

Second chance 100

Chapter 100:

Cailin frowned. “That wasn’t agreed.”

“House rules. I’m the floor manager tonight.” Chloe winked. “Good luck.” She sauntered off.

Cailin pulled up the manifest for the Mystery Item. It was listed as a vintage Cartier Tank watch, circa 1954. She crossed to the secure table where the piece sat in a velvet box, fitted her loupe, and lifted it carefully.

It was beautiful. Gold casing, leather strap. It looked perfect.

Too perfect.

Cailin leaned in, focusing on the serial number etched into the back of the case. The font. The serif on the number four. It was off by a fraction of a millimeter — and the depth of the cut was perfectly, unnaturally uniform.

Laser etching.

Laser etching didn’t exist in 1954.

It was a trap. Chloe wanted her to walk onto that stage, authenticate the watch, and sell a counterfeit to a room full of the world's sharpest collectors. It would obliterate her credibility in minutes. She would lose the wager by default.

Cailin smiled. It was a cold, precise smile.

"Fine," she whispered. "I'll open."

Up in the VIP box, Hilliard sat in a leather armchair looking exhausted. Dark circles shadowed his eyes. He hadn't slept properly since the DNA results. He had summoned the world's leading horologist, Master Sterling, under the pretext of a private appraisal later that evening — but something in his gut told him the old man's expertise might be needed on the main floor first. He had noticed Chloe moving with a desperate, erratic energy for days, as though something were about to break loose.

He spotted Cailin below on the floor. Even amid the chaos, she stood out — her posture regal, her focus absolute.

Charla sat beside him, clinging to his arm like a barnacle.

"Look at her," Charla murmured, tilting a manicured nail toward Cailin. "Pretending to belong. It's pathetic."

Hilliard said nothing. She belongs more than you do, he thought. But he kept his silence and simply watched.

Cailin felt his gaze. It was a physical sensation — a warmth on the back of her neck, as deliberate as a touch. She looked up.

Their eyes locked across the crowded hall. Distance meant nothing. The tension between them was a taut wire pulled to its limit.

Hilliard raised his glass of scotch slightly. A challenge. Show me what you can do.

Cailin gave a single, measured nod. Bring it on.

The lights dimmed. The music swelled.

Chloe took the microphone at the side podium. “Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the Holloway Grand Auction!” Applause rolled through the room.

“First up,” Chloe announced, her voice drenched in manufactured sweetness, “our Chief Auctioneer, Cali, with a rare find — a mystery item!”

Cailin stepped onto the main podium. The spotlight found her, blindingly white. She adjusted her veil, lifted the watch, and leaned into the microphone.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” she said, her voice calm and absolute. “Before we bid... let’s talk about honesty.”