

Second chance 37

Chapter 37:

"Are we?" Cailin tilted her head and let her gaze settle on Charla's left hand, resting conspicuously on the table. "I don't see a ring on your finger."

Hilliard lowered his newspaper. He took a sip of his black coffee and watched Cailin over the rim of the cup, saying nothing, defending no one. His jaw tightened almost imperceptibly, his eyes flicking briefly to the bracelet on Charla's wrist with a flash of something that looked like annoyance before he masked it behind the cup. He simply watched, his expression dark and unreadable.

Charla flushed a deep, blotchy red. She slammed her coffee cup down, liquid sloshing onto the saucer, and raised her wrist to shake the jewelry with a sharp jangle.

"Hilliard gave me this for our anniversary," she announced, displaying a thick diamond bracelet. "It's worth more than the car you drove here."

Jeraldine glanced up from her croissant with a faint smirk. "A Holloway heirloom. The Star of the East. Reserved for the true lady of the house."

Cailin studied the bracelet. It was gaudy, heavy, and deeply old-fashioned.

"An heirloom?" she asked, raising an eyebrow. "Or a consolation prize for waiting five years without a proposal?"

The silence that followed was deafening. A servant in the corner dropped a silver spoon, its clang echoing like a gunshot.

Hilliard choked slightly on his coffee. He set the cup down and coughed into his napkin to hide the twitch at the corner of his lips.

Charla shoved her chair back with a violent scrape against the parquet floor and slammed both hands on the table.

“How dare you!” she screeched. “I am the woman he loves! I am the one who stayed when you ran away like a coward!”

“Then why am I the one with the marriage certificate?” Cailin replied, her voice dropping an octave, becoming quietly lethal. She paused, letting the silence stretch, letting the anticipation build before delivering the final cut. “And why are you just the... mistress?”

Charla gasped. Tears sprang to her eyes — Cailin couldn’t tell whether they were real or manufactured, and she didn’t care.

“Hilliard!” Charla wailed, turning to him. “Are you going to let her insult me like this in your own home?”

Hilliard folded his newspaper with meticulous care and set it on the table. He looked at Charla with an expression of mild exhaustion.

“Sit down, Charla,” he said. “You’re making a scene.”

Charla froze, her mouth falling open. He hadn’t denied it. He hadn’t defended her. He had simply told her to be quiet.

Cailin didn’t wait. She took the seat on the left — the guest seat — but she sat in it like a queen on a throne.

“Pass the toast, please,” she said to a stunned Jeraldine.

Jeraldine stared at her, butter knife suspended in mid-air. “You will regret this,” the older woman hissed.

Cailin took a piece of toast and spread jam on it with deliberate, unhurried movements.

“I already regret coming back,” she said, and took a bite.