

Second chance 36

Chapter 36:

"I would never have a child with a man who keeps his mistress in the next room," she spat.

Hilliard flinched. The reaction was subtle — a slight widening of the eyes, a tightening of the lips — but it was there. The word mistress had struck a nerve.

He pulled back, his expression hardening into stone.

"Charla is a guest," he said, though the conviction in his voice sounded thin. "You are the wife. Act like it."

"Then treat me like one," Cailin countered, lifting her chin and holding his gaze, daring him to deny the reality of their twisted situation.

Hilliard's eyes dropped to her lips. The tension in the small entryway was thick enough to cut — a volatile mix of anger, suspicion, and a lingering, unwanted attraction that crackled between them like static electricity.

For a moment, Cailin thought he might kiss her. Or strangle her.

Instead, he pulled away abruptly, turned on his heel, and left the room, slamming the door behind him hard enough to rattle the antique mirror on the wall.

Cailin locked the door instantly. Her fingers fumbled with the deadbolt, shaking now that he was gone.

She rushed to the window and pushed aside the heavy drapes. It overlooked the service driveway — a narrow strip of gravel hidden from the main gardens by high hedges. Perfect.

She pulled out the burner phone she had hidden in her bra. Her hands trembled as she typed.

Stuck here. Need my 'meds' (code for backup/supplies). Service gate. Tomorrow 10 AM.

She hit send and watched the delivery confirmation appear. Then she sank onto the dusty bed, the adrenaline draining out of her all at once, leaving her exhausted and terrified.

Morning sunlight flooded the opulent dining room, illuminating dust motes drifting over the polished mahogany table. It was a scene of perfect domestic wealth, if one ignored the suffocating tension that made the air feel like solid lead.

Jeraldine sat at the foot of the table, buttering a croissant with the precision of a surgeon. Hilliard sat at the head, engrossed in the Wall Street Journal — a shield against the women in his life.

And Charla sat on his right. The wife's seat.

Cailin entered the room. She had found a simple but elegant navy dress in the closet — one of her own, left behind years ago and preserved by the staff. It felt like a ghost's skin against hers, and it fit perfectly, drawing out the stark paleness of her complexion and the fire in her eyes.

The maid hesitated, pulling out a chair on the left side of the table.

Cailin ignored her. She walked straight to Charla.

"You're in my seat," Cailin said calmly. Her voice wasn't loud, but it carried across the room, cutting clean through the clink of silverware.

Charla looked up, a nervous laugh bubbling from her throat. She glanced at Hilliard, then back at Cailin. "Oh, Cailin, don't be petty. We're all family here. Sit anywhere."