

Second chance 741

Chapter 741:

She began to thrash wildly in his arms. She shoved her hands against his solid chest, her legs kicking out.

“Put me down!” she yelled, her voice muffled by the thick blanket.

The guard did not loosen his grip. He tightened his arms, absorbing her blows without flinching.

“Ma’am, we’re following Mr. Aguirre’s orders,” the guard stated, his voice a low, commanding rumble that vibrated through his chest. “Remain calm. We’re moving to a secure location.”

The elevator dropped rapidly, the sudden loss of gravity making Cailin’s stomach lurch. She was forced to press her face against his chest to keep her balance. She could hear the steady, trained thud of his heartbeat beneath the wet fabric of his suit.

The elevator chimed. The doors opened onto the lowest level of The Vault — a subterranean, blast-proof safe room designed for extreme emergencies.

The guard carried her out of the elevator and stood by as Kegan, who had taken a separate express lift, keyed in the code to open the heavy steel door of the safe room. The electronic deadbolt engaged with a heavy clack.

The operative walked over to a long, black leather sofa and gently set her down. He reached out and pulled the wet ballistic blanket off her head.

Cailin was shivering uncontrollably. Her black gown was ruined, clinging to her skin like a second layer of ice. She pushed her wet hair out of her eyes. She did not look at the guard. She looked at Kegan with the feral, cornered aggression of a wounded leopard.

She immediately raised her left hand and stared at her bare ring finger, a stark reminder of the battle she had just lost on the stage.

Kegan watched her, his face impassive.

He walked over to a climate-controlled cabinet in the corner of the room and pulled out a thick, oversized black cashmere robe. He walked back to the sofa and draped the robe over Cailin's shoulders.

Cailin immediately reached up to push it off.

Kegan's hands clamped down on her shoulders, holding the robe in place. His grip was absolute.

"Put it on," Kegan said, his voice dropping to a dangerous, quiet register. "You'll be useless with hypothermia."

Cailin's jaw tightened. She glared at him, but she pulled the edges of the warm cashmere around her freezing body.

"Charla set that trap for me," Cailin said, her voice hard. "This is my auction house. I'll handle her."

Kegan let out a dark, humorless laugh. "She exposed a Sinclair asset on my watch," he said, his voice turning colder than the water that had flooded the hall. "This is my fight now."

He turned and walked toward the heavy steel door.

"Stay here," Kegan commanded without looking back. "Don't open this door for anyone but me."

He hit the exit button. The door slid open, and he stepped out into the hallway. The heavy steel slammed shut behind him, the electronic lock engaging automatically.

Cailin was trapped in the safest, most impenetrable cage in New York.

Chapter 742:

Less than five minutes later, the electronic lock on the blast door clicked, and the heavy steel slid open.

Kegan walked back into the safe room. His perfectly tailored suit was somehow still immaculate. He carried a small, white first-aid box in his hand.

Cailin was sitting on the edge of the sofa, the cashmere robe pulled tight around her. She was examining the raw, chafed skin on her knuckles where she had gripped the perfume bottle. When she saw him enter, her spine stiffened, and her eyes narrowed into defensive slits.

Kegan did not speak. He walked directly to her, dropped to one knee on the concrete floor, and reached for her right hand.

Cailin tried to pull her hand back, but his grip was firm. It was steady, immovable, yet impersonal and careful. He opened the first-aid box, took out a cotton swab soaked in iodine, and began to clean the split skin on her knuckles.

The gentle, meticulous motion was completely at odds with the ruthless executioner who ran her security.

Cailin stared down at the top of his dark head. The anger inside her did not subside; it mutated into a hot, suffocating wave of pure resentment.

“Stop it,” Cailin snapped, her voice trembling with suppressed fury. She yanked her hand back so hard she almost lost her balance. “Don’t pretend this is normal. Don’t act like my entire life wasn’t just detonated in front of the world. My identity, my safety, the safety of my children — it’s all gone.”

Kegan’s hand froze in mid-air. He slowly lowered the iodine swab. He looked up at her, and for the first time since she’d known him, Cailin saw a flicker of genuine, raw frustration behind his dark eyes.

He didn't yell. He didn't order her to sit down. He just looked at her.

Cailin stood up, towering over him as he knelt on the floor. The adrenaline and the trauma of the night finally boiled over.

"You ruined everything!" Cailin shouted, the sound echoing harshly off the concrete walls. "I trusted you! I trusted your security! That mask, that identity — Cali was the only piece of freedom I had left! It was the only thing I built that they didn't own! And you let them destroy it!"

