

Second chance 88

Chapter 88:

Hilliard stared upward, genuinely confused. He hadn't ordered a heart. He had ordered a standard gold cascade. He shot a look at Gavin, who was typing frantically on his phone.

The heart lingered, burning bright against the night.

Then a second wave of rockets launched, screaming straight through the center of the glowing shape.

"Here comes the message!" Charla squealed, seizing Hilliard's arm. "Ask me! Ask me now!"

Cailin pressed her hand over her eyes. "Oh no."

The rockets burst inside the heart with a deafening crack.

Gold and blue sparks flew outward — not the soft pastels Charla preferred. These were bold, aggressive colors. The deep blue of Cailin's dress. The gold of the Holloway crest.

Letters began to form in the smoke. Large, blocky, undeniable.

S H E ' S

The crowd held its breath.

M I N E

The sky blazed with the message, burning it into the retinas of every person on the roof.

SHE'S MINE.

The silence that followed was heavier than the explosion itself.

"She's... mine?" a voice asked, bewildered. "Who's mine? What does that mean?"

"Is it a corporate slogan? Some new acquisition?" another guest whispered.

Charla froze. Her expression collapsed from ecstasy into blank confusion. She blinked, the glitter on her lashes catching the light of the damning letters still glowing overhead.

“Who is ‘she’?” someone asked, loudly enough for half the rooftop to hear.

Hilliard stared at the sky. His lips parted.

He didn’t see a corporate slogan. He saw a gauntlet thrown at his feet — a claim staked on his territory. On his woman.

He whipped around, eyes cutting through the shadows.

Cailin was pressing herself back against the pillar, her face burning. Cold dread washed over her. This wasn’t just a prank. It was a beacon — a public declaration that would invite exactly the kind of scrutiny she couldn’t afford.

“A declaration of war!” a gossip columnist near the bar shouted, phone raised to livestream. “Holloway’s fiancée publicly challenged by a mystery rival!”

The crowd erupted — laughter, gasps, the frantic clicking of cameras.

Charla screamed. It was a primal, cornered sound, something between rage and agony.

“Turn it off! Turn it off!” She lunged at the podium, pounding the useless ceremonial button with both fists.

Hilliard didn't move toward Charla. He moved toward Cailin.

His face was a mask of shock, but something darker churned beneath it. Jealousy.

He looked at the display — massive, expensive. A barge rental alone ran fifty thousand dollars. The custom pyrotechnics? Another hundred. He knew he hadn't paid for it.

So who had?

He reached Cailin and seized her wrist. His grip was hard.

"Who sent that?" he demanded.

"Let me go," Cailin hissed, trying to pry his fingers loose.

"A secret admirer?" Hilliard sneered, gesturing toward the sky where the letters were dissolving into smoke. "With the budget for a barge display? Who is he, Cailin?"

"Maybe I'm just lovable," Cailin deflected, her heart hammering. She couldn't tell him it was his own children, bankrolled by her billionaire ally.

Charla snatched a wine glass from a passing waiter. She didn't drink it.

She hurled it.

Smash.