

Second chance 86

Chapter 86:

“Sir,” Gavin whispered, his voice tight with stress. “The pyrotechnics lead is asking for the Green Kef.”

Hilliard frowned. “The what?”

“The launch code override,” Gavin explained, glancing at Cailin before lowering his voice further. “The system is acting up. It’s locked out the manual controls. They need your biometric authorization to reset the sequence.”

Hilliard exhaled, heavy with irritation. “Excuse me, Cailin. Business.” He stepped away with Gavin, his back to her.

Cailin seized the moment. She reached up as though tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear and tapped the tiny, flesh-colored earpiece hidden there — a precaution Kegan had insisted on, a piece of tech that had come with the dress and the taser as part of his standard security package for high-risk engagements.

“Aron?” she whispered, barely moving her lips. “Are you there?”

Static crackled. Then a small, triumphant voice. “Hi, Mommy. Did you see the glitter? Davy stuck the landing.”

"It was lovely," Cailin whispered sharply. "Now abort. Get out of here. Hilliard is resetting the system."

"Can't," Aron said, the rapid clicking of a keyboard underscoring his voice. "We anticipated the override. The reset command bypasses our timer and triggers the finale instantly. It's already compiled. Whether he does it or not, the show starts in five minutes. This just makes it happen now."

"What finale? Aron! Abort!"

"Love you, Mom," Aron said.

The connection cut.

Cailin tapped the earpiece again. Nothing.

Hilliard turned back around. He caught her hand still hovering near her ear.

"Everything okay?" he asked. "You look pale."

Cailin dropped her hand. "I need fresh air."

“We are outside,” Hilliard pointed out.

“Away from the crowd,” Cailin said.

“The balcony is this way.” He held her gaze as he guided her toward the far edge of the roof, a secluded alcove overlooking the sprawling grid of Manhattan.

They leaned against the stone railing. The wind whipped Cailin’s hair across her face. Below them, the city was a river of light.

“Why did you come, Cailin?” Hilliard asked softly. “Really?”

Cailin gripped the cold stone. She couldn’t tell him she was here to extract three miniature hackers. The lie came easily, a well-worn shield.

“To see if you were happy,” she said. The words tasted like ash.

Hilliard laughed — a bitter, hollow sound that seemed to drop straight off the balcony. “Happy? With Charla?”

"You are marrying her," Cailin said. "Tonight, I hear."

"It's a merger. Not a marriage," Hilliard admitted. He looked out at the skyline, his profile sharp and hard. "Our families — it makes sense on paper."

Cailin's heart gave a painful twitch. "That's not fair to her."

"She knows the deal," Hilliard said. He turned to face her. "She wants the name. The access. She doesn't want me."

"And what do you want?" Cailin asked.

The question hung between them, heavy and dangerous.