Her chest heaved, tears of pure frustration burning the corners of her eyes. "You call this protection? You let Sinclair paint a target on my back and then let Charla English feed me to the wolves!"

The silence in the safe room was absolute. The only sound was the faint hum of the ventilation system.

Kegan slowly stood up. His massive frame seemed somehow less a shield and more a part of the cage. He looked at her red-rimmed eyes, at the scraped skin on her hand, and the devastating reality of the security failure finally pierced through his thick armor of composure.

He had failed his primary directive. He had failed her.

Kegan took a slow, deep breath. He looked down at the floor, then back up into her eyes.

“I’m sorry.”

Chapter 743:

The two words hung in the air, heavy and impossible. Cailin physically recoiled. Her protector, the man who operated with the certainty of a god, had just apologized.

“I was arrogant,” Kegan continued, his voice a low, gravelly scrape. “I underestimated the reach of the Sinclair network and the psychotic desperation of Charla English. I used the wrong protocols. I failed you.”

He looked at her hand. “But I swear to you, Cailin, I will not let this night hurt you further. I will fix the media. I will fix Charla. I will handle all of it.”

Cailin stared at him, her mind struggling to process the vulnerability in his eyes. She turned her head away, her jaw tight.

“The damage is done, Kegan,” she said coldly. “Your apologies are worthless.”

Before Kegan could respond, the access panel by the door buzzed frantically.

Kegan frowned and hit the release button. The door slid open, and Fiona, Cailin’s personal assistant, stumbled into the room. Cailin’s tense shoulders relaxed slightly at the sight of her. Fiona had arrived from Geneva that morning with a trove of European intel — a key piece of Cailin’s trusted inner circle, unlike Joanne, the treacherous spy back in her New York office. She was out of breath, her eyes wide with panic.

Fiona flinched when she saw the state Cailin was in, but she quickly focused on her boss, holding out an encrypted tablet.

“Boss,” Fiona gasped. “The PR team is trying to scrub the photos from the mainstream feeds, but the dark web forums are exploding. Everyone knows Cali is Cailin Morton.”

Fiona swallowed hard, her voice dropping to a terrified whisper. “And... my contacts on the security team intercepted the girl who pulled the fire alarm. Blair. They didn’t hand her over to the police. Some of Kegan’s men took her down to the Deep Water Zone.”

Cailin’s blood ran cold. The Deep Water Zone. It was an abandoned diving training tank at the lowest level of the facility, used by Kegan for interrogating cartel spies. It was a death sentence.

Cailin immediately stripped off the cashmere robe, letting it fall to the floor. She walked to the emergency locker on the wall, pulled out a black tactical trench coat, and shoved her arms into the sleeves. The vulnerable, shivering woman vanished. The underground queen returned.

“I have to stop him,” Cailin said, checking the pockets of the coat. “Blair is an idiot manipulated by Charla. I will not let Kegan execute a civilian in my building. I will not become the monster they think I am.”

Kegan stepped in front of the door, blocking her path. “That woman tried to destroy you. Let me handle the trash. You stay here where it’s safe.”

Cailin looked up at him, her amber eyes burning with absolute, unyielding authority.

“This is my territory, Kegan,” Cailin said, her voice like cracking ice. “These are my rules. I am the boss here. I am not a canary you can lock in a cage.”

Chapter 744:

Kegan stared into her eyes. He saw the fire, the independence he had sworn to protect, not crush. He slowly stepped aside, clearing the path to the door.

“Fine,” Kegan said, his voice dark and resolute. “But I’m going with you.”

The Deep Water Zone smelled of rust, salt, and old terror. It was a cavernous, unfinished sub-basement beneath The Vault, originally designed as a deep-sea submersible testing tank. Now it served a much darker purpose.

Kegan Aguirre stood on a steel gantry overlooking a massive, cylindrical blast-glass tank. He wore a perfectly tailored black suit, his posture relaxed, his face an emotionless mask of a seasoned executioner.

Inside the glass tank, Blair was suspended in the air, her wrists bound by heavy industrial chains attached to a motorized winch on the ceiling. Freezing, untreated seawater blasted into the tank from four massive intake valves at the bottom.

The water had already reached Blair's waist. She was thrashing wildly, her lips turning a bruised purple from the cold. Her screams echoed inside the thick glass, bouncing off the walls, completely soundproofed from the outside world.

Outside the tank, pinned face-down on the wet concrete floor by two massive mercenaries, was Carter.

