

Second chance 571

Chapter 571:

“Go.” Hilliard did not look up. “Leave me.”

“I can’t leave you here. You’ll freeze. You’ll —”

“Leave me.” The words were final. Absolute. The tone of someone who had nothing left to lose. “I need to be near her. Even like this. Even —” He pressed his forehead against his knees, wrapped his arms around his shins, made himself as small as his frame would allow. “Just leave me.”

Julian stood in the rain. Watched his cousin curl into himself on the floor of a building lobby — become something that looked like refuse, like the aftermath of disaster, like a man who had been discarded by the world and had decided to discard himself in return.

He took off his coat. Draped it over Hilliard’s shoulders. Then he sat, on the floor beside him, and waited for morning.

The hours passed. The lobby emptied of residents returning from dinners, from theaters, from the endless social obligations of the wealthy. The security guard made his rounds, noted the two men on the floor, decided they were not his problem. The heating system cycled on, off, on again, maintaining a temperature that was comfortable for walking through but brutal for sitting on.

Hilliard did not move. He had found a position that allowed him to press his shoulder against the door, to imagine that he could feel her presence through the steel and wood and insulation, to pretend that proximity was connection, that being near was being with.

Julian dozed beside him, waking periodically to check his phone, to note the time, to consider calling someone who might intervene. Each time, he looked at Hilliard's face — set in lines of absolute determination, of refusal to leave, of the particular madness that came from wanting something that could not be had — and decided against it.

At six, the first residents began to leave. Business suits, exercise clothes, the costumes of lives that continued despite everything. They stepped around the two men on the floor, some with curiosity, most with the practiced indifference of New Yorkers who had learned not to see the broken people in their midst.

At seven, the elevator chimed.

Hilliard's head came up. His eyes, red-rimmed and sleepless, found the doors as they opened, as she stepped out, as Cailin Morton — Cali — whoever she was now — entered the lobby of her building.

She wore a trench coat, camel-colored, belted tight against her frame. Her hair was pulled back, severe, practical. She held a coffee in one hand, her phone in the other, her attention on the screen, on the messages that had accumulated overnight, on the life that had continued while Hilliard had been dissolving into grief.

She did not see him at first. She walked toward the door, her stride purposeful, her posture suggesting someone who had decided to keep moving, to keep functioning, to refuse the collapse that waited at the edges of consciousness.

Then she saw him.

Chapter 572:

Her step did not falter. Her expression did not change. She simply continued walking, her eyes moving over him with the same assessment she might give to a piece of furniture, to a delivery left in the wrong place, to something that was not her concern.

She reached the door. Reached for the handle.

Hilliard's hand rose. Involuntary. Hopeful. A gesture that begged for acknowledgment, for recognition, for anything other than the emptiness she had offered him in the car.

She paused for a fraction of a second, her gaze calculating the distance. Then, steadying herself with a hand briefly touching the doorframe, she deliberately lifted her leg and stepped over his prone form as if he were a piece of discarded luggage. She did not look down. Did not pause. Did not acknowledge his existence in any way.

The door opened. Closed. She was gone.

Hilliard's hand fell. He sat frozen, the memory of her passage burning into his nervous system — the brush of her coat against his shoulder, the scent of her coffee, the absolute indifference of her gaze.

She had stepped over him. Had treated him as less than human. Had made him invisible in ways that hatred could not, that anger could not, that only absolute, complete, irrevocable dismissal could achieve.

“Boss.” Julian’s voice was soft. “We should go. You need —”

“Go.” Hilliard’s voice was barely audible. “Leave me.”

“She’s gone. She’s not — she’s not coming back. You saw —”

“I saw.” Hilliard pressed his forehead against the door where she had touched it, where her hand had been moments before. “I saw everything. Now go.”

Julian went. He did not want to, but he had learned that there were limits to what he could do, limits to what anyone could do for a man who had decided to destroy himself.

Hilliard remained. Through the morning, into the afternoon, into the evening when the lobby filled again with residents returning home. He did not eat. Did not drink. Did not move except to press closer to the door, to maintain the connection that was not a connection, to be near her in the only way she would allow.

At midnight, security approached. Before they could speak, Julian reappeared, his expression grim. He didn’t speak to Hilliard. He made a single phone call. “This is Julian Holloway. My cousin is meditating in the lobby of your building. Yes, that Holloway. Ensure he is not disturbed.” The phone clicked shut. The security guards faded back into the shadows.

