

Second chance 22

Chapter 22:

Inside the bedroom, Cailin listened. She heard the anger in his voice as he defended her honor, however tarnished he believed it to be. A new strategy began to form in her mind. Direct confrontation was a dead end; he was stronger, and legally, he had her trapped. But psychological warfare — that was a battlefield where she excelled. If she was a prisoner, she would make her cage unbearable for her jailer's other woman. She would play the part he so desperately wanted to see, if only to twist the knife in Charla's back.

She walked to the closet and found one of Hilliard's spare dress shirts. She stripped off her leather jacket and the torn silk dress, then pulled on the white shirt. It hung to her mid-thighs.

She opened the door and walked out, legs bare.

Charla gasped. "You shameless—"

Cailin ignored her. She walked straight to Hilliard.

"Honey, I'm hungry," she said, her voice dripping with false sweetness. "Can we get oysters?"

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Hilliard looked at her. His eyes darkened as they traveled over her legs, the way his shirt clung to her curves. He knew she was acting. He knew she was doing it to spite Charla.

He didn't care.

"Anything you want," he said, his voice rough.

Charla screamed in frustration. She grabbed her purse and stormed toward the door of the suite.

"I hate you both!"

The door slammed.

Cailin's smile dropped instantly. She stepped away from Hilliard.

"She's gone. You can stop staring," Cailin said coldly.

Hilliard stepped closer. "You're wearing my shirt."

"It was the only thing clean," she lied.

“It suits you,” he murmured. He reached out toward a button.

Then the lights in the suite flickered.

Bzzt.

The massive TV on the wall switched on by itself, the volume surging to maximum. A cartoon skull appeared on the screen, laughing.

Hilliard sighed and looked at the ceiling. “The hackers again?”

Cailin turned away to hide her smile. Her boys were here.

The animated skull on the massive flat-screen television winked. It was a pixelated, crude graphic — the kind of thing a child would think was edgy — accompanied by a jarring, synthesized cackle that bounced off the marble walls of the penthouse suite.

Hilliard instinctively moved, placing himself partially in front of Cailin as his eyes swept the room’s potential entry points. His posture shifted from that of a predator cornering his prey to a guardian defending his territory. The romantic tension that had been suffocating the room only seconds ago evaporated instantly, replaced by sharp, tactical alertness.

“What the hell?” Hilliard growled. He grabbed the remote from the nightstand and stabbed the power button.

Nothing happened. The skull kept laughing.

Cailin’s heart hammered against her ribs in a frantic rhythm that made her fingertips tingle. She recognized that skull. It was the “Kill Switch” icon Aron had designed for his gaming tablet last summer. They are here.

The realization was a double-edged sword, cutting through her with equal parts maternal pride and terrifying panic. Her children were in the building. They were hacking the hotel. And they were dangerously close to the man who could take them away from her forever.

“It’s a system glitch,” Cailin said, her voice coming out too high, too brittle. She backed away from him, her bare legs bumping against the edge of the mattress. “The storm must be interfering with the satellite feed.”

“That is no glitch,” Hilliard said, his eyes narrowing as he studied the screen. “That is a deliberate intrusion.”