

Second chance 551

Chapter 551:

“Little angel,” he said. “I need to ask you something important. The man in that building — Hilliard Holloway. Why did you believe he was your father?”

He was testing her again, checking the integrity of her conditioning after the unexpected trauma.

The girl’s fingers tightened on the cup. “I remember,” she said slowly. “Pieces. A big office. Windows everywhere. He gave me...” She searched for the word. “A sweet apple. Red. Sticky.”

A caramel apple. Silas filed the detail. The forger had done excellent work with the drawing, and the girl’s memory implantation was holding. The detail was specific, emotional, and perfectly designed to torment Hilliard Holloway.

“And your mother?” he asked. “Where is she?”

The girl’s face crumpled, just slightly, just at the corners of her mouth. “I don’t remember. I was in the water. Then I was on a boat. Then you found me.”

This part of her story was true enough. She had been found on a refugee boat, an orphan with no name and a face that was worth a fortune to the Sinclair family.

Silas made a decision. He reached into his pocket, withdrew a second phone — his personal device, not the encrypted unit he had given the girl — and dialed a number from memory.

“Father,” he said when the line connected. “I need to see you. Immediately. The asset is ready. Phase one is complete.”

Sebastian Sinclair’s voice came through, gravel and authority and the impatience of a man who had not been surprised in decades. “I’m in the middle of —”

“She looks like Seraphina.”

Silence. Then: “Bring her to the estate. Now.”

The line disconnected.

Silas returned the phone to his pocket. He looked at the girl — this small weapon he had pulled from obscurity — and felt the first stirrings of something he had thought long dead in his family. The thrill of a perfectly executed plan.

“Elia,” he said, using the name they had given her. “Would you like to see where I live? It’s very large. Very old. There are gardens, and horses, and a library with books that are older than this country.”

The girl looked up. For the first time since the lobby, something like interest sparked in her eyes. "Are there puzzles?"

Silas smiled, genuinely. "Thousands."

"Okay," she said. "I'll go with you."

The Maybach turned north, toward the Sinclair estate in Westchester County, leaving Manhattan and its towers behind.

Hilliard Holloway's office occupied the entire seventy-third floor of the Holloway Group tower. The windows faced south, toward the harbor, toward the water that had taken his daughter.

He stood at the glass now, though he did not see the view. His eyes were unfocused, his mind occupied with the report Gavin had delivered that morning. Sinclair Energy had initiated aggressive positions against Holloway's European technology holdings. The move was unprovoked, strategically sound, and personally inexplicable.

The Sinclairs and Holloways had maintained careful neutrality for generations. They moved in different circles, competed in different markets, and acknowledged each other's existence with the nod of apex predators sharing territory.

Why now? Why this?

His phone buzzed.

Chapter 552:

Not his business line — that was silent, screened, managed by assistants. This was his private cell, the number known to perhaps twenty people worldwide. The number he had given to no one in months.

He crossed to his desk and picked it up.

Unknown number. Encrypted routing, the screen indicated, though that meant little — most of his contacts used similar protections.

The message was two lines. Simple words. Devastating impact.

You still have my drawing of the caramel apple, don't you? You promised you would come back for me.

Hilliard's hand closed on the phone with enough force to crack the case. His breath stopped. His vision narrowed to the screen, to those words, to the particular construction of that question.

The drawing.

No one knew about the drawing. No one. He had taken it from her small hands on the pier — the last physical piece of her he possessed. It was locked in his private safe, a sacred relic of his failure.

And the promise. He had made that promise. I'll come back for you.

She was gone. The ocean had her, had kept her, would never release her.

And now this — arriving from nowhere, from encrypted nothing, speaking with her voice, using her memory.

"Gavin," Hilliard said. His voice was strange in his own ears, distant and controlled. "Trace this. Everything. Origin, routing, physical location. Now."

Gavin was already moving, pulling equipment from his bag and connecting to the tower's dedicated fiber line. "On it, boss."

Hilliard sat. He did not look at the message again. He could not. The words were burning into his retinas, into the tissue of his brain, creating pathways of grief and guilt that would never heal.

"Preliminary routing shows twelve jumps," Gavin reported, his fingers flying across keyboards. "Military-grade encryption at each node. This is serious hardware, boss. We're talking nation-state level, or —" he paused, checking a readout "— Sinclair."

Hilliard's head came up. "Sinclair?"

