

Second chance 561

Chapter 561:

Richard and Patricia fell together. Their combined mass — two hundred and eighty pounds of affronted privilege — carried them down the slight incline that Davy had calculated with the precision of a civil engineer, toward the reflecting pool that was being renovated, that was empty of water but full of mud.

They landed with a sound that Aron would later describe to his mother as “satisfying.”

Patricia came up first, her mouth open in a scream that produced only mud, her eyes clenched shut against the filth. Richard was slower, his bulk making extraction difficult, his hands sinking into the muck as he tried to push himself upright.

“Help!” Patricia shrieked. “Help us! Someone help!”

Above, Davy raised a micro-camera. Click. Click. The images would be uploaded to a dark web forum dedicated to the humiliation of the wealthy, where they would circulate forever — immune to lawyers, immune to takedown notices, immortal in their indignity.

“Mission complete,” Aron said. “Exfiltrate.”

They vanished into the corridor, silent as ghosts, leaving no evidence of their presence except the code still running in the estate’s irrigation system, the lubricant already evaporating, and the photographs already propagating through servers in countries without extradition treaties.

Ten minutes later, Richard and Patricia stood shivering in the grand foyer, dripping mud onto a Persian rug worth more than their car. A stoic housekeeper had handed them towels, but the damage was done. Their clothes were ruined. Their dignity was in fragments. Their pearls were scattered across a garden they would never be allowed to enter again.

The main doors opened, and Hilliard Holloway strode in, his city suit still immaculate, his face a mask of cold fury from the confrontation with Charla. He had just arrived from Manhattan, the drive doing nothing to cool the rage simmering in his blood. He stopped dead, his gaze sweeping over the muddy, dripping figures of the Englishes. His expression shifted — anger giving way to a chilling, predatory calm. He fought to keep it neutral, a flicker of something dangerously close to pride warring with his fury. The boys were more resourceful than he had anticipated.

“Richard.” His voice was mild. “Patricia. You appear to have had an accident.”

“Accident?” Richard’s voice cracked. He gestured at himself, at his wife, at the mud still dripping from his earlobes. “This was sabotage! Your security systems, your — your —” He sputtered, searching for words adequate to his outrage. “There were children! On the balcony! We saw them!”

Hilliard’s expression did not change. “Children? In this house?”

“Two boys!” Patricia found her voice, shrill with the particular hysteria of a woman who had been made ridiculous. “They did this! They hacked your systems, they —”

“Gavin.” Hilliard turned to his assistant, who had appeared at his elbow with the silent efficiency of a man who had anticipated the summons. “Check the security footage. The balcony cameras. See if there were any... children.”

Gavin's fingers moved across his tablet. His face remained professionally blank. "Sir. The balcony cameras show a voltage fluctuation approximately twelve minutes ago. The system rebooted. No footage was recorded."

"Convenient," Richard snarled. "Very convenient. You expect us to believe —"

Chapter 562:

"I expect you to come with me." Hilliard's voice dropped, became something that made Richard's next words die in his throat. "We have some business to discuss in the drawing room. Now."

He turned without waiting for a reply, his silent command pulling them into the heart of the house, away from the prying eyes of the staff.

The Holloway estate's formal drawing room had hosted negotiations that had shaped the movement of nations. Tonight, it hosted the end of an alliance that had never been more than convenience dressed in affection.

Richard and Patricia English sat on a Louis XVI sofa that had survived the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and two world wars. They were dripping mud onto upholstery that had been cleaned by specialists flown from Paris. Neither of them cared anymore.

Hilliard stood at the fireplace, his back to them, watching flames that had been lit more for atmosphere than warmth. Gavin stood at the door, his tablet in hand, his posture suggesting he was prepared for violence.

“You cannot do this,” Richard said. His voice was hoarse, stripped of the bluster that had carried him through the garden. “We have contracts. Agreements. Decades of —”

“Gavin.” Hilliard did not turn. “Tell them.”

Gavin stepped forward. His voice was the neutral instrument of corporate warfare, delivering numbers that were sentences, data that was execution.

“As of fourteen hundred hours today, Holloway Group subsidiaries completed hostile short positions against English Holdings’ core supply chain enterprises. Seventy percent of your outstanding equity is now held by Holloway-controlled offshore accounts.” He paused, allowing the information to land. “Additionally, your three major commercial real estate developments — the Hudson Yards project, the Miami waterfront complex, and the Austin tech campus — have experienced simultaneous construction financing defaults. Lenders have initiated foreclosure proceedings. Bankruptcy filings are expected by morning.”