"Mr. Aguirre! Please!" Carter screamed, his voice tearing at his vocal cords. He struggled against the boots pressing into his spine, his eyes locked on Blair. "She didn't know what she was doing! Charla forced her! Please, I'll do anything!"

Kegan did not even glance down at the weeping man. He slowly pulled a silk handkerchief from his pocket and wiped a microscopic speck of dust from his cuff.

He leaned toward the microphone on the control console. His voice piped into the tank, cold and metallic.

"In my world, actions have consequences," Kegan stated, his tone conversational. "You attacked the woman I protect. The water temperature is four degrees Celsius. You have approximately five minutes before hypothermia stops your heart, or the water fills your lungs. Whichever comes first."

Inside the tank, the water surged higher, hitting Blair's chest. The freezing temperature felt like a thousand burning needles piercing her skin. The sheer, primal terror of drowning shattered whatever fragile sanity she had left. She threw her head back and slammed it against the glass, screaming for mercy that wasn't coming.

In the dark shadows behind a stack of rusted shipping containers, Charla English stood perfectly still.

She had tried to flee the building, but Kegan's men had locked down the elevators and stairwells. She had been forced to hide in the sub-basement, frantically recalling the schematics she'd paid a low-level maintenance worker a small fortune for — a desperate exploit meant to be her insurance policy, a secret way in or out.

Charla watched Blair thrashing in the freezing water. She did not feel a single ounce of guilt. Instead, a twisted, euphoric wave of relief washed over her.

Die, Charla thought, her eyes wide and manic. Just die. If you drown, there's no witness. They can't prove I ordered it.

Chapter 745:

Charla pulled her backup burner phone from her pocket. Her fingers flew across the screen, permanently wiping the encrypted messaging app she had used to communicate with Blair. She dropped the phone on the ground and crushed it under the heel of her shoe, kicking the pieces into a floor drain.

She was safe.

Inside the tank, the water had reached Blair's chin. She had to tilt her head back, gasping for the rapidly shrinking pocket of air at the top of the glass cylinder.

Kegan pressed the microphone button again. "I'll ask you one time. Who gave you the override codes? Who ordered the attack?"

Blair's mind was short-circuiting from the lack of oxygen and the freezing cold. Charla's threat echoed in her dying brain: I will make sure you spend the next twenty years in a federal prison.

In her panicked, oxygen-starved state, Blair made a fatal miscalculation. She thought that if she protected Charla, Charla's lawyers would somehow save her.

"It was me!" Blair shrieked into the tank's internal microphone, coughing up seawater. "I did it! I hated her! I wanted to ruin her! No one else!"

Behind the containers, Charla let out a long, silent breath. A wicked smile spread across her face. The stupid girl had actually taken the fall.

On the floor, Carter stopped struggling. He stared at the woman in the tank, his eyes wide with horror and absolute betrayal. He realized, in that moment, that the woman he loved was truly a monster.

Kegan narrowed his eyes. He had interrogated cartel bosses and hardened assassins. He knew a lie when he heard one. The girl was covering for someone.

But Kegan didn't care. She was a loose end, and loose ends needed to be cut.

"Since you confess to acting alone," Kegan said coldly, "the sentence is death."

He hit the master override button on the console.

The water pumps roared to life, doubling their output. The water surged violently, instantly swallowing Blair's head.

Blair's eyes bulged. She thrashed against the chains, bubbles erupting from her mouth as her lungs screamed for air. The darkness of the deep water began to close in on her vision.

Just as Blair's eyes began to roll back in her head—

BOOM.

The heavy reinforced steel doors of the Deep Water Zone were kicked open with explosive force.

Cailin strode into the room. Her black tactical coat flared out behind her. Her amber eyes blazed with absolute, undeniable authority. Kegan walked a half-step behind her, his presence a dark, looming shadow of violence.

"That's enough, Kegan!" Cailin's voice cracked through the cavernous room like a gunshot. "Drain the tank. Now."

Cailin's command echoed off the damp concrete walls, slicing through the heavy tension in the room.

Kegan turned his head, his jaw tightening. A flash of dark irritation crossed his eyes. He did not like having his authority questioned, especially in front of his men. But he looked at Cailin's face — the absolute, unyielding resolve in her amber eyes — and he knew this was not a battle he could win without losing her completely.

Kegan let out a short, sharp breath and gave a subtle flick of his wrist to the mercenary at the control panel.

Chapter 746:

The mercenary slammed his fist onto the emergency release valve.

