

## Second chance 34

Chapter 34:

“Sign it, Cailin,” Hilliard said, walking over. He took the contract and read Clause 14. His frown deepened. He looked at Cailin and saw the sheer terror in her eyes — the way her pupils had dilated, the way her hands were trembling.

“Why is this clause here?” he asked Amerigo, suspicion sharpening his voice.

“Standard boilerplate for long separations,” Amerigo said smoothly.

Cailin pushed the papers back across the desk as though they were on fire.

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“I won't sign.”

“Why not?” Charla piped up from the doorway, straining to sound intelligent. “If there's no child, there's no risk. Unless you're lying.”

Cailin turned a cold stare on her. “Because I don't trust you people. I don't trust any of you.”

“Then you stay married,” Amerigo concluded, closing the folder with a definitive thud.

“And you stay here,” Hilliard added, “until we sort this out.”

Cailin stood. The trap had closed on both sides. If she signed, she lost the children the moment they were discovered — and Hilliard would discover them. If she didn’t sign, she remained his wife, trapped in his house, under his roof.

Checkmate.

“I need a drink,” Cailin said, and turned on her heel and walked out of the study before they could see the tears of rage welling in her eyes.

Down the hall, Charla stood in the shadows of the corridor. She had watched Hilliard storm away from Cailin’s room and seen the look on his face — a look of frustrated obsession she had never once seen him direct at her.

Charla gripped the diamond bracelet on her wrist until her knuckles turned white.

“She has to go,” Charla whispered to the empty hall. “She has to go.”

Hilliard didn't let Cailin get far. Before she could reach the crystal decanters on the sideboard in the foyer, his hand closed around her upper arm. His grip was firm, burning through the silk of her blouse — not painful, but possessing an undeniable finality.

"You've had enough excitement for one day," he said, his voice low and stripped of the warmth he had shown in the hotel room. He steered her toward the grand staircase. "Alfred will bring water to your room."

Cailin stiffened but didn't resist. A scene here, in the open foyer where servants were pretending to polish silver while eavesdropping, would only weaken her position. She allowed him to guide her up the plush carpeted steps, her mind racing. Clause 14. They knew. Or they suspected enough to set a legal trap.

They reached the second-floor landing. Instinct, honed by three years of marriage, pulled Cailin toward the right wing — toward the Master Suite. It was reflex, muscle memory of a life she thought she had buried.

Hilliard stopped her. His body became a solid wall between her and the double mahogany doors she used to walk through every night.

"Not there," he said, his voice flat.

Cailin looked up at him, confusion flickering in her eyes before she masked it with cold indifference. "Excuse me?"

Hilliard gestured to Alfred, the elderly butler who had silently materialized at the top of the stairs with a silver pitcher of water.