Patricia made a sound like a wounded animal. Richard’s face cycled through colors — red, white, a grayish pallor that suggested cardiac event.

“You planned this.” The words emerged as accusation, as disbelief, as the dawning comprehension of catastrophe. “The engagement. The alliance. It was all —”

“Anesthesia.” Hilliard turned. His face was composed, the mask of the businessman restored, but something in his eyes suggested he was enjoying this — that the destruction of the English family was providing a distraction from the destruction of his own. “I needed you calm. Cooperative. Unsuspecting

while I positioned my pieces. Your daughter taught me the value of patience. Of playing the long game.” He smiled. It was not a pleasant expression. “I learned from the best.”

Richard stood. His legs shook. He took a step toward Hilliard, his hands rising, and found himself facing Gavin, who had moved with silent efficiency to interpose himself between them.

“Please,” Richard whispered. The word was foreign in his mouth, unused, unpracticed. “We can fix this. We can — Charla. Take Charla. Do whatever you want with her. Just — our companies. Our homes. Please.”

Chapter 563:

“Too late.” Hilliard walked to the sidebar, poured whiskey he did not drink, set the glass down untouched. “The machinery is in motion. By tomorrow, your name will be synonymous with failure. Your properties will be auctioned. Your social standing will be...” He searched for the word. “Gone. As if it never existed.”

He turned to face them fully. The firelight caught the hollows of his face, the shadows that sleeplessness and grief had carved beneath his eyes.

“But that is business. That is...” He waved a hand, dismissing billions in value with a gesture. “Expected. Predictable. What happens next is personal.”

He walked to where Richard stood, still frozen in his gesture of supplication. Reached out. Grabbed the mud-stained tie and pulled, hard enough to bring Richard’s face level with his own.

“You called them bastards.” The words were soft. Intimate. The tone of a lover sharing secrets. “You called my sons — the heirs to everything I have built, the blood of my blood — you called them bastards. You suggested they be sent to military schools. To be broken. To be disciplined for existing.”

Richard’s mouth opened. Closed. No sound emerged.

“I want you to understand something.” Hilliard’s grip tightened. The silk of the tie cut into Richard’s throat, restricted his breathing, brought spots to his vision. “They are Holloways. They are the future of this family. And you — you and your vapid wife and your murderous daughter — you are the past. You are the garbage I am taking out.”

He released the tie. Richard stumbled backward, gasping, one hand at his throat.

“Gavin. Security. Escort these people from the premises. If they resist —” Hilliard turned away, retrieving his whiskey, finally drinking it in a single swallow that burned all the way down “— use whatever force is necessary.”

The guards moved. Their hands were not gentle. Richard and Patricia were lifted, propelled, marched toward the door with the efficiency of men who had done this before, who would do it again, who understood that the wealthy were no different from anyone else when their power was stripped away.

Hilliard listened to the sounds of their departure — the protests, the pleading, the final silence of the heavy door closing. He set down his glass. Walked to the window. Watched their car retreat down the drive, taillights disappearing into the autumn dark.

“Boss.” Gavin’s voice was careful. “The car is ready. Brooklyn.”

Hilliard did not answer immediately. He was thinking of Cailin. Of the pills scattered on marble, the evidence of her suffering, the suffering he had caused. He was thinking of the sons he had just claimed — publicly, irrevocably — and the daughter he had lost, the daughter who might somehow, impossibly, be alive.

“Brooklyn,” he repeated. The word was a prayer. A promise. A threat. “Yes. Let’s go.”

The bulletproof SUV tore through Brooklyn’s industrial streets like a predator scenting blood.

Chapter 564:

Hilliard sat in the back seat, his hands clenched on his knees, his eyes fixed on the passing landscape of warehouses and loading docks and the particular desolation of places that had been abandoned by legitimate commerce. Gavin’s voice had been clipped over the comms minutes earlier: “Sir, we’ve got her. Cross-referenced pharmacy security footage with city surveillance. She’s in an industrial loft in Brooklyn.” Hilliard hadn’t replied, his entire being focused on the coordinates Gavin had sent.

“There.” Hilliard’s voice was barely human. “The red brick building. Number forty-seven.”