A deafening mechanical groan echoed from beneath the floor. The massive drain at the bottom of the glass tank opened. The freezing seawater was sucked out with terrifying speed, creating a violent whirlpool that slammed Blair against the glass walls.

In the shadows behind the shipping containers, Charla saw Cailin and Kegan enter the room. Her heart leaped into her throat. The terror she had felt in the corridor returned tenfold. She knew that if Kegan caught her down here, he would not use water. He would ensure she simply vanished from the face of the earth.

While every eye in the room was fixed on the draining tank, Charla dropped to her hands and knees. She crawled silently through the filthy puddles, slipping into the dark, narrow maintenance tunnel that led to the city's subway system.

Kegan, standing behind Cailin, slowly swept his dark eyes across the cavernous room. His gaze lingered for a fraction of a second on the shadows behind the shipping containers. He noticed a slight disturbance in the dust, a wet footprint that didn't belong to the mercenaries. He didn't alert Cailin or undercut her authority in the room, but he discreetly tapped his earpiece. "Gavin," Kegan murmured, his voice barely a breath. "Check surveillance for the maintenance tunnel behind grid B-7. I have a female suspect, likely Charla English. Seal all subterranean exits within a four-block radius. I want her found."

The tank was empty. The glass door hissed open.

Two mercenaries stepped inside, unhooked the heavy chains, and dragged Blair out by her armpits. They tossed her onto the concrete floor like a sack of wet garbage.

Blair collapsed, coughing violently, vomiting up mouthfuls of bitter seawater. She lay shivering uncontrollably, gasping for the damp, metallic air.

Carter broke free from the guards, who let him go. He ripped off his own jacket and threw it over Blair's freezing body. He didn't hold her. He just looked at her with a profound, exhausted sadness.

Cailin walked slowly toward the shivering woman on the floor. Her high heels clicked rhythmically against the concrete. She stopped, towering over Blair, her expression a mask of absolute, freezing disdain.

Blair weakly tilted her head up. When she saw Cailin's flawless, unscarred face looking down at her, a whimper of pure terror escaped her blue lips. She shrank back against the wet floor.

“You think you’re a martyr?” Cailin asked, her voice low, smooth, and utterly devoid of pity. “You think taking the fall makes you loyal? Charla English is probably halfway to the Upper East Side by now, laughing at how easily she convinced you to die for her.”

Blair flinched as if she had been struck. She squeezed her eyes shut, tears mixing with the seawater on her face. She knew it was true.

Kegan stepped down from the gantry, walking up to stand beside Cailin.

Chapter 747:

“She lied to my face,” Kegan said, his voice cold. “She’s a liability. Let me put her in a barrel and drop her in the Hudson. It solves the problem permanently.”

Cailin did not look at Kegan. She kept her eyes locked on Blair.

“No,” Cailin said firmly. “I will not let Kegan dirty my floors to clean up this kind of trash. From this night forward, The Vault’s executions will be strategic, reserved for kings, not wasted on pathetic, disposable pawns.”

Cailin turned her head slightly, looking directly into the lens of the security camera mounted on the wall. She knew the feed was being recorded to the central servers.

“Record this,” Cailin ordered, her voice ringing with the absolute authority of a queen passing judgment.

“Effective immediately, Blair and every member of her immediate family are permanently blacklisted from the global underground financial and art markets. Any institution, gallery, or syndicate that conducts business with her will be classified as a hostile entity by The Vault and will face immediate economic sanctions.”

The words were not physical blows, but they were far more lethal. Cailin had just dropped a financial nuclear bomb on Blair’s life. She had instantly erased Blair from the elite society she so desperately craved, turning her into a toxic untouchable. It was a social and financial death sentence.

Blair let out a hollow, agonizing wail, her eyes rolling back in her head. Her body went limp as she passed out cold on the wet concrete.

Carter looked up at Cailin. There was no anger in his eyes, only a deep, terrifying respect for the absolute power this woman wielded.

“Thank you,” Carter whispered, his voice cracking. “Thank you for letting her live.”

Cailin waved her hand dismissively. The two mercenaries grabbed Carter and the unconscious Blair, dragging them toward the rear service exit to throw them into the cold New York alleyway.

The adrenaline that had kept Cailin moving for the last hour suddenly evaporated. The physical toll of the freezing water, the violent struggle, and the intense emotional spikes crashed down on her all at once.

Her vision blurred. The concrete floor seemed to tilt beneath her feet. She swayed, her knees buckling.

Before she could fall, a strong, steady arm wrapped around her waist.

