

Second chance 60

Chapter 60:

The helicopter ride back to New Jersey was a blur of grey clouds and darker thoughts. Hilliard didn't speak. He turned the folded drawing over in his fingers, again and again. He had caught her — not with a lover, not with a stolen account, but with a child's drawing that linked her directly to the attack on his company.

When they landed on the private pad at the Holloway Estate, he didn't wait for the car. He crossed the wet lawn on foot, his stride long and furious.

Inside, he bypassed the servants and went straight to the guest wing. The guard posted outside Cailin's door straightened at his approach.

"Unlock it," Hilliard said.

The lock clicked. He threw the door open.

Cailin sat on the edge of the bed. She looked up, face pale, hands gripping the mattress — the look of someone waiting for an executioner. A burner phone was in her hand. She tried to slide it under the pillow, but she was too slow.

Hilliard didn't care about the phone. He reached into his pocket, pulled out the drawing, and threw it at her feet.

“Explain this,” he said.

Hilliard kicked the door shut behind him. The sound sealed them inside a vacuum of tension. He stepped closer, invading her space until he was looming over her, the smell of rain and aviation fuel clinging to him.

“Who was in that loft, Cailin? Who are you protecting?”

His voice was low, stripped of the shouting from earlier. This was worse. This was the voice of a man conducting a deposition.

Cailin’s mind raced. The burner phone beneath the pillow felt like a hot coal. If he connected A and D to Aron and Davy, he wouldn’t just be angry. He would be a father asserting his rights. He would take them.

She stood and smoothed the wrinkles from her skirt with trembling hands. She needed to be the villain. Villains went to jail. Mothers lost their children. She would rather be the villain.

“No one,” she said. Her voice was steady, though her knees felt like water.

“Don’t lie to me!” Hilliard snapped, the control breaking. “I saw the workstations. I saw the shoes — small shoes, Cailin. Who were they?”

He grabbed her shoulders, his grip firm and desperate. “Who ran the code? Who put that animation on every screen in Times Square?”

Cailin looked him dead in the eye. She summoned every ounce of the persona she had built over five years as Cali — the woman who had negotiated with warlords and thieves.

“I did,” she said.

Hilliard went still. His hands loosened slightly. “You?”

“I hired the team,” Cailin said, the words tasting like ash. “I rented the loft. I wrote the script. I wanted to hurt you.”

“Why?” Hilliard whispered. The hurt flashed raw and unguarded in his eyes for a fraction of a second.

“Because you let Charla burn Elia,” Cailin spat, channeling her real fury to fuel the false confession. “Because you are blind. Because you needed to wake up.”

Hilliard released her and stepped back, dragging a hand through his damp hair. He looked at her — really looked. He didn’t see a frantic mother. He saw a woman capable of orchestrating a sophisticated cyberattack.