

Second chance 35

Chapter 35:

“The Blue Room, Alfred,” Hilliard said, his tone leaving no room for argument. “It’s more suitable.”

Cailin felt a chill that had nothing to do with the drafty hallway. The Blue Room. Situated in the east wing, it was the furthest guest room from the family quarters — cold, impersonal, historically reserved for distant relatives or business associates one didn’t particularly like.

“The Master Suite is being renovated,” Hilliard said, though the excuse sounded flimsy even on his own tongue.

“Hilliard!” A voice shrilled from down the hall, shattering the tense silence.

Charla English stepped out of the Master Suite — the very room Cailin had just been barred from — wearing a floor-length silk robe of garish fuchsia, a color she knew Cailin detested. The air around her was heavy with the scent of gardenias, Cailin’s favorite perfume, a deliberate act of territorial marking.

“Did you bring my luggage to our room yet?” Charla called out, ignoring Cailin entirely as she adjusted the belt of the robe, a triumphant smirk playing on her lips.

Cailin’s eyes narrowed. The unspoken truth hung in the air, exposed and rotting.

“Suitable?” Cailin asked, her voice razor-sharp. “Or occupied?”

Hilliard didn’t answer. A muscle ticked in his jaw — the only sign that Charla’s performance had annoyed him. He gripped Cailin’s elbow and propelled her down the opposite corridor, away from the Master Suite, away from the life Charla was playing dress-up in.

He opened the door to the Blue Room.

“Get settled,” he ordered, ushering her inside. “Dinner is at seven. Don’t be late.”

He stepped in after her and closed the door, effectively dismissing Alfred. The click of the latch sounded like a prison cell locking.

The room smelled of stale lavender and disuse. Dust motes drifted through the beam of light cutting between the heavy velvet curtains. It was a tomb.

Before Cailin could retreat, Hilliard trapped her against the doorframe. He placed one hand on the wood beside her head and leaned in until she could smell the crisp rain and cedarwood of his cologne.

“Why were you so terrified of Clause 14, Cailin?” he demanded quietly. His grey eyes searched hers, stripping away layers of defense, hunting for the truth she was guarding with her life.

Cailin's heart hammered against her ribs like a frantic, trapped bird. She pressed her spine against the hard wood of the door, refusing to shrink. "I told you," she said, holding her voice steady through sheer force of will. "I don't trust your family with my future. I don't trust you."

"Future children?" Hilliard pressed, leaning closer. His gaze dropped briefly to her stomach, then returned to her eyes. "Or existing ones?"

The question hung between them, heavy and dangerous. He was too close. He was connecting the dots — the hackers, the lemon drop wrapper, the terror in the study.

Cailin forced a scoff, a sharp sound of derision. She pushed against his chest with both palms flat against his suit jacket.