Kegan caught her effortlessly. He pulled her back against his solid chest, supporting her entire weight.

“You’re burning out,” Kegan murmured, his voice a low, factual statement, devoid of pity but laced with concern.

Cailin was too exhausted to fight him. She let her head fall back against his shoulder, her eyes closing as he supported her, half-carrying her out of the darkness.

The armored Maybach SUV was a silent, rolling fortress. It glided through the rain-slicked streets of Manhattan, the thick bulletproof glass completely isolating the cabin from the chaotic noise of the city outside.

Chapter 748:

In the cavernous back seat, the ambient lighting was dimmed to a soft, warm amber. Cailin sat slumped against the plush leather door panel. She was wearing a dry, spare tactical jacket Kegan had retrieved from the vehicle’s storage over her ruined dress. The heavy fabric smelled impersonally of clean ballistic nylon and metal.

Kegan sat on the opposite side of the wide seat, the heavy leather armrest acting as a physical barrier between them. He held a tablet displaying satellite imagery of the subway grid, but he wasn’t looking at

it. His dark, watchful eyes were fixed on Cailin's profile, tracking the slow, exhausted rise and fall of her chest.

Cailin stared blankly out the window at the blurred neon lights of the city. Her left hand rested on her lap, her fingers unconsciously tracing the spot where the ring had been.

Her mind was a chaotic storm of exhaustion and dread. The mask was gone. The world knew Cali was Cailin Morton. The sanctuary she had built for five years was shattered.

Worse, Charla's psychotic attack tonight proved that the danger was escalating. If Charla had used sulfuric acid instead of the fire sprinklers, Cailin's life would have ended on that marble floor.

And looming over all of this was the shadow of Sebastian Sinclair — the revelation about her mother's execution, the hidden ledgers, the stolen Nazi art. She was standing at the epicenter of a war between billionaires and assassins, and she had dragged her children right into the crossfire.

A profound, suffocating wave of regret washed over her. She closed her eyes, wishing she could rewind time, wishing she had never walked into that first Holloway gala five years ago.

The gentle hum of the Maybach's engine and the warm air blowing from the vents began to pull her under. Her body, pushed far past its physical limits, simply shut down. Her breathing slowed, becoming deep and rhythmic. She fell into a heavy, dreamless sleep.

Kegan watched her eyes close. He waited a full minute to make sure she was truly asleep.

He set his tablet down. He reached over and pressed a button on the console. A secure satellite phone emerged from a hidden compartment.

He dialed a heavily encrypted number. After a single, silent pulse, the line connected.

"She's safe," Kegan said, his voice low. "The situation is contained, but her cover is blown. Sinclair made his move."

The voice that came back through the speaker was thousands of miles away, tinny and distorted by the encryption, but the raw, violent anger in it was unmistakable. It was Hilliard.

"Report," Hilliard's voice crackled, a blade of pure ice. "Every detail. Now."

Kegan methodically recounted the events of the night: Silas Sinclair's public claim, the two-hundred-million-dollar ring, Charla's attack, and Cailin's unmasking. He left nothing out.

There was a long, static-filled silence on the other end of the line. When Hilliard spoke again, his voice was a low, vibrating growl of absolute murder.

"Keep a kill team on Charla. I want her found. As for Sinclair... my flight leaves Prague in one hour. I've acquired the asset. Jaeger is mine. I'm coming home."

“Understood,” Kegan said. He ended the call and placed the satellite phone back in its compartment.

Chapter 749:

He looked over at the sleeping woman curled against the door. Her face, usually a mask of control, was peaceful in sleep, but also heartbreakingly vulnerable. Hilliard was coming back, not as a penitent ex-husband, but as a storm of vengeance. And Cailin, whether she wanted it or not, was about to be trapped in the dead center of it.

Kegan leaned back against the leather. He was her protector, her general. But he knew, with a chilling certainty, that he couldn’t protect her from the hurricane that was Hilliard Holloway’s love.

The rolling fortress of the Maybach finally decelerated, leaving the rain-slicked streets of Manhattan behind as it descended the steep concrete ramp into the subterranean garage of Cailin’s designated safe house. The heavy tires squeaked against the polished floor, coming to a smooth halt in the damp, echoing space. Before the engine had even fully cut out, the illusion of sanctuary was violently shattered.

The heavy door on Kegan’s side was ripped open with terrifying force. Before Kegan could reach for his weapon, a hand clamped onto his tactical vest. It was Julian, Hilliard’s lead operative in New York, his face grim as he hauled Kegan out into the damp garage air to secure the perimeter. In his other hand, Julian thrust a heavy, military-grade encrypted tablet into the back seat.

