

## Second chance 106

Chapter 106:

It felt as though she had sealed one crack in a failing dam only to feel another split open, wider and more dangerous than before.

Kegan's reply came almost instantly, brutally efficient.

Threat is being neutralized. Your mission is unchanged. Go to the dinner. Do not run. Project absolute normalcy. I will handle the loose end.

Cailin stared at the word. Neutralized. It was cold and final. She chose not to think about what it meant.

She looked back at Hilliard's invitation. The dinner was no longer a tedious obligation or a romantic trap. It was a battlefield. Her role was to hold the general's attention while her allies dealt with the spy in their ranks.

She took a long, steady breath.

Your next favorite read is on .com

"I'm going to need a new dress," she said to Ashely, her voice hardening into steel.

The crystal wine glass felt fragile in Cailin's hand, the stem so thin she feared it might snap under the pressure of her grip. Kegan's orders echoed in her mind: Project absolute normalcy. It was a near-impossible task. The private dining alcove at The Ritz-Carlton was designed for intimacy, which only made the air between her and Hilliard feel thicker — charged with the unspoken war she was fighting on two fronts. Every shadow seemed to hold a threat: Hilliard's obsessive scrutiny on one side, Chloe's desperate blackmail on the other.

Hilliard poured the vintage Bordeaux. The dark red liquid swirled into her glass, catching the candlelight. He set the bottle down with a precise, deliberate movement. His movements were always like that — calculated, efficient, terrifyingly controlled.

"To your victory," Hilliard said, lifting his glass. His eyes, dark and intent, locked onto hers with a predatory curiosity that had been sharpening ever since the auction.

Cailin forced the corners of her mouth upward. It felt like pulling against a heavy weight. "To competence," she corrected him, touching her glass to his. The sound was a soft, ominous chime. She took a sip. The wine was rich and complex and tasted like ash. She set the glass down and placed her phone face-down on the white tablecloth — a nervous habit she hadn't been able to shake since coming back from the dead. Always hiding the screen. Always guarding the portal to her real life.

"Chloe resigned this morning," Hilliard noted, his gaze dropping to her phone for a fraction of a second before returning to her face. "You cleared the board efficiently."

"She defeated herself," Cailin said, her voice steady despite the rapid thrumming of her pulse. "I just held up the mirror. People like Chloe don't like what they see."

The waiter arrived, a shadow in a tuxedo, placing a plate of scallop crudo between them. Cailin shifted in her chair, the silk of her dress rustling. Every sound felt amplified in the small space.

Then it happened.

Her phone vibrated against the table — not a soft buzz, but a harsh, insistent rattle against the wood that cut through the silence like a shout.

Cailin froze. She picked up her fork. Ignore it. It's nothing.