At three in the morning, he began to hallucinate. Saw her face in the marble patterns of the floor. Heard her voice in the hum of the heating system. Felt her touch in the drafts that moved through the lobby.

At five, he stood. His legs were numb, his back screaming, his body protesting the abuse of thirty-six hours without movement, without sustenance, without care.

He walked to the door. Pressed his palm against it. Whispered words that had no meaning, that were only sounds, that were the last fragments of a language he had been trying to learn and had failed.

Then he left.

Chapter 573:

Holloway Group tower rose against the gray morning like a monument to ambition, to achievement, to the particular madness of believing that money could solve anything.

Hilliard walked through the lobby without seeing it. Nodded to security guards who stared at his appearance — suit wrinkled beyond salvage, face unshaven, eyes hollowed by sleeplessness and grief — and said nothing. Took the elevator to the seventy-third floor. Entered his office.

Gavin was waiting. His expression cycled through shock, concern, and professional assessment, settling finally on the blank mask that allowed him to continue functioning.

“Boss. You need —”

“Later.” Hilliard walked to his desk. Sat. The leather creaked beneath him, familiar, indifferent. “What do you have?”

“Sinclair.” Gavin’s voice was careful. “Their legal team has filed preliminary motions. Discovery requests. They’re preparing for war.”

“Good.” Hilliard’s hand found a pen, began to tap against the desk, a rhythm that was the only thing keeping him present. “Let them prepare. What else?”

Gavin hesitated. “The medical records. You asked me to —” He stopped. Reached into his bag. Withdrew a folder, black, unmarked, the kind that held secrets. “Manhattan Presbyterian. Cailin Morton’s file. Complete diagnostic history.”

Hilliard’s hand stopped. The pen fell. He reached for the folder with fingers that trembled, that had not stopped trembling since she stepped over him, since he understood what he had become in her eyes.

“Leave me.”

Gavin left. The door closed with a sound that was final, that was the sealing of a tomb, that was Hilliard alone with the evidence of his crimes.

He opened the folder.

The first page was a summary. He read it three times, each pass slower than the last, each word settling into his understanding with the weight of a stone dropped into deep water.

Major Depressive Disorder. Severe. Recurrent.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Complex. Chronic.

His eyes moved down the page. Found the symptoms list. Found the treatment history. Found the medications — the same pills he had seen scattered on her floor, the same chemicals she needed to survive, to function, to exist in a world that had become unbearable.

He turned the page.

Patient exhibits severe somatic symptoms including insomnia, anorexia, auditory hallucinations. High risk of self-harm. Multiple incidents of dissociative episodes resulting in unintentional self-injury.

Etiology: Traumatic loss of child combined with prolonged emotional abuse.

Emotional abuse.

The words burned. Hilliard felt them in his retinas, in the tissue of his brain, in the place where he had been trying to understand what he had done and had failed, always failed, because the truth was too large, too terrible, too final.

He had done this. He had reduced a woman who had once been brilliant, vibrant, alive — had reduced her to this, to pills and diagnoses and the risk of self-destruction, to a life measured in the ability to survive another day.

His stomach contracted. He bent forward, gasping, the physical reaction overwhelming thought, overwhelming grief, overwhelming everything except the absolute certainty that he was poison, that his existence was contamination, that everything he touched turned to ash.

Chapter 574:

“Boss?” Gavin’s voice through the door, concerned, professional, giving him the distance of his breakdown.

“Go away.” The words were forced out between spasms, between the dry heaves that produced nothing, that were his body trying to expel something that could not be expelled. “Leave me. Now.”

He heard footsteps retreating. Heard the outer door close. He was alone.

He stood. Stumbled to the private bathroom — the one with the shower and the couch and the medical supplies that had been installed after his own breakdown, after his own collapse, after he had learned that the body could betray the mind in ways that were humiliating and absolute.

He reached the sink. Looked up. Saw his reflection in the mirror — hollow-eyed, unshaven, the face of a man who had destroyed everything he loved and was still breathing, still walking, still existing in ways that seemed like mockery.

His fist moved before he decided to move it.