Gavin stopped the car. Hilliard was already moving, pushing through the door, running through rain that had begun to fall — thin and cold and stinging. He did not feel it. He felt nothing except the certainty that had been building since he saw the photographs, since he understood what those pills meant, since he realized that he had broken her so completely that she needed chemicals to survive.

The door was steel, reinforced, electronic. Hilliard reached it first, his shoulder slamming into the unyielding metal.

He stepped back, raised his foot, and kicked. The impact sent a blinding spike of pain through his still-healing chest, through ribs that had been cracked and reset, through flesh that had been stitched and restitched. He gasped, stumbling back, a strangled cry caught in his throat. He kicked again — a desperate, useless act of fury — and nearly collapsed.

“Sir!” Gavin was beside him, pushing him aside with a firm hand. “Allow me.” He produced a sleek, black device from his jacket — a handheld tactical computer — and pressed it against the electronic lock. A progress bar appeared on its small screen. The seconds stretched out, each one an eternity for Hilliard.

“It’s military-grade encryption, but I have a bypass,” Gavin muttered, his fingers tapping rapidly. “Just a few more seconds...”

There was a faint hum, a click, and the heavy steel door swung inward.

“Cailin!”

He was inside. The space was dark, minimal, functional. A safe house, not a home. No photographs. No decorations. Nothing that suggested the woman who had once filled rooms with color, with life, with the particular energy of someone who loved beautiful things.

He found the bedroom by following his memory of her habits, her patterns, the way she had always sought the smallest, most defensible space. The door was open. The light was off.

She was on the floor.

Hilliard's heart stopped. Literally stopped — one missed beat, then a panicked gallop that sent blood roaring in his ears. She was wearing a thin cotton nightgown, white, too large for her frame. Her face was turned away, her hair spread across the carpet like a dark fan. One arm was extended, the hand open, fingers curled as if reaching for something that had rolled away.

The orange bottle lay on its side. White pills scattered around it like seeds, like teeth, like small bones.

"No." The word emerged as whisper, as prayer, as denial. "No, no, no —"

He was beside her. His fingers found her throat, pressing for the pulse that had to be there, that had to be — there. Faint. Thready. But present. Her skin was cold, too cold, the temperature of someone who had been lying on carpet in an unheated room for too long.

Chapter 565:

"Gavin!" His voice was a scream now, all pretense of control abandoned. "Call emergency services! Private hospital, Manhattan Presbyterian — tell them we're coming, tell them it's an overdose, tell them —" He was lifting her, gathering her in his arms. She was so light, so fragile, so broken. "Tell them to be ready."

He was running. The car door was open, Gavin having anticipated, having prepared. Hilliard climbed in with her still in his arms, arranged her across his lap, and pulled his coat around her with shaking hands.

“Drive. Red lights. I don’t care about laws, I don’t care about —” He was pressing his face to her hair, inhaling the scent of her shampoo, something herbal, something that had not changed in five years. “Cailin. Cailin, please. Don’t do this. Don’t leave me this way.”

The car accelerated. Hilliard held her closer, his hands moving over her back, her arms, trying to generate warmth, trying to will life back into her body. He was crying. He could feel the tears on his face, hot and shameful and completely beyond his control.

“Please. I’m begging you. I’ll do anything. I’ll give you anything. Just —” His voice broke. “Just stay. Please stay.”

The car turned sharply. Cailin’s body shifted with the motion, her head lolling against his shoulder, and her eyes — her eyes opened.

They were unfocused at first. Confused. The pupils dilated, then contracted, adjusting to the dim light of the car’s interior. She blinked. Once. Twice.

Then she saw him.

Her gaze sharpened. Not with recognition, not with relief, but with something that made Hilliard’s hope curdle in his chest. Something cold. Something final. Something that looked at him and saw nothing worth seeing.

“Cailin.” He tried to smile. The expression felt wrong on his face, a rictus of desperation. “You’re awake. Thank God. We’re going to the hospital. You’ll be fine. I —”

She did not speak. She simply looked at him, her eyes empty of everything — anger, hatred, even the disgust he had learned to expect. Empty of everything except the absolute certainty that he was not worth her attention.

The car was warm. The heating was on maximum, fighting the November chill that seeped through bulletproof glass. Hilliard could feel Cailin's body against his — the slight weight of her, the fragility of bones that had become too prominent, too visible, too close to the surface.

She had not spoken. She had not moved except to pull away, to press herself against the door on her side of the vehicle, to create distance between them that was physical and absolute.