“Final node resolves to their internal network. Their highest security tier. The kind of access their board members use.” Gavin looked up, his face troubled. “Boss, this came from inside Sinclair Energy. From someone with executive clearance.”

Hilliard stood. He walked back to the window, to the view of water and distance.

Silas Sinclair. The heir apparent. The man who had appeared at the building today — Gavin’s security feed had captured the confrontation at the entrance, though not the audio. The man who had struck Charla, who had taken a child, who had looked at Hilliard’s empire with the contempt of older money.

This was a message. A weapon. Psychological warfare designed to exploit his greatest wound, to destabilize his decision-making, to make him vulnerable.

The Sinclairs had learned of Elia. Had researched her, found this detail — the drawing, the promise — and were using it against him. The cruelty was precise, calculated, worthy of his own methods.

“Delete it,” Hilliard said.

“Boss?”

Chapter 553:

“The message. Delete it. Wipe the routing data. I don’t want to see it again.” He turned from the window. His face was composed, the mask of the businessman restored, but something in his eyes had gone dead. His hand tightened on the desk, the knuckles white, as a sharp pain shot through his ribs. He

ignored it, channeling the agony into cold fury. “And Gavin,” he said, his voice a low rasp, “initiate Protocol Meridian. Full hostile takeover preparation for Sinclair Energy’s North American assets. If they want war, we’ll give them war.”

Gavin hesitated. He had seen the message. Had seen Hilliard’s reaction. He was not certain this was the correct interpretation, but he had learned never to question his employer’s tactical decisions.

“Yes, sir,” he said. His fingers moved, executing commands that would mobilize billions in capital, destabilize markets, and begin a conflict between two of the world’s most powerful families.

Hilliard returned to his window. He did not look at his phone, now wiped clean of the message that had nearly broken him.

It was a trick. It had to be a trick.

But some part of him — the part that still remembered the waxy feel of the crayon on paper and the weight of a promise he had broken — would never be entirely certain.

The Sinclair estate was not a house. It was a statement written in stone and time.

The girl saw it first through rain that had followed them from the city, the building emerging from wooded hills like something from a storybook. Turrets. Wings. A central keep that predated the American Revolution. Lights burned in dozens of windows, warm against the gray afternoon.

"It's a castle," she whispered.

Silas smiled. "Something like that. My family has lived here for a very long time."

The Maybach passed through gates that opened without visible mechanism, traversed a drive lined with ancient oak trees, and stopped at an entrance that could have accommodated a marching band. Servants appeared with umbrellas and discreet offers of refreshment, moving with the practiced invisibility of people trained to anticipate need before it was expressed.

Silas led the girl through halls of marble and dark wood, past paintings whose subjects wore clothing from centuries past, through rooms that smelled of beeswax and old paper. She counted doors — forty-seven — before they stopped.

"This is my father's study," Silas said. "He is... not always gentle. But he is fair. And he will want to see you."

He knocked. A voice — deep, accented with the particular vowels of old New England wealth — called them in.

The room was dim, lit primarily by a fire that burned in a hearth large enough to stand in. A man stood at the far window, his back to them, his silhouette suggesting height and the slight stoop of age.

"Father," Silas said. "This is Elia."

Sebastian Sinclair turned.

He was in his seventies, the girl guessed, though he carried himself with the energy of someone younger. His hair was white, cropped close. His eyes — gray, sharp, accustomed to command — moved first to his son, then down, down, to the small figure at Silas's side.

The crystal glass in his hand slipped.

It fell to the carpet with a muffled thump, followed by the spreading stain of expensive whiskey. Sebastian did not notice. He was already moving, crossing the room with steps that were nearly running, steps that broke the dignity of his age and station.

Chapter 554:

He stopped three feet from the girl. He dropped to one knee — a gesture that sent shock through the servants visible in the doorway, and through Silas himself, who allowed a flicker of feigned surprise.

"Seraphina," Sebastian whispered.

His hand rose, trembling, toward the girl's face. He stopped before touching her, fingers curled in the air as if grasping at smoke.

"The eyes," he said. His own eyes were wet, the gray swimming with moisture he did not seem to notice. "The bones. You have her chin. Her mother's chin." He looked at Silas, desperate, confirming. "She is the image. At that age. Exactly."

Silas understood, then. The name. Seraphina. His aunt, dead before his birth, lost to some family tragedy that was never discussed. The girl had been chosen for this role precisely because of this uncanny resemblance. She was not a long-lost relative — she was a living ghost, a weapon forged from coincidence and grief.