The mirror shattered. Glass exploded outward, shards flying, cutting his hand, his wrist, his forearm. He felt the pain distantly, registered it as appropriate, as deserved, as insufficient.

He hit it again. The frame bent. The wall behind showed through, plaster and lathe and the structural reality of a building that would outlast him, that would outlast everyone.

Blood ran down his arm. Dripped into the sink. Mixed with water from a faucet he had turned on without noticing, without purpose, simply because the sound was something other than silence.

He slid down the wall. Sat on the tile floor, surrounded by fragments of mirror that showed his face in pieces, in angles, in the multiplicity of a man who had become many things and none of them good.

He pressed his bleeding hand against his chest. Felt the heartbeat that continued despite everything, that refused to stop, that pumped blood through a system that should have given up, should have ended.

"I'm sorry." The words were whispered to no one, to the empty room, to the fragments of his reflection.
"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm —"

The door opened. Gavin, despite instructions, despite professionalism, unable to ignore the sounds of destruction, of injury, of a man coming apart in ways that could not be ignored.

“Boss —”

“Get out.” Hilliard did not look up. “Get out and close the door and forget you saw this. Forget you know me. Forget —”

He stopped. The words were meaningless. The forgetting was impossible. The damage was done, was permanent, was the only thing that would survive of him when everything else was gone.

Gavin approached. Knelt. Took Hilliard’s bleeding hand in his own, applied pressure with a towel that appeared from somewhere, and spoke words that Hilliard could not process, that existed only as sound.

“Call her,” Hilliard whispered. The last request. The last hope. The last thing he could think to ask for. “Call her and tell her — tell her I’m sorry. Tell her I understand now. Tell her —”

Chapter 575:

He stopped. There was nothing to tell. Nothing she would believe. Nothing that could bridge the chasm he had created, that he had widened with every choice, every mistake, every moment of blindness that had led them here.

“Tell her goodbye,” he said. “Tell her I’m finally gone.”

The words were a surrender, a final admission of defeat. He fell silent, his body slumping against the wall, the fight leaving him entirely.

Julian, who had followed Gavin in, exchanged a grim look with the assistant. They had to get him out of there, away from the glass, away from the seventy-third floor window.

The Sinclair estate gates were wrought iron, black, topped with spikes that suggested medieval defense rather than modern security. They rose twelve feet, flanked by stone pillars that supported cameras invisible to casual inspection — sensors that detected heat, motion, and the particular electromagnetic signatures of weapons and recording devices.

Charla English sat in her car, watching them. Her hands were steady on the steering wheel, but only because she had taken a pill, one of the ones she had been saving for emergencies, for moments when absolute calm was required.

This was such a moment.

She had spent the night preparing. The documents were in her bag, forged with the skill of a man who had been paid enough to disappear afterward, to never acknowledge his involvement, to become a ghost in the record of what she was about to attempt.

The girl was inside. She knew it with the certainty of someone who had seen death and recognized its opposite. The encrypted message from the former Holloway maid she kept on a private payroll had been unequivocal. It came with a grainy, long-lens photograph of a small girl with dark hair playing near

the Sinclair estate's hedge maze. The text beneath was simple: They call her Elia. Sinclair's new heir. That had confirmed what her instincts had screamed since she threw that small body into the rain.

Elia. Alive. Adopted by Sebastian Sinclair, the old monster who had been powerful when her own family was still trading in something as vulgar as actual goods.

If Hilliard saw her — if he understood — Charla would be dead. Not metaphorically. Not legally. Actually dead, in ways that would make her wish for the drowning she had ordered for the child.

She had to get to the girl first. Had to remove her, hide her, destroy the evidence of her own crime before Hilliard could connect the dots. The forged documents — Child Welfare Services, emergency intervention order, allegations of kidnapping and illegal adoption — were her only chance.

Charla stepped out of the car. Adjusted her glasses, black-rimmed, professional. Smoothed her suit, gray, anonymous, the uniform of bureaucratic authority. Walked to the intercom with the stride of someone who had every right to be there, who was performing a duty, who could not be refused.

Chapter 576:

"Child Welfare Services." She spoke into the microphone, her voice pitched to carry authority, to suggest urgency, to bypass the usual protocols of privacy and protection. "We have a court order regarding a minor female, approximately five years of age, believed to be held on these premises without legal guardianship. Open the gate."

