child? That she had lied about the child’s very existence?

She could say the girl was a fraud. A con artist. That would work. Hilliard would believe her. He had to believe her.

But Silas Sinclair had believed the child was his. Had claimed her. Had struck Charla for touching her.

What did that mean? Who was that girl, really?

Charla's phone buzzed. She flinched, nearly dropped it. A text from Hilliard: Where are you? We need to discuss the engagement announcement.

She stared at the words. The engagement. The party. The future she had constructed from lies and manipulation, now trembling like a house of cards in wind.

She typed back: On my way. We need to talk.

She did not mention the child. She did not mention Sinclair.

She would fix this. She always fixed things. She was Charla English, and she did not lose.

But her hands were shaking as she walked to her own car, and she could not stop them.

The Maybach's interior was warm enough to steam the windows, creating a private world of leather and soft light.

The girl sat wrapped in blankets, holding a cup of hot chocolate that one of Silas's men had produced from a concealed compartment. She had stopped shivering. The color was returning to her face, though her eyes remained distant, processing.

Silas sat across from her, having changed into dry clothes from the emergency wardrobe the car maintained. He watched her with the careful attention he usually reserved for hostile negotiations.