

## Second chance 26

Chapter 26:

“Maybe it slid under the wardrobe door when you stumbled,” he suggested, taking a step in that direction.

Cailin’s stomach dropped. If he opened those doors — if he saw three pairs of eyes staring back at him — it was over. The game, the freedom, the secrets. All of it.

She grabbed his bicep, her fingers digging into the muscle through his shirt.

“Hilliard, wait.”

He paused and looked down at her hand on his arm. It was the first time she had initiated contact in five years.

“I think I heard someone in the hall,” she said, forcing a tremor into her voice. “A guard, maybe. Or a thief. It distracted me.”

Just then, a loud buzz filled the room. The overhead lights flickered violently and slammed back on at full brightness.

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Cailin squinted against the sudden glare. Hilliard blinked and switched off his flashlight, his expression caught between irritation at the interruption and tactical reassessment.

The room was illuminated in sharp, unforgiving detail. And there, sitting innocently on the nightstand — not on the floor, not near the closet — was Cailin's phone.

Hilliard looked at the phone. Then he looked at Cailin. Whatever softness had briefly touched his face vanished, replaced by a cold, hard mask.

"You lied," he stated flatly.

Cailin bit her lip. She had been caught in a clumsy lie, but it was better than the truth.

"I didn't want you to know I was texting my lawyer," she said, lifting her chin. "I was trying to delete the message before you saw it."

Hilliard scoffed. He walked to the nightstand, picked up her phone, and tossed it onto the bed.

"You're a terrible liar, Cailin. You always were."

He turned away from the closet. He crossed to the heavy velvet armchair in the corner of the room, dragged it across the carpet, and positioned it directly in front of the bedroom door.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m sleeping here,” Hilliard said, dropping into the chair. He crossed his arms over his chest and stretched his long legs out, effectively blocking the only exit. “I’m not letting you out of my sight again.”

“You can’t be serious. You’re going to guard me?”

“Until we get on that plane tomorrow? Yes.”

Cailin looked at the closet doors. Her children were trapped inside — no water, no bathroom — and a man who would wake at the drop of a pin was sitting ten feet away.

She climbed into the massive bed and pulled the duvet up to her chin to hide the trembling of her hands.

“Fine,” she said, turning her back to him.

The room went silent. Minutes stretched into hours. Cailin lay with her eyes wide open, staring at the reflection of the room in the dark window.

From inside the closet came a tiny, muffled sneeze.

Cailin immediately coughed — a loud, hacking sound that tore at her throat.

Hilliard stirred in the chair. “Are you sick?”

“Dust allergy,” she muttered, burying her face in the pillow. “This hotel is filthy.”