“Father,” he said carefully, “Elia is not — she was found in the city. She believes her father is Hilliard Holloway. We don’t know her mother.”

“Don’t know?” Sebastian’s voice cracked. He reached out, finally touching the girl’s cheek with fingers that shook. “Look at her. Look at her and tell me blood doesn’t speak. Tell me coincidence creates such resemblance.”

The girl stood very still. She did not understand what was happening, but she recognized a script. This old man was playing a part. This old man needed something she could give, even if she didn’t understand what.

She reached up. Her small hand found his, pressed against her cheek, and held it there.

“Don’t cry,” she said. “Please. I don’t like when people cry.”

Sebastian’s composure broke. The tears that had been gathering spilled over, tracking down weathered cheeks. He pulled her into his arms, held her with the desperate strength of someone who had lost everything and been offered one impossible chance at restoration.

“Silas,” he said, his voice muffled against the girl’s hair. “Call the lawyers. All of them. Tonight.”

“Father —”

“I will adopt her. Legally, permanently, irrevocably. She will have my name, my protection, my empire.” He pulled back, looked into the girl’s confused face with an expression of absolute, terrifying devotion. It was a vow not to a child, but to his own revenge. “No one will ever harm you again. No one will ever make you cold, or hungry, or afraid. This I swear. This I swear on my blood and my name and everything I have built.”

The girl looked at Silas. Silas looked back, his eyes cold and approving, and gave a single nod.

“Welcome home,” he said. “Elia.”

The Sinclair estate’s east wing contained a conference room that had hosted decisions affecting the movement of nations.

Tonight, it hosted lawyers. Twelve of them, summoned from Manhattan by helicopter, arriving with briefcases of documents and the particular alertness of professionals who sensed history occurring.

Chapter 555:

Sebastian sat at the head of the table, the girl on his lap. She had been given a tablet loaded with educational games, and she played with it absently, her head leaning against the old man’s chest, apparently unconcerned by the legal machinery assembling around her.

“Standard adoption protocols are insufficient,” the lead attorney was saying. “Given the child’s unknown parentage, we recommend a comprehensive trust structure with multiple layers of —”

“She will have everything,” Sebastian interrupted. “Equal to my biological children. Equal to Silas and Sterling. Name her my daughter in the documents. Establish the irrevocable trusts tonight.”

The attorneys exchanged glances. This was irregular. This was potentially explosive, given the Sinclair family’s existing inheritance structures. But they had learned long ago not to question Sebastian’s decisions — only to execute them efficiently.

“And publicity?” another attorney asked. “The Holloway connection — there will be questions. Hilliard Holloway specifically may challenge —”

“He may try.” Sebastian’s voice carried the weight of decades spent crushing opposition. “He will fail. Schedule the announcement for this weekend. The Hamptons property. Full press presence, full guest list. I want every family of consequence in this country to witness her introduction.”

Silas, standing by the window, turned. “Father. Hilliard Holloway. Should we —”

“Invite him.” Sebastian’s smile was thin and cold. “I want him to see what he has lost. I want him to understand that whatever claim he believes he has, it is ashes. She is Sinclair now. She will always be Sinclair.”

The girl looked up from her game. “The man in the building? The one who didn’t want me?”

Sebastian's expression softened, transformed entirely when he looked at her. "He will never trouble you again, little one. I promise you this."

She accepted this with a child's faith, returning to her game.

The attorneys worked through the night. By dawn, the documents were prepared, reviewed, and executed. The girl's fingerprints were taken — small, smudged, but legally binding. A photograph was captured for the family records, the child in a dress that had been sewn in the estate's workshop overnight, seated beside Sebastian in a pose that echoed portraits from two centuries past.

She was Sinclair now.

In Manhattan, Hilliard Holloway received the invitation by messenger. Heavy paper, black ink, the Sinclair crest embossed in gold. The text was formal, elegant, and devastating in its simplicity.

You are cordially invited to attend the introduction of Miss Elia Sinclair, daughter of Sebastian Sinclair, at the Sinclair estate, Hamptons, this Saturday evening.

Hilliard read it three times.

Elia. The name from the message he had deleted. The name he had convinced himself was a weapon, a trap, Sinclair cruelty.

But here it was. Official. Legal. A daughter.

His hand began to shake. The paper rattled, then tore, his grip too tight, too desperate.

