

Second chance 78

Chapter 78:

He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her toward him. She twisted away, palms pushing hard against his chest, and in the struggle his fingers snagged the delicate silk of her neckline.

Rip.

The sound of tearing fabric cut through the silence of the room.

Cailin gasped, her hands flying up to cover her chest. The bodice hung in tatters.

“You animal!” She slapped him. Hard.

The sound echoed off the walls. Hilliard’s head snapped to the side.

He froze. The sting on his cheek pulled him back to himself. He looked at the torn dress. He looked at the terror in her eyes.

Then his gaze drifted lower — to her exposed stomach.

The rumors. The abortion. Or the birth. He needed to know. The money no longer mattered. The truth might be written on her skin.

“Show me,” he whispered.

“What?” Cailin clutched the remnants of her dress.

“Show me your stomach,” Hilliard said. “If you carried a child, the marks are there. If you terminated... there will be nothing.”

“You are insane,” Cailin said, backing away until the wall stopped her.

“If you show me, and there are no marks, I will believe you about the money. About everything,” Hilliard bargained, his voice raw with desperation.

“And if I don’t?” Cailin asked.

“Then I call the FBI about the theft,” Hilliard threatened.

Cailin weighed her options, her heart hammering. The scars were there — but they were not what he expected. She had prepared for this.

She dropped her hands.

“Fine.”

She reached back and unzipped the rest of the dress. It fell to the floor in a pool of red silk.

She stood in her lingerie, her torso bare to the cool air of the room.

Hilliard stepped closer. He held his breath. He had expected the silvery, tiger-stripe lines of stretch marks — or the smooth, unblemished skin of a woman who had never carried life.

Instead, he found art. And chaos.

A large, intricate tattoo of black roses and thorns covered her lower abdomen. The ink was dark and dense, swallowing the light. But beneath it, the texture of the skin was uneven.

A jagged vertical scar ran through the roses. It was not the neat, horizontal line of a C-section. It was a trauma scar — ugly and raised.

“What is this?” Hilliard reached out, his finger trembling as he traced the vertical line through the ink.

Cailin didn't flinch. She stared at the wall over his shoulder.

"A car accident. In Milan. Three years ago," she said. The lie was smooth, practiced. She felt a quiet flicker of gratitude for Kegan, who had spent a fortune planting a digital ghost in the Italian medical system — a complete record of a crash, an emergency surgery, a recovery. A contingency built for a moment exactly like this.

"And the tattoos?" Hilliard asked, his voice barely audible.

"To cover the ugly parts. To remind me I survived," Cailin said.

It was partially true. The tattoos concealed the C-section scar and the stretch marks. The vertical scar was from a surgery to repair a complication — but to Hilliard, it looked like wreckage.