

Second chance 84

Chapter 84:

Hilliard was closing in, his shadow stretching across the floor as he navigated the last few guests between them. She had seconds. Shielding the movement with her own body, her hand shot out and snatched the small yellow paper, fingers crushing it into her fist. She straightened up, letting a mask of cool indifference settle over her features just as he came within reach.

The crumpled note felt damp against her palm.

They were escalating. This was no longer just a prank — it was a declaration of war. And if Hilliard saw this note, if he recognized the childlike handwriting that matched the doodles he had found in the Brooklyn safe house, he would know. He would know they were here.

She shoved the crumpled ball into her clutch. She needed to get them out. Now.

She swept the perimeter. To the left of the stage, a heavy metal door leading to the fire escape stood slightly ajar — a sliver of darkness in the wall of light.

She moved toward it, her heels striking the concrete pavers in sharp, rapid beats.

Hilliard pulled her closer, eliminating the polite distance between their bodies. He ignored Charla completely, his focus narrowing until only Cailin existed.

“That dress,” he murmured, his eyes traveling down the curve of her spine. “You look...”

He trailed off, the words catching in his throat. He wanted to say beautiful. He wanted to say mine.

Cailin turned her head and met his gaze with ice. “Like a woman who isn’t your wife?”

Hilliard’s jaw tightened. “Like a woman who is trying to start a riot.”

“Hilliard!” Charla seized his other arm, digging her manicured nails into the fabric of his suit jacket. “The press is waiting for a photo! We need to cut the cake!”

Hilliard didn’t look at her. He didn’t shake her off either, but his body remained angled toward Cailin.

The stares had already begun. Whispers rippled through the crowd like wind through dry grass.

“Is that the ex-wife?”

“She looks better than the fiancée.”

“I heard she was dead.”

Charla heard every word. Her smile twitched — a glitch in the perfect facade. She tightened her grip on Hilliard.

“Cailin is just leaving,” Charla announced loudly, her voice climbing an octave. “She has clients to attend to. Don’t you, dear?”

Cailin felt the crumpled sticky note burning inside her clutch. If she left now, she could circle back to the fire escape from the street and intercept the kids before they launched whatever Phase 2 was.

“Yes,” Cailin began, pulling against Hilliard’s grip. “I should—”

Then she saw it. A flash of black hoodie near the catering tent. Small. Fast.

They weren’t leaving. They were repositioning.

If she left the roof, she would lose visual contact — leave them unsupervised in a lion’s den.

“Actually,” Cailin said, halting her retreat. She stepped back into Hilliard’s space, forcing him to loosen his grip slightly. “I’m staying. I love fireworks.”

Charla's face fell. Hilliard smirked — a dark, satisfied expression that made Cailin's skin prickle.

"Good," Hilliard said. "Stay with me."

He signaled a waiter with a sharp nod, lifted two flutes of champagne from the tray, and handed one to Cailin.

He did not take one for Charla.

Charla stood there, empty-handed, her mouth opening and closing like a fish on a dock.