Silence. Then: "Identification, please."

Charla produced the badge she had commissioned, the credentials that would pass casual inspection, that would not survive detailed verification but that did not need to. She needed only to get inside. Only to reach the girl. Only to —

The gate opened.

Not gradually. Fully. A car emerged — black, armored, the kind that transported people who did not believe in vulnerability. It stopped ten feet from where Charla stood, and a man stepped out.

Silas Sinclair was younger than she had expected. Better looking. More dangerous. He wore a cashmere sweater the color of storm clouds, jeans that cost more than her monthly rent, and an expression of mild curiosity that did not reach his eyes.

“Ms. English.” He did not make it a question. “Or should I say, former Ms. Holloway? Your engagement seems to have encountered... difficulties.”

Charla’s smile felt like cracking ice. “Mr. Sinclair. I’m here on official business. A child welfare investigation. I have reason to believe —”

“You have reason to believe you can deceive me with these documents,” Silas interrupted, his voice gentle, conversational. He held up a tablet displaying a high-resolution scan of the very papers she held in her hand. “Your forger did excellent work. But my family acquired the company that manufactures the security-grade paper for all state documents three weeks ago. I can tell from the microscopic watermark that this batch was reported stolen from a warehouse in Queens last Tuesday.”

He stepped closer — close enough that Charla could smell his cologne, something expensive and cold, something that suggested power without the need to display it.

“Let me explain something.” He reached out. Took her chin in his hand, the gesture intimate, controlling, utterly without warmth. “That child is mine. Legally, permanently, irrevocably. She is Sinclair. She will always be Sinclair. And you —” He smiled, and Charla saw something in it that made her want to run, to scream, to do anything except continue standing there. “— are nothing. Less than nothing. A failed attempt at social climbing that will be remembered only as a cautionary tale.”

Charla jerked free. Her hand went to her bag, to the documents that were her only weapon, her only hope. “You don’t understand. That girl — she’s not what you think. She’s —”

“She is exactly what I think.” Silas’s voice hardened. “She is a weapon. A tool. A means to an end that you cannot comprehend and do not need to know.” He gestured, and two men emerged from the car, their posture suggesting professions that did not require advertising. “And you are attempting to interfere with Sinclair family business. Do you know what we do to people who interfere with Sinclair family business?”

Charla retreated. One step. Two. Her heel caught on gravel, sent her stumbling, saved from falling only by the sudden grip of a hand on her arm that was not gentle.

Chapter 577:

“Leave.” Silas’s voice was final. “Now. And pray that I forget your existence, because if I remember —” He leaned close, close enough that his breath warmed her ear, that she could feel the vibration of words spoken at the threshold of hearing. “— if I remember, I will end you. Not dramatically. Not publicly. Simply. Completely. As if you had never been.”

He released her. Stepped back. Smiled with the warmth of a winter sun.

“Drive safely, Ms. English. The roads can be dangerous for people who have lost their way.”

Charla ran. To her car, into the seat, hands shaking on the wheel as she reversed, turned, and accelerated down the drive without looking back, without breathing, without thinking of anything except escape.

In her rearview mirror, she saw Silas Sinclair watching her go. Saw him raise a hand in farewell. Saw him turn and walk back through gates that closed behind him with the finality of a vault.

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She was too late. The girl was protected, was claimed, was beyond her reach. And Hilliard — Hilliard would learn the truth, would understand what she had done, would come for her with everything he had.

Charla drove. Toward the city, toward the only sanctuary she knew, toward the hollow comfort of a plan that had already failed before she understood it was necessary.

Manhattan Presbyterian Hospital’s private wing smelled of antiseptic and money, the particular combination that suggested illness was merely another service available to those who could afford the best.

Cailin walked through it like a ghost. The new prescription was secure in her pocket — thirty days of sertraline, of prazosin, of the chemicals that kept her functioning, that held the nightmares at bay, that allowed her to pretend she was still human.

She had not slept. The encounter with Hilliard — in the car, on the street, in the endless hours since — had burned through her reserves, had left her with nothing except the mechanical ability to move, to breathe, to place one foot in front of another.

The doctor's words echoed. "Your PTSD is progressing. The hallucinations will increase without proper rest. You need to reduce stress. You need —"

She had walked out. There was no reducing stress. There was only survival, only the next breath, only the endless present that had no future and no past worth remembering.