"Cailin." He tried again. His voice was hoarse, ruined by screaming, by crying, by the desperate hope that was dying with each second of her silence. "You need medical attention. The pills — when I saw the bottle, I thought —"

"I didn't take them." Her voice was barely audible. Rough, as if unused, as if she had not spoken in days. "I dropped them. I was tired. I couldn't —" She stopped. Took a breath that shuddered through her frame. "I didn't try to kill myself, Hilliard. I'm not that weak. I'm not that... generous."

Chapter 566:

The words landed like stones. Hilliard felt them in his chest, in his gut, in the place where hope had been trying to grow.

“That’s —” He reached for her, his hand extending across the space between them, and saw her flinch. Saw her press harder against the door, her fingers finding the handle, white-knuckled, ready to pull. “That’s good. That’s — I’m so relieved, I —”

“Don’t touch me.” The words were flat. Final. The tone of someone discussing weather, traffic, the price of commodities. “Don’t speak to me. Don’t look at me.”

Hilliard’s hand fell. He stared at her, at the profile she had turned to the window, at the reflection of streetlights moving across features that had become unfamiliar in their emptiness.

“Cailin, I know you’re angry. I know I deserve —”

“Angry?” She turned. The movement was sudden, violent, bringing her face level with his — close enough that he could see the red lines in her eyes, the bruises of sleeplessness, the absolute exhaustion that had nothing to do with physical rest. “You think I’m angry?”

She laughed. The sound was worse than her silence. It was broken glass, it was metal scraping metal, it was the sound of something that had once been human learning to make noises without meaning.

“Anger would require energy, Hilliard. Anger would require that I care enough to feel something about you.” She leaned closer. Her breath was warm against his face, smelling of nothing, of emptiness, of the chemical neutrality of someone who had stopped eating for pleasure. “I don’t feel anger. I don’t feel anything. You are... nothing. A blank space where a person should be.”

Hilliard’s throat closed. He tried to speak, to find words that might reach her, that might bridge the chasm that had opened between them, and found only silence.

“You thought —” She was watching him now, her head tilted, the gesture analytical, clinical. “You thought that bursting into my home, that carrying me to your car, that crying over me like some tragic hero in a bad novel — you thought this would change something?”

“I thought —” He forced the words out. “I thought you were dying. I thought I was losing you. I —”

“You lost me five years ago.” The words were precise, enunciated with the care of someone speaking to a child, to someone incapable of understanding normal language. “When you chose her. When you let her destroy me. When you —” Her voice caught, just slightly, just at the edges, and he saw her control slip, saw the crack in the ice before it sealed again. “— When you let my daughter die.”

“Don’t —” The word was agony. “Please, don’t say that. Don’t —”

“Why not?” She was smiling now, an expression that did not reach her eyes, transforming her face into a mask of polite inquiry. “It’s true. Elia is dead. Because of you. Because of your choices. Because you were too weak, too stupid, too —”

Chapter 567:

“I would give anything —” His voice broke. “My company. My life. Everything I have, everything I am, if I could —”

“I want you to stop speaking.” She cut through his desperation with the efficiency of a surgeon’s blade. “I want you to stop breathing my air. I want you to disappear from my existence so completely that I never have to remember you were ever part of it.”

She turned to the window. Her hand was still on the door handle, her body angled toward escape, toward the street that moved past in a blur of rain and neon.

“You make me sick, Hilliard. The smell of you —” She inhaled, deliberately, as if cataloging odors. “Cologne and antiseptic and desperation. The sound of your voice. The way you look at me, like I’m something you own, something you lost, something you have a right to want back.” She shuddered, a physical spasm, visible and unmistakable. “You make me physically ill. Your touch would contaminate me. Your tears would poison me. I would rather die in the street than accept anything from you.”

The words were final. Absolute. Hilliard felt them settle into his bones, into the marrow of him, into the place where he had been trying to build something worth offering her.

“Pull over,” Cailin said. Not to him. To the driver, to the invisible presence behind the partition. “I want out.”

“Ma’am, we’re in —”

“Pull over.” Her voice did not rise. It did not need to. It carried the absolute certainty of someone who had nothing left to lose. “Or I will open this door and jump. At this speed. Into traffic. Do you believe me?”

The driver believed her. Hilliard could see it in the way the car slowed, the way it edged toward the curb, the way the locks disengaged with a sound like surrender.

