

Second chance 83

Chapter 83:

The giant crimson X hung in the smoky sky above the East River like a bloody scar. It wasn't the golden ring Hilliard had ordered, nor the silver cascade Charla had promised the press. It was a rejection — a denial written in gunpowder and fire.

The music from the DJ booth cut out with a violent scratch, leaving a vacuum of silence over the rooftop garden. The only sounds were the fizzling of embers drifting down toward the water and the confused murmurs of three hundred of New York's wealthiest socialites.

"A technical glitch!" Charla's voice shrilled through the sudden quiet. She snatched a microphone from a passing stagehand, her knuckles white around the handle. Her smile was tight and manic, stretching her face until it looked as though the skin might tear. "Or perhaps... X marks the spot for love? A treasure hunt!"

She laughed. It was a brittle, glass-breaking sound. The crowd didn't laugh with her. They shuffled uncertainly, champagne flutes clinking with nervous energy.

Hilliard didn't look at the sky. He didn't look at the woman clinging to the microphone in a desperate attempt to salvage her spotlight. His eyes were locked on Cailin.

She stood near the edge of the crowd in that midnight blue dress, a piece of the night sky wrapped around her body. She wasn't watching the fireworks. Her head moved in slow sweeps, eyes darting toward the shadows near the DJ booth. Her chest rose and fell in a rhythm that bore no resemblance to the calm boredom of the other guests. It was the rhythm of panic.

She took a step back, her hand tightening around her small beaded bag.

Hilliard pushed off the marble railing he had been leaning against and moved, ignoring the investors clustered around him.

“Hilliard, about the merger—” a man in a tuxedo began.

“Not now,” Hilliard said, without stopping. He cut through the crowd like a shark through open water.

Cailin saw him coming. Her eyes widened, the pupils blowing out until her irises were just thin rings. She spun on her heel, the heavy silk of her dress swirling around her ankles, and plunged into the crowd.

She was running. Again.

“Cailin!” Hilliard called out. The noise swallowed his voice, but he watched her shoulders stiffen. She had heard him.

A waiter stepped into his path, a tray of empty flutes balanced overhead. “Champagne, sir? To toast the—”

Hilliard shouldered past him, sending a glass wobbling on the tray. “Move.”

Cailin reached the DJ booth. It was empty. The console was dark, cables ripped from their sockets. The hired DJ was nowhere to be seen. But sitting on the metal table, lit by a strobe light left spinning on autopilot, was a black laptop. Its screen was just fading to black, locking itself.

Cailin pressed her hand to the plastic casing. It was warm.

They were just here.

Her heart hammered against her ribs like a frantic bird trying to break its cage. She scanned the table's surface. Tucked beneath the edge of the laptop was a neon yellow sticky note.

Phase 1 Complete. — Blue Bear.

Cailin's stomach dropped.