

Second chance 107

Chapter 107:

“Aren’t you going to check that?” Hilliard asked. He hadn’t touched his food. He was watching her hands.

“It’s just work,” Cailin said, stabbing a scallop. “Spam. Telemarketers don’t sleep.”

The screen brightened against the tablecloth, casting a faint glow upward. A second vibration followed.

Hilliard’s gaze dropped to the phone. Because it was slightly elevated on the thick linen, and because the room was dim, the notification preview was visible from across the table.

Cailin reached for it — but she was a second too slow.

The notification box flashed white text against a dark background.

Client A: Asset 1 has a fever. Needs Mommy.

Time seemed to warp. The air conditioning vent above blasted cold air onto Cailin’s bare shoulders. She watched Hilliard’s eyes widen, then narrow. The wine glass paused halfway to his lips.

“Asset 1,” Hilliard said. His voice dropped an octave. It wasn’t a question — it was an accusation wrapped in confusion. “Needs Mommy?”

Cailin snatched the phone and pressed it against her chest. Her heart stopped, then restarted with a violent kick that made her ribs ache.

“It’s code,” she said. The words came out too quickly, breathless and brittle. “For a vintage doll restoration project.”

Hilliard set his glass down. The crystal met the table with a sound like a gavel. “Since when do dolls get fevers, Cailin?”

He leaned forward. The candlelight cast long shadows across his face, turning the hollows beneath his cheekbones into dark pits. He looked dangerous.

“It’s industry slang,” Cailin said, her mind racing, grasping at anything. “‘Fever’ means heat damage — the vinyl degrades. And ‘Mommy’? The client calls me the ‘Mother of Restoration.’ It’s a running joke.”

Hilliard stared at her without blinking. He was dissecting her, peeling back the layers of panic behind her eyes. The logic was paper-thin and they both knew it.

“And the urgency?” he pressed, his voice soft and lethal. “Why would the client contact you directly instead of the facility manager?”

Sweat prickled at Cailin's hairline. The phone burned against her skin through the fabric of her dress.

"The client is eccentric," Cailin said. "She trusts only me with her collection. It's a multi-million dollar asset. Being on call is part of the job."

"Show me the contact," Hilliard said. He held out his hand, palm up. A command.

Cailin gripped the phone until her knuckles turned white. "No."

"Why not?"

"Client confidentiality," she said, lifting her chin. "I don't expose my buyers. Not even to you."

Hilliard's hand remained extended for a long moment, then he withdrew it slowly and leaned back in his chair, the leather creaking beneath him.

"You're hiding a child," Hilliard said. He wasn't asking. He was concluding. "Something far more valuable than a doll."

The air left Cailin's lungs. She stood abruptly, her chair scraping loudly against the floor.

“I am hiding a business empire you don’t control,” she said, her voice shaking with a mixture of fear and manufactured outrage. She shoved the phone into her purse. “I won’t sit here and be interrogated about my work terminology.”