

Second chance 101

Chapter 101:

Cailin held the watch high, letting the spotlight catch the gold casing.

“This item is listed as a 1954 Cartier Tank,” she said. Her voice carried clearly through the hall.

“However—” She paused, letting the silence stretch and settle over the audience. “I cannot in good conscience sell this. It is a forgery.”

Gasps rippled through the room. Heads turned. Whispers broke out across the floor.

Chloe rushed the stage from the side wing, her face pale with panic. “She is lying! She is trying to devalue the inventory!”

She seized the secondary microphone. “This watch was authenticated by three experts! Cali is incompetent — she is sabotaging the sale because she knows she will lose our wager!”

The crowd murmured uneasily. Investors exchanged glances. Fraud. Incompetence. These were words that killed stock prices and reputations with equal efficiency.

In the VIP box, Hilliard rose to his feet. This was his company’s reputation. His name was on the door.

He caught the eye of Silas, the auction house's general manager, standing near the back wall, and gave a sharp, almost imperceptible nod toward the side entrance.

On stage, Cailin remained perfectly composed. She didn't raise her voice. She turned to Chloe with the patience of someone who had already won.

"If it is genuine, Chloe, why is the serial number laser-etched? Laser etching didn't exist in 1954."

Chloe froze. Her mouth opened. No sound came out. She hadn't checked that detail — she had purchased a high-end replica believing it would deceive everyone.

"That's... that's a restoration detail!" Chloe said, grasping for something, anything. "The case was restored!"

"Then let's ask an independent source," Cailin said, turning to face the main entrance.

The double doors swung open.

Master Sterling walked in — an elderly man with white hair and a reputation that made even the boldest forgers nervous. He was the world's foremost horologist. Silas, acting on Hilliard's silent command, had personally retrieved him from the waiting lounge.

Sterling crossed the room with unhurried authority. The crowd parted for him without prompting.

He climbed the steps onto the stage and accepted the watch from Cailin's gloved hand without a word or a glance at Chloe. He produced his own jeweler's loupe — a heavy brass instrument — and bent over the piece.

Silence fell over the hall. Only the hum of the air conditioning remained.

Chloe was visibly sweating, her makeup beginning to dissolve under the harsh stage lights.

Cailin stood with her hands clasped in front of her, entirely still.

Sterling lowered the loupe. He looked at the watch, then at the audience.

"The lady is correct." His voice filled the room without a microphone. "This is a high-grade replica. Laser-etched. The movement is modern. It is worthless."

The crowd erupted.

"Shame!" someone shouted.

“Fraud!” came another voice.

Chloe looked as though her legs might give way. Her knees visibly buckled.

Hilliard leaned forward in the box and activated the PA override.

“Silas.” Hilliard’s voice rolled out through the speakers — measured, final. “Handle this.”