

Second chance 87

Chapter 87:

Hilliard looked at her lips. Then at her eyes. He saw her there, bathed in the city's glow, and a five-year-old dam of regret inside him began to crack. The merger, the money, the empire — all of it felt like dust compared to the woman he had thrown away.

"I want to go back five years," he said quietly. "And fix a mistake."

The air crackled. Not with the static from her earpiece — with the electricity of unresolved history. Hilliard leaned in, his hand moving to cover hers on the railing.

"Hilliard!"

Charla's voice shattered the moment. She stood at the entrance to the alcove, her hair slicked back to conceal the glitter, her face a mask of fury.

"It's starting! The real show!" She marched over and seized his arm, pulling him away from Cailin as though Cailin were contagious.

Hilliard looked back at her one last time — a silent apology, or perhaps a warning. Then he let Charla drag him away.

Charla dragged Hilliard to the center of the rooftop, directly under the main spotlight. She was vibrating with energy — a volatile mix of adrenaline and rage.

Cailin stayed in the shadows near a pillar, checking her watch. Four minutes.

“Everyone! Gather round!” Charla commanded into a fresh microphone, her voice booming over the speakers.

The crowd shuffled inward, forming a tight circle around the couple.

“Tonight isn’t just my birthday,” Charla announced, beaming. She looked up at Hilliard with wide, demanding eyes. “It’s a celebration of... our future.”

She waited.

Hilliard stood stiffly, hands in his pockets. He did not take the microphone. He did not smile.

“Say something, darling,” Charla hissed, covering the mic with her palm.

Hilliard looked out at the crowd. He looked exhausted. “Happy Birthday, Charla.”

It was flat. Perfunctory. Like reading a grocery list.

The crowd offered polite applause. Someone coughed into the silence.

“And now!” Charla cried, her voice straining to drown out the awkwardness. “The Holloway Fireworks Spectacular!” She swept her arm toward the sky in a grand gesture, as though commanding the heavens.

The crowd looked up. The giant red X had long since faded, but the memory of it lingered like a question mark over the entire evening.

“This is embarrassing,” a woman in emerald silk whispered near Cailin. “After that X thing? They’re still going through with it?”

Cailin checked her watch. Time was up.

A loud hiss tore through the air from the river below.

It wasn’t one rocket. It was fifty, launched simultaneously. They screamed into the sky, trailing thick pink smoke that looked silver-gray against the dark.

“Pink? I ordered gold!” Charla stamped her foot. “Everything is wrong!”

The rockets reached their apex and exploded. Boom. Boom. Boom. The sound rattled the penthouse windows.

The sparks didn't fall randomly. They hung suspended, burning with the intense brightness of magnesium, and slowly resolved into a shape.

A massive, shimmering heart.

It pulsed in the sky, red and pink.

Charla gasped, her hands flying to her chest. "Oh! A heart! He does love me!"

The crowd released a wave of oohs and aahs. The tension that had gripped the rooftop broke open. The evening was romantic after all.

"See?" Charla turned to Hilliard, tears welling in her eyes. "You romantic fool."