

Second chance 23

Chapter 23:

He reached for the landline on the bedside table, lifted the receiver, listened for a moment, then slammed it back into the cradle.

“Dead,” he muttered.

Zap.

The sound was almost physical, like a whip cracking through the air. The heavy crystal chandelier above them flickered once, twice, and died. The recessed ceiling lights followed. The hum of the central HVAC unit let out a low, dying groan and went silent.

Pitch blackness swallowed the room.

The only light came from the fading afterglow of the television, which had finally cut out, leaving a grey, ghostly rectangle on the wall.

“Stay where you are.” Hilliard’s voice cut through the dark — authoritative, calm, the voice of a man who thrived in chaos.

Cailin heard the distinct click of the electronic locks on the suite's main double doors. In high-end security systems, a power failure often triggered a fail-safe mode. Aron would have known that. He would have exploited it to make them fail open.

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She didn't wait to find out.

While Hilliard fumbled with his watch — she knew he wore a tactical timepiece with an integrated flashlight — Cailin slid sideways. She moved silently across the plush carpet, her bare feet finding purchase on the thick wool. She picked up the heels she had left by the bed and held them in one hand to avoid making a sound.

A beam of harsh white light sliced through the darkness.

Hilliard had activated his light. The beam swept across the bed where she had been standing seconds ago.

"Cailin?"

She froze behind a decorative marble pillar that separated the sleeping area from the sunken living room. She held her breath, pressing her hand over her mouth to stifle the sound of her own breathing. The beam danced wildly, illuminating an overturned chair, the shattered remains of Charla's champagne glass, and the empty bed.

“Damn it,” Hilliard cursed.

She heard his heavy footsteps pound toward the main hallway. He was assuming she would go for the front door — that she would run for the elevators.

He was wrong.

Cailin waited until the beam of light disappeared around the corner into the foyer. Her phone vibrated in the pocket of the shirt. She pulled it out, shielding the screen with her palm.

Unknown Number: Power down. Door open. Run, Mom.

Tears pricked her eyes. My brave, reckless boy.

Then she moved. She didn’t run — running was loud. She stalked toward the service entrance near the kitchenette, the route housekeeping used, the one that led to the back stairwells. She reached the service door and turned the handle. It was unlocked. She slipped out into the cool, stale air of the service corridor, leaving the luxury of the penthouse behind.

The service stairwell was bathed in the eerie, blood-red glow of emergency backup lights. The concrete walls were cold and smelled of industrial cleaner and dust.

Cailin closed the heavy fire door behind her and leaned against it for a moment to steady her trembling legs. She needed to get down four flights. The plan had always been to meet in the alley.