“Cailin —” Hilliard reached for her again, unable to stop himself, unable to accept what was happening.

She was already moving. The door opened, cold air rushing in, rain spattering the leather seats. She stepped out, her bare feet finding wet pavement, her thin nightgown immediately plastered to her frame by the downpour.

She did not look back.

Hilliard watched her walk away. Watched her merge with the crowd on the sidewalk, become indistinguishable from the other broken people seeking shelter from the storm. Watched until she was gone, until the space where she had been was empty, until the only evidence of her presence was the damp outline on the leather seat and the scent of her shampoo lingering in the closed air.

“Boss?” Gavin’s voice came through the intercom, careful, professional, giving him the distance of his grief. “Should I follow her? Should we —”

“No.” The word was barely audible. Hilliard pressed his forehead against the window, cold glass against fevered skin. “Let her go.”

The silence in the SUV was absolute, a crushing weight. He didn’t speak. He just stared out the window at the empty space where she had been.

Chapter 568:

“Gavin,” he said finally, his voice a dead monotone. “The Core. Take me to The Core.”

It wasn't a request. It was the last resort of a man who needed to drown himself in something other than his own failure.

The Core occupied the basement of a building that had once been a bank, then a speakeasy, then a series of failed restaurants. Now it was the most exclusive private club in Manhattan, accessible only to those whose wealth had transcended mere millions, whose names appeared on lists that were themselves secrets.

Hilliard had been drinking for six hours.

The VIP suite was designed for discretion. No windows. Soundproofing that made the city above feel like a dream. A ventilation system that could clear smoke, or other substances, in minutes. He had used none of these features except the bar, which was stocked with Macallan whiskey in vintages that cost more than most people's cars.

He was on his fifth bottle. The first four lay on the carpet, empty, like fallen soldiers. The fifth was half-empty, clutched in his hand, raised to his lips in a rhythm that had become mechanical, automatic, necessary.

The door opened. Julian Holloway entered with the careful step of a man who had been summoned by alarmed staff, who had been warned that the situation was beyond their capacity to manage.

"Jesus Christ." Julian's voice was soft, almost reverent. He had never seen his cousin this way. Had never imagined it possible. Hilliard Holloway, who had destroyed companies over breakfast, who had ended careers with a signature, who had faced down regulators and criminals and the occasional actual

monster with the same expression of mild inconvenience — Hilliard Holloway was drunk. Was ruined. Was broken in ways that Julian had not believed humans could break.

“Go away.” Hilliard did not look up. His voice was gravel, was sandpaper, was the sound of a throat that had been screaming for hours.

“You’re going to kill yourself.” Julian crossed to the bar, surveyed the destruction, selected a glass and filled it with water. “At this rate, alcohol poisoning by midnight. Liver failure by morning. Very dramatic, Hilliard. Very... final.”

“Good.” Hilliard raised the bottle again. The whiskey burned going down, had stopped tasting like anything hours ago. “Final is what I want. Final is what I deserve.”

Julian set down the water. He sat on the sofa across from his cousin, close enough to smell the desperation, the grief, the particular odor of a man who had stopped caring for himself in any meaningful way.

“What happened?”

Hilliard laughed. The sound was worse than his voice — the sound of something being torn, of flesh separating from bone. “She told me I make her sick. She told me —” He stopped. The bottle was empty. He reached for the next, found only air, found Julian’s hand intercepting his, holding him with surprising strength.

“Enough.”

Chapter 569:

“She said I contaminate her.” Hilliard’s eyes found Julian’s, and Julian saw something that made him want to look away, that made him understand why the staff had been afraid. “She said she would rather die than accept anything from me. She walked away. In the rain. In her nightgown. And I let her.”

Julian held his gaze. “Because you had to. Because if you followed, if you pushed —”

“I know.” Hilliard’s voice dropped to a whisper. “I know. That’s the worst part. I know she meant it. I know she would have —” He stopped. The image was too clear, too present — Cailin stepping into traffic, Cailin’s body on wet pavement, Cailin gone in ways that even his money could not reverse. “I know.”

He stood. Stumbled. Caught himself on the bar, on Julian’s reaching hand, on the solid reality of furniture that did not care about his pain.