“Gavin,” he said. His voice was barely audible. “Find me everything. Every record, every photograph, every piece of surveillance from that building yesterday. I need to know who that child was. I need to know what she looked like.”

“Boss, the Sinclairs have locked down all —”

Chapter 556:

“Then break the locks! Bribe someone, hack something, I don’t care!” Hilliard slammed his hand on the desk, the torn invitation scattering. “That child. If she is — if there’s any possibility —”

He stopped. The hope was too dangerous. The hope was a knife he was holding to his own throat.

But he could not stop it. Could not suppress it. The message, the name, the timing — too many coincidences, too many possibilities.

“And Charla,” he said, the name emerging with new weight, new suspicion. “Find her. Bring her to me. I have questions about what happened at that entrance yesterday. About who she spoke to. About who she sent away.”

Gavin nodded, already moving.

Hilliard stood at his window, looking toward the water, toward the east, toward the Hamptons and whatever truth waited there.

He would go to the party. He would see this Elia Sinclair with his own eyes.

And if she was his — if the ocean had somehow given her back, if the sacrifice he had made had not been final, if there was any chance at redemption —

He would burn the Sinclair empire to the ground to claim her.

In the Holloway estate, Charla English received the news not by a simple phone call but by a frantic message from a society journalist she kept on retainer: “Sinclair is holding a press conference this weekend. Hamptons. Announcing a new heir. Source says it’s a child they just ‘found.’ Something big is happening.”

She dropped her coffee cup. It shattered against marble, ceramic shards and brown liquid spreading across the floor she had once hoped to rule.

Charla’s blood ran cold. She connected the dots in a flash of pure terror: the girl at the tower, Silas Sinclair’s rage, the impossible resemblance. It wasn’t a random orphan. It was her.

Elia. Alive. Adopted by Sebastian Sinclair. About to be introduced to the world as heir to a fortune that dwarfed Hilliard's.

And she had thrown that child into the rain. Had struck her. Had lied about her very existence.

Hilliard would know soon — if he didn't already suspect. And when he learned what she had done —

Charla looked at her reflection in the window, pale and desperate and utterly alone. She knew Hilliard's men would be coming for her the moment he connected the dots. She had perhaps a few hours to save herself. To build a shield out of the only ghost Hilliard Holloway still worshipped.

Charla English stood in the elevator of the Holloway Group tower, watching the floor numbers climb with the desperation of a woman who could feel the earth collapsing beneath her feet.

Seventy floors. Seventy-two. Seventy-three.

Chapter 557:

She had spent three hours that morning preparing for this moment. The white silk blouse was vintage Celine, identical to one Cailin had worn in a photograph Hilliard kept in his desk drawer. The wide-leg trousers were Theory, the cut precise, the fabric heavy enough to suggest substance rather than display. She had straightened her hair — abandoned the waves she had cultivated for years — in favor of the sleek, center-parted style that had framed Cailin's face in every society photograph from their marriage.

She looked in the mirrored elevator walls and saw a ghost. A cheap imitation. A mockingbird singing dead songs. She knew it was a mad, desperate gamble — a pathetic attempt to wear a dead woman's skin to win back a man who had already discarded her. But logic had fled, leaving only the raw, clawing need to try anything, no matter how debased. If he had loved that image once, perhaps some flicker of it remained, a weakness she could exploit.

The elevator chimed. The doors opened onto the executive floor, all polished marble and the hushed efficiency of people who handled billions before lunch.

Gavin Thorne stood at the entrance to the CEO suite, his tablet in hand, his posture suggesting he had been waiting specifically for her.

"English." His voice was flat. Professional. "You saved my security team a trip to the estate. Holloway ordered you brought in."

Charla's smile felt like cracked porcelain. "And here I am. Voluntarily. Regarding a critical matter of my own."

Gavin did not move. "He is currently tearing through the Sinclair encryption. He left specific instructions not to be disturbed until he is ready for your interrogation. Wait in the holding room."

"I have instructions for you, Gavin. Get out of my way." Charla's voice dropped to a hiss, all pretense of charm evaporating. She shoved past him, her shoulder connecting with his chest hard enough to send him stumbling. "Now."

She reached the heavy mahogany double doors and pushed.

The office beyond was vast, all glass and steel and the particular silence of spaces designed to intimidate. Floor-to-ceiling windows framed Manhattan like a possession, the city spread below in grids of ambition and failure. The afternoon light was gray, filtered through clouds that promised rain.