On the glowing screen, Hilliard Holloway’s face appeared. He was in the dimly lit cabin of his private jet, the low hum of the engines a constant thrum in the background as the aircraft burned through the sky from Prague, fueled by a rage that was practically vibrating off the digital feed. His dark shirt was unbuttoned at the collar, and his eyes were completely black, devoid of any light.

Julian slammed the door shut, sealing her in with the digital phantom of her ex-husband.

Cailin jolted awake. Before her eyes could even focus, Hilliard's voice lashed out from the speakers.

"Look at me." It was not a request of affection. It was a violent, oxygen-stealing demand, a desperate attempt to visually brand her, to consume her through the screen, to prove she was still breathing and still his. His gaze felt as heavy as physical hands framing her face.

He leaned closer to the camera, his intense stare pinning her against the leather seat, his suffocating presence trapping her completely.

Cailin's lungs burned. Even through the screen, the phantom weight of his obsession suffocated her. She gripped the edges of the tablet, her knuckles turning white as they pressed against the rough metal casing. She didn't speak. The absolute disparity in their current emotional states was a concrete wall she couldn't break. She felt not just anger, but a freezing exhaustion. He had spent so long crawling out of the abyss, yet the moment she was threatened, he reverted to this terrifying, controlling beast.

Panic and fury spiked in her veins. She opened her jaw and bit down hard on her own lower lip to ground herself.

She tasted hot, metallic blood instantly.

Chapter 750:

Hilliard let out a low, guttural groan through the speaker, seeing the blood bloom on her mouth. The sharp visual pain forced him to pull back a fraction of an inch from his camera. His chest heaved, his breath ragged over the audio feed. He wiped a hand over his own jaw, looking like a starving wolf trapped behind a glass cage.

Cailin snapped her head to the side, gasping for air. Her chest rose and fell rapidly.

“If you don’t want me to smash this screen right now,” Cailin said, her voice a razor blade, completely devoid of heat, “back off.”

Hilliard stared at her. He saw the absolute, unyielding rejection in her amber eyes. He knew if he pushed his digital presence one millimeter further, she would shatter. Slowly, his posture loosened its death grip on the frame.

Cailin immediately scrambled backward, pressing her spine into the farthest corner of the cabin. She pulled the edges of her tactical jacket tightly around her neck. She turned her face toward the tinted window, refusing to look at the tablet, building an impenetrable wall of silence. Her mind raced with a cold, analytical precision. She had just survived the auction, and now she had to manage his volatile mental state. She felt a profound disappointment; the fragile truce they had built was cracking under his tyrannical instincts. The water in the corridor... it had felt strange, slick with a chemical undertone. This wasn’t an accident. Charla had planned it, and Hilliard’s response was not to comfort, but to control.

The driver, terrified by the booming voice from the device, killed the engine completely and shrank back into his seat, not daring to make a sound.

Cailin didn’t wait for the door to be opened. She shoved the handle, leaving the tablet face-down on the seat, stepped out into the cold garage, and walked toward the private elevator. Her high heels clicked against the concrete, the sound sharp and final. She never looked back.

Onboard his jet, Hilliard watched the tablet's camera feed show only the empty car's ceiling. He raised his thumb and wiped the sweat and phantom tension from his mouth.

"Gavin," Hilliard said, his voice a low, mechanical hum to his aide sitting across from him. "Activate the global kill order on Charla English. Find her."

Upstairs, Cailin entered the penthouse safe house. She locked the heavy steel door and slid down the wood paneling until she hit the floor, her knees pulling up to her chest. Her fingers unconsciously rubbed the bare skin of her left ring finger, the phantom weight of the two-hundred-million-dollar diamond still burning her.

Her encrypted burner phone vibrated violently in her pocket.

The screen flashed with a designated code. Silas Sinclair.

Cailin took a slow, deep breath, forcing her heart rate down. She swiped to answer.

"Cousin," Silas's lazy, aristocratic drawl drifted through the speaker. "I need a favor. Send me a high-resolution, front-facing photograph of your late mother. Evelyn."

Cailin's spine stiffened. "Why?"

“The Sinclair genetic database requires facial bone modeling to expedite the final DNA confirmation,” Silas said, a hint of amusement in his tone. “Grandfather is impatient.”

Cailin stood up. She walked to the wall safe, punched in the code, and pulled out a yellowed photograph of her mother. She placed it on the encrypted scanner and hit send.