“I killed her, Julian. Not physically. Not yet. But I killed the person she was. The person who could love, who could hope, who could —” He gestured vaguely, the movement encompassing everything, nothing. “I took that from her. With my arrogance. With my blindness. With my —” He stopped. The word would not come. The word was too large, too final, too true. “With my choice. I chose to believe the lies. I chose to let her go. I chose to —”

He was crying. Julian watched, helpless, as his cousin — the man he had admired and resented and competed against and learned from — dissolved into something that had no precedent in their shared experience.

“She’s gone. They’re all gone. Elia. Cailin. The boys —” Hilliard’s hands found his hair, pulled, the pain grounding him, bringing him back to the room, to the moment, to the impossibility of his existence. “I have nothing. I am nothing. I am a monster who destroyed everything he touched, and I am still breathing, still walking, still —”

He collapsed onto the sofa. Curled into himself, knees to chest, forehead pressed against leather that smelled of other people’s success, other people’s celebrations, other people’s happiness.

“Make it stop.” The words were muffled, barely audible. “Please. Make it stop.”

Julian sat beside him. Put a hand on his shoulder, felt the trembling that ran through the frame, the vibration of a man coming apart at the molecular level.

“I can’t make it stop,” he said. “But I can call someone who might.”

He reached for his phone. Scrolled through contacts, past billionaires and senators, to a name he had acquired on a whim at a charity gala months ago. He had instructed his assistant to clone the contact list of Cailin’s fiery friend, Ashely Trevino, purely out of strategic curiosity. Now, that petty act of corporate espionage felt like a lifeline.

“Julian.” Hilliard’s voice was a warning, was desperation, was the last flicker of pride trying to assert itself. “Don’t. She doesn’t — she won’t —”

“She might.” Julian pressed the button. Held the phone where they could both hear the ringing, the silence, the moment of connection.

“Hello?” Cailin’s voice came through — distant, cold, the voice of someone who had already decided this conversation was not worth having.

Chapter 570:

“Cailin. It’s Julian.” He spoke quickly, before she could hang up, before the silence could become permanent. “I’m with Hilliard. At The Core. He’s —” He searched for words adequate to the situation. “He’s not well. He’s been drinking for hours. I think — I’m afraid he’s going to hurt himself. Seriously. Permanently.”

Silence. Then: “Call a doctor.”

“I have. He won’t see them. He won’t —” Julian looked at his cousin, at the wreckage of a man who had once seemed invincible. “He keeps asking for you. Keeps saying your name. I know you don’t — I know what he did — but if you could just speak to him. Just for a moment. It might —”

“No.”

The word was final. Absolute. The same tone she had used in the car, the same emptiness that had made Hilliard’s hope curdle and die.

“If he wants to die,” Cailin said, “that is his choice. His right.” She paused. Julian could hear her breathing, controlled, deliberate. “Tell him I said this: if he is going to kill himself, he should do it somewhere I won’t have to smell it. Somewhere that won’t contaminate my city. My air.”

The line went dead.

Julian lowered the phone. Looked at Hilliard, who had heard, who had understood, who was curling tighter into himself as if he could disappear into his own body.

“She said —” Julian began.

“I heard.” Hilliard’s voice was barely audible. “I heard.”

He stood. Stumbled toward the door. Julian followed, catching him as he swayed, supporting him through corridors that seemed to tilt and shift, through the entrance that opened onto rain that had become sleet, into the cold that did not register against the cold inside him.

“Where are you going?”

“To her.” Hilliard’s voice was distant, determined, the voice of someone who had abandoned reason for obsession. “I have to see her. I have to —”

“She doesn’t want to see you. She said —”

"I heard what she said." Hilliard turned. His eyes were wild, unfocused, the eyes of a man who had crossed some threshold from which return was impossible. "I heard. But I have to be near her. Even if she hates me. Even if she —" He stopped. The words would not come. The need was too large, too desperate, too impossible to name.

Julian drove. Through streets that had become rivers of reflected light, through intersections where traffic laws were suggestions, through the city that had witnessed their family's rise and would witness whatever came next.

They stopped at a building on the Upper West Side. Pre-war. Elegant. The kind of building where doormen remembered faces and forgot names, where privacy was the most valuable amenity.

Hilliard got out. Walked to the entrance. Stood before the intercom with his finger hovering over the button that would connect him to her, that would announce his presence, that would give her the opportunity to refuse him entry.

He did not press it.

Instead, he slid down the wall. Sat on the cold marble of the lobby floor, his back against the door that separated him from the only thing he wanted, the only thing he had ever wanted, the thing he had destroyed and could not rebuild.

"Boss —" Julian began.