Hilliard Holloway stood at the window, his back to her. He wore a charcoal suit that hung loose on his frame — he had lost weight in the weeks since the hospital, since the revelation about Elia, since everything. His tie was loosened, the top button of his shirt undone. One hand held a phone to his ear; the other was pressed against the glass as if he could push through it, could fall through seventy-three floors of empty air and find something at the bottom that made sense.

“I don’t care what it costs,” he was saying. His voice was the one Charla recognized from boardrooms, from negotiations, from the moments when he destroyed competitors without visible emotion. “Break their encryption. I want to know who that child is. I want to know everything.”

He turned.

His eyes found her. Moved over her white blouse, her straightened hair, the careful minimalism of her appearance. She saw the moment of recognition — the flicker of something that might have been memory, might have been pain.

Chapter 558:

Then she saw his stomach contract. A physical spasm, visible even beneath the expensive wool of his jacket. His face drained of color, then flooded with it — a wave of rage that transformed his features into something barely human.

“Take that off.” His voice was barely audible. The words emerged from somewhere beneath language, from the reptilian core of the brain that processes threat and contamination.

Charla’s hand went to her collar. “Hilliard, I —”

“Take. It. Off.” He was moving toward her now, each step measured and controlled, but something in his shoulders suggested a man holding himself back from violence by threads of will alone. “You are wearing her skin. You are wearing her ghost. And you are not fit to carry her shadow.”

Charla’s fingers found the silk of the blouse. The fabric suddenly felt like poison against her skin. “I thought — you always said — you loved how she dressed. I thought if I —”

“You thought.” Hilliard stopped three feet from her. Close enough that she could smell his cologne, cedar and something darker underneath, something that suggested sleepless nights and the metallic edge of desperation. “You thought you could replace her by wearing her clothes. You thought you could become her by straightening your hair.” He laughed, a sound like broken glass in a blender. “You are not even the echo of her echo. You are the noise that drowns out the music.”

He turned away. Walked to his desk. Picked up his phone and spoke into it without looking at her.

“Gavin. Get in here.”

The doors opened. Gavin entered, two security guards behind him, their faces professionally blank.

“English was just leaving,” Hilliard said. He still had not looked at her. “Permanently. Revoke her building access. All floors. Effective immediately.”

“Hilliard.” Charla’s voice cracked. She reached into her bag, her fingers closing around her phone with desperate strength. “You don’t understand. I have evidence. About Cailin. About what she really is.”

She pulled the phone free. The screen was already open to the photographs she had taken in the hospital corridor — white pills scattered across marble, the orange prescription bottle lying on its side, Cailin’s face in the moment before violence, twisted with something that looked like madness.

“She’s a drug addict,” Charla said. The words tumbled out, too fast, too eager. “A lunatic. She takes these by the handful just to function. She’s dangerous, Hilliard. She’s —”

Hilliard took the phone.

He looked at the screen. His thumb moved, enlarging the image, scrolling through the photographs Charla had captured with such satisfaction. The pills. The bottle. The label that read HIGH CONCENTRATION — USE WITH CAUTION.

Charla watched his face. Waited for the disgust, the recoil, the confirmation that Cailin Morton was damaged goods, was broken, was less than nothing.

She saw his pupils dilate. Saw the muscle in his jaw jump, once, twice. Saw his hand close around the phone with enough force to crack the case.

Then he moved.

Chapter 559:

The bronze paperweight on his desk — a gift from some Saudi prince, heavy enough to kill — was in his hand, and then it was flying, and then the massive LCD screen behind his desk was exploding in a shower of glass and sparks and the scream of dying electronics.

Charla screamed too. Stumbled backward, her heel catching on the carpet, her arms windmilling for balance.

“Gavin!” Hilliard’s voice was something from a nightmare, a sound that belonged in caves, in places where light had never reached. “Get this thing out of my sight.”

The security guards moved. Their hands closed on Charla’s arms with professional efficiency, lifting her, turning her, marching her toward the doors.

“Hilliard!” She was shrieking now, all pretense of dignity abandoned. “You can’t do this! I’m your fiancée! We have a party this weekend, the engagement announcement, everyone is coming —”

Hilliard turned.

He walked to where she struggled in the guards’ grip. Leaned close — close enough that his lips brushed her ear, that she could feel the heat of his breath, the vibration of words spoken at the threshold of hearing.