She emerged onto Fifth Avenue. The afternoon was gray, the light flat, the city moving around her in its eternal indifference. She stood at the curb, waiting for the light, watching traffic flow past in rivers of black and silver and the occasional flash of color that suggested someone still believed in joy.

The Maybach was black. Bulletproof. Indistinguishable from a hundred other luxury vehicles except to those who knew how to look, who understood the particular configuration of antennae that suggested diplomatic plates, of window tint that suggested privacy beyond the legal limit.

It stopped at the light ten feet from where Cailin stood. The rear window was down — slightly, illegally, a crack of perhaps three inches that allowed the circulation of air in a cabin that had become stuffy.

Chapter 578:

Cailin's eyes moved over it without interest. Without expectation. Her mind was occupied with the mechanics of crossing the street, of reaching her apartment, of the bed that waited with the promise of unconsciousness.

Then she saw.

Through the narrow gap, a flash of color. Pink. A dress, perhaps, or a coat — the shade that had been Elia's favorite, the color she had chosen for every important occasion, the hue that had become synonymous with her presence in Cailin's memory.

And a profile. Small. Delicate. The particular curve of a cheekbone, the angle of a jaw, the way hair fell across a forehead in waves that were not styled but simply were, naturally, perfectly.

Cailin's heart stopped.

She stared. The light changed. The Maybach began to move, accelerating with the smooth power of twelve cylinders and engineering that cost more than most houses.

"Elia?"

The word emerged as whisper, as prayer, as the sound of a woman who had learned not to hope confronting the impossible.

She staggered forward — not running, but lurching, her body struggling to obey a command her mind screamed. A taxi swerved, horn screaming, driver shouting curses she did not hear. Each step felt like tearing something inside her, but she didn't feel the pain, only the desperate, gravitational pull toward that car. The Maybach was twenty feet ahead. Thirty. Accelerating into traffic that parted for it, that recognized wealth and power and made way.

“Elia!”

The scream tore her throat. It was a raw, primal sound of agony and impossible hope.

“Mommy’s here! Elia, look at me! Look —”

She reached for the rear bumper. Her fingers brushed metal, found purchase, slipped on wet chrome. The car turned, merged, became part of the flow that moved uptown, toward the park, toward destinations she did not know and could not follow.

Cailin stumbled. Her foot caught on the curb, sent her sprawling, hands reaching forward to break her fall, finding only concrete that scraped skin, that brought blood, that did not matter.

She lay on the pavement. Watched the Maybach disappear into the distance, become indistinguishable from other black cars, become memory, become hallucination, become the thing she had been warned about.

“Not real.” The words were gasped, desperate, the mantra of someone trying to survive their own mind. “Not real. Not real. The doctor said — hallucinations — stress induced — not —”

But she had felt the metal. Had seen the profile. Had known, with the certainty that transcended diagnosis, that the child in that car was hers.

She pushed herself up. Stood in the street, bleeding from palms and knees, hair plastered to her face by rain that had begun again, thin and cold and stinging. Around her, traffic moved, horns sounded, the city continued its eternal indifference.

Cailin walked to the curb. Sat. Pressed her face against her knees, wrapped her arms around her shins, made herself as small as her frame would allow.

Chapter 579:

“Elia.” The name was whispered to no one, to the empty street, to the memory of a child who could not be alive, who was alive, who was somewhere in this city wearing pink and riding in bulletproof cars and not knowing that her mother was breaking, had broken, would never be whole again.

Across the street, a black SUV idled at the corner. Inside, Hilliard Holloway watched through tinted glass. He had been hauled from the depths of his breakdown by Julian, forced into a shower and a change of clothes, but the core of him remained shattered. He was supposed to be at a meeting, but he couldn’t. He had told Gavin to bring him here, to this street, needing to see her, even from a distance.

“Boss, the preliminary injunction from Sinclair’s legal team just hit my tablet. It’s aggressive.”

Hilliard’s gaze dropped to the screen in Gavin’s hand, his mind snapping back to the corporate war he was supposed to be fighting. He scanned the first few lines, a curse forming on his lips.

A horn blared, followed by a scream that ripped through the city noise. A scream that sounded impossibly like his daughter's name.

