

Second chance 108

Chapter 108:

"I've lost my appetite," she declared.

She turned to leave, but Hilliard was faster. He was on his feet in an instant, his hand closing around her wrist — warm, firm, not painful, but utterly unbreakable.

"Run, Cailin," he whispered, drawing her just close enough that she caught the scent of sandalwood and rain. "Run as fast as you can. But I will find the truth. And if you are protecting something that belongs to me..."

He didn't finish. He didn't need to.

Cailin wrenched her arm free. She could still feel the ghost of his grip burning on her skin.

"You're delusional, Hilliard," she said.

She walked out of the alcove, past the startled waiter, and into the lobby without looking back. Her legs were trembling so badly she thought she might fall, but she kept moving, the click of her heels on the marble floor sounding like a ticking clock counting down to something she couldn't stop.

Back at the table, Hilliard watched her disappear. He didn't follow. Not yet.

He reached for his phone and dialed Gavin.

"Track her," Hilliard said, his eyes fixed on the empty chair across the table. "And find me everything you can on a 'Client A.' I want to know what asset of hers requires such immediate, personal attention."

The morning sun over Central Park was deceptive. It shone bright and cheerful, glinting off the reservoir's surface, but Cailin felt nothing but cold dread pooling in her stomach. She walked briskly along the path near Fifth Avenue, checking over her shoulder every few seconds. Every jogger, every tourist, every shifting shadow looked like one of Hilliard's investigators.

She spotted Ashely on a bench near the Alice in Wonderland statue. Elia was standing on the bronze mushroom, making a determined effort to climb up to the Mad Hatter.

Cailin rushed over, her oversized sunglasses concealing the dark circles beneath her eyes.

"Why did you text 'Mommy'? We have new protocols for exactly this reason!" Cailin hissed the moment she was within earshot, not bothering with a greeting.

Ashely flinched, looking up from her coffee. "I panicked! Elia had a nightmare, she was burning up, she was crying for you — I didn't think you'd have your phone lying on the table during a dinner with—"

“It wasn’t a date,” Cailin snapped, glancing around. “And now he knows. He saw the preview notification. He’s suspicious, Ash.”

“Okay, breathe,” Ashely said, rising and reaching for Cailin’s arm. “We can fix this. We just need to—”

“Mommy, look! A doggy!” Elia shouted, pointing a chubby finger toward the street, a half-eaten pretzel clutched in her other hand.

Cailin followed her finger. Her heart stopped.

A black SUV was idling across the street, directly beside the park entrance. The window rolled down.

It was Hilliard.

He wasn’t looking at the dog. He was looking at them — specifically, at the little girl with wild curls standing on the bronze statue.