

Second chance 103

Chapter 103:

As she stepped down from the podium, Charla rose from her seat in the box and seized the microphone from the stand beside her.

“Wait — don’t go just yet, Cali!” Charla’s voice rang out, syrupy sweet.

Cailin stopped.

“Since Hilliard has been so very generous tonight,” Charla announced to the assembled crowd, “I have a charity proposal!”

Charla stood center stage in the spotlight, drinking in the attention. She looked down at Cailin, who stood in the shadows of the wing.

“Everyone is dying to know,” Charla said, leveling a finger at her. “Who is the mysterious Cali? What is she hiding under that veil?”

The crowd murmured in delighted agreement. The mystery had always been part of the allure.

“I propose a special charity lot,” Charla announced, her laugh ringing out over the room. “The winner gets to remove her mask — right here, right now!”

The crowd cheered. They were drunk on champagne and money, and they wanted a spectacle.

“Let’s start the bidding at one hundred thousand!” Charla called out.

“Two hundred thousand!” A flushed tycoon in the front row thrust his glass into the air.

Cailin stood frozen in the wing. This was not in any contract. This was harassment.

She looked up at the box. Hilliard was frowning, moving toward the railing.

“Five hundred thousand to see the face!” another man yelled.

“Take it off! Take it off!” The crowd began to chant — a low, rhythmic pulse that had the quality of a mob finding its voice.

Charla clapped her hands in delight. “You see? It’s for charity, Cali. Don’t be shy. Unless you have something to hide?”

Cailin walked back to the microphone. With a single gesture to the sound booth, she cut the background music.

“I am an auctioneer,” her voice rang out, cold and precise. “Not a showgirl.”

“Oh, come on,” Charla sneered. “Everyone has a price.”

“My dignity does not,” Cailin replied.

The crowd booed. They wanted the spectacle. They felt entitled to her face because they had bought everything else in the room tonight.

Charla’s hand shot out toward Cailin’s veil. “Let me help you—”

Cailin caught her wrist. Her grip was steel — years of lifting heavy crates and carrying children had made her strong in ways that didn’t show.

“Touch me,” Cailin said, low enough that only Charla could hear, “and I sue you for assault. And I will win.”

Charla winced. “You’re hurting me! Hilliard!”

Hilliard was already moving. He had left the box and was storming down the stairs.

But Cailin didn't need saving.

She released Charla's wrist with a firm shove and turned to face the crowd.

"You want to bid on something real?" she asked. "Let's bid on Ms. English's silence. Because that would be worth millions."

The crowd laughed — uncertain, nervous laughter that signaled the mood had shifted.

"I bid zero," Cailin said.

She raised the gavel and brought it down one final time.

"This auction is closed."

She walked off the stage with her head high, ignoring the stunned silence that followed. The crowd parted for her. She didn't run.

She marched.