Hilliard's head shot up. The tablet and the injunction were forgotten. He saw Cailin — only Cailin — scrambling into the street, collapsing on the pavement as she chased the taillights of a black Maybach already merging into the thick of Fifth Avenue traffic. He saw the car clearly. He saw its diplomatic plates. And he heard the name she screamed again, a ghostly echo piercing the glass and the rain.

Elia.

His blood ran cold. It wasn't a hallucination. It was a Sinclair car. The Sinclairs, who had sent him that cryptic text about a caramel apple. The Sinclairs, who had just announced a new heir named Elia. A cold, terrifying logic began to form in the ruins of his mind.

"Boss?" Gavin's voice was careful. "Should we —"

"Gavin." Hilliard's voice was a low, dangerous rasp. "Get the plate of that Maybach. I want to know who it's registered to. I want to know its destination. I want to know who was inside. Now." He watched as Cailin stood, walked away, limping slightly, leaving blood on the pavement.

He watched until she was gone. Until the street was empty. Until the only evidence of her passage was the blood, already washing away in the rain.

“Follow her,” he said. “Don’t let her see. But don’t —” He stopped. The words would not come. The instructions were impossible. “Just follow her. Make sure she’s safe.”

He stopped again. There was no making sure. There was no safety. There was only the endless present, the endless grief, and the new, terrible possibility that he was not just fighting for Cailin’s sanity, but for the life of a daughter he had been forced to believe was dead.

The SUV moved. Followed at a distance, through streets that had become rivers of reflected light, through the city that had witnessed their rise and would witness whatever came next.

In the back seat, Hilliard pressed his forehead against the cold glass and whispered a name that was no longer just a memory, but a weapon, a mystery, and a sliver of impossible hope.

Chapter 580:

The Brooklyn dusk was the color of old bruises, purple and yellow fading into gray. The journey from Fifth Avenue had been a dissociative blur — a silent, numb ride in the back of a yellow taxi she had hailed without thinking, crossing the river while the city lights bled together through the rain-streaked glass. The driver had dropped her two blocks away, unnerved by the bloody, hollow-eyed woman who handed him a crumpled bill and walked away without a word.

Cailin Morton walked through the final stretch of pavement like a ghost haunting her own life. Her knees were scraped raw, the palms of her hands shredded from where she had caught herself on the concrete. Blood had dried in brown streaks down her wrists, mixing with the rain that had finally stopped falling. She did not feel the pain. She felt nothing except the certainty that she had seen her daughter, that Elia was alive, that the black Maybach had carried her away into the city that swallowed everything.

She reached her building. The industrial loft was supposed to be safe, was supposed to be hidden, was supposed to be the place where she could pretend to be the person she had built from nothing. She

pushed through the door. Did not turn on the lights. The darkness was familiar, was comfortable, was the only thing that did not lie to her.

Cailin collapsed onto the living room floor. The concrete was cold through her thin coat. She lay there, staring at the ceiling, watching the shadows move as cars passed on the street below. She had not taken her medication. Not today, not yesterday, not since she had seen the girl in the car. The pills were in the bathroom, orange bottles lined up like soldiers she had abandoned.

The sound started small. A drip. Water falling somewhere in the apartment, rhythmic, persistent. Cailin turned her head. The bathroom door was open, a rectangle of deeper darkness. The drip continued. And then it changed.

“Mommy.”

The voice was Elia’s. Five years old, small, scared. The voice from before the cliff, before the water, before the end.

“Mommy, the water’s so cold.”

Cailin’s heart stopped. Literally stopped — one missed beat, then a panicked gallop that sent blood roaring in her ears. She scrambled to her feet, legs numb from sitting, from the cold, from the shock. She ran. Stumbled. Caught herself on the doorframe and pushed through.

“Elia! Mommy’s coming!”

The bathroom was empty. The sink was dry. The drip had been nothing, was nothing, was her mind playing tricks with grief and withdrawal and a mother's unique madness that could not accept death.

But the mirror was there — massive, framed in chrome, reflecting the streetlight that filtered through the frosted window. Cailin saw herself. Saw the woman she had become. Pale, hollow-eyed, blood streaked across her face from where she had wiped her hands. Her hair was plastered to her skull, dark and stringy. She looked like a corpse. She looked like a ghost. She looked like the thing that Charla English had always claimed she was.