"If I ever see you wearing her colors again," he whispered, "I will peel that skin from your bones and feed it to you. Do you understand?"

Charla's composure shattered completely. The guards dragged her out. Her heels left tracks on the marble — long scars of desperation that someone would clean before the next meeting.

Hilliard stood alone in the wreckage of his office. The phone was still in his hand, the screen showing Cailin's pills, Cailin's pain, the evidence of what he had done to her.

He walked to the window. Pressed his forehead against the glass. The city spread below him, indifferent and eternal. Somewhere in it was the woman he had broken, the woman who was breaking still, the woman he could not reach and could not save and could not forget.

"Boss." Gavin's voice came from the doorway, careful, professional, giving him the distance of grief. "The Sinclair file. You asked for updates."

"Later." Hilliard did not turn. "Tell the driver to prepare the car. We're going back to the estate. I can't be here right now."

He paused. "And find her. Find where she's staying. I need to —"

He stopped. The words would not come. The need was too large, too desperate, too impossible to name.

He needed to see her. Needed to know she was breathing. Needed to fall to his knees and beg forgiveness he knew she would not grant, for crimes that could not be forgiven, in a language that had not been invented yet.

The Rolls-Royce Phantom purred up the drive of the Holloway estate like a cat presenting a gift it knew was unwanted.

Richard English adjusted his tie in the reflection of the window. The silk was Hermès, the pattern subtle, the cost equivalent to a year of most people's rent. His wife Patricia sat beside him, her posture rigid, her face set in the expression of grievance she had cultivated over forty years of perceived slights.

"They will apologize," Richard said. Not for the first time. "They will apologize, and they will reinstate the engagement, and they will compensate us for the humiliation."

Chapter 560:

Patricia's hand found her pearls. The strand was three hundred thousand dollars, South Sea, perfectly matched. She had worn them specifically to remind the Holloways of what they were losing.

"Charla said Hilliard was under stress. Temporary insanity. Once he sees us, sees our dignity, he will remember who we are."

The car stopped. A footman opened the door. Richard emerged with the careful dignity of a man who had rehearsed this entrance, who had imagined it playing out in his favor a hundred times.

The estate spread before them, manicured to mathematical perfection. The gardens were autumn-bare, the hedges precise, the fountains silent. It was a display of wealth so old and so entrenched that it did not need to impress. It simply was.

Richard and Patricia walked the path toward the main house, their footsteps crunching on gravel that had been raked that morning. They passed the ornamental hedge maze, the stone benches, the service buildings where lesser people performed the labor that maintained all this beauty.

Above them, on the second-floor balcony that ran the length of the east wing, two small figures watched.

Aron — he had given the Holloway name without hesitation, producing documents that Preston's lawyers were still verifying — lay on his stomach, his chin propped on his hands. Beside him, Davy sat cross-legged, a modified tablet in his lap, his fingers moving across the screen with the speed of a concert pianist.

"Davy. Targets entering kill zone."

"Visual confirmed." Davy's voice was soft and precise, without the excitement that might have belonged to a child playing a prank. "Initiating irrigation override."

His fingers danced. Code flowed across the screen, commands in a language that Richard English would not have recognized if it had been shouted in his face.

Below, Richard was in mid-complaint. “— absolutely unacceptable treatment of our daughter, we have been allies for decades, your father and I —”

The sprinklers erupted.

Not gradually. Simultaneously. Forty high-pressure heads embedded in the lawn around the walkway — normally used for the precise hydration of Kentucky bluegrass — suddenly discharged at maximum pressure.

Patricia screamed. The sound was cut off by water filling her mouth, her nose, her carefully styled hair collapsing into sodden ropes. Her Chanel jacket — five thousand dollars, the buttons gold-plated — was instantly saturated, the cream silk turning transparent, clinging to flesh that had been toned by personal trainers and maintained by cosmetic procedures.

Richard flailed. His hands rose to protect his face, his eyes, his dignity. He stepped backward, seeking solid ground, and his foot found the marble tile that Davy had selected thirty minutes earlier.

The industrial lubricant was invisible. Odorless. Applied with precision by a drone that Aron had programmed to follow the estate’s cleaning schedule.

Richard’s foot slid. His center of gravity shifted. His arms windmilled, grasping for purchase, and found only his wife’s pearl necklace.

The strand broke with a sound like small bones snapping. Pearls scattered across wet marble — bouncing, rolling, a fortune in organic gems becoming projectiles, becoming hazards, becoming litter.

