

Second chance 93

Chapter 93:

“You are incompetent,” Jeraldine sneered. “Just like all the help Hilliard hires these days.”

Cailin gripped the edge of the counter. Beneath her gloves, her knuckles turned white.

“Perhaps you have a history of buying fakes,” Cailin said softly.

Jeraldine’s eyes narrowed. She leaned in. “You have an insolent tone.”

“I have an honest one,” Cailin said, meeting her gaze without flinching. “And I can see a fake right in front of me.”

Jeraldine gasped, her hand flying to her pearls. “How dare you!”

The showroom door chimed.

Hilliard walked in. He stopped when he saw the two women facing each other across the counter, the air between them crackling. He looked tired, the small cut on his lip still visible.

“Mother? What are you doing here?”

“This woman insulted our heritage!” Jeraldine pointed a trembling finger at Cailin. “She says the Ming vase is a fake!”

Hilliard looked at the vase. Then at Cailin.

“Tell her she is wrong!” Jeraldine demanded.

Hilliard studied Cailin — the fire in her eyes, the quiet authority in her posture.

“If Cali says it’s fake, it’s fake,” he said simply.

Jeraldine looked as though the floor had shifted beneath her feet. “You take her side? Against your own mother?”

“I take the side of the expert I hired,” Hilliard said.

Jeraldine snatched the vase and clutched it to her chest. “I am leaving. You are bewitched. She has poisoned you.” She stormed out, the door chimes jangling violently in her wake.

Hilliard remained. He walked to the counter and leaned against it.

“My mother is... difficult.”

“Difficult clients are my specialty,” Cailin said, her tone cool and professional — though the words landed like darts.

He took a step closer. The edge of his expensive Italian shoe nudged the toe of hers. He was too close — he smelled of rain and sandalwood, a scent that triggered a phantom ache in her chest so sharp she nearly gasped.

His hand rose, hovering inches from the black netting covering her face. “How long are you going to hide behind this mask, Cailin?” he whispered.

Cailin stopped breathing.

Click. Click. Click.

Rapid, aggressive footsteps echoed from the hallway — high heels striking marble with the cadence of a woman on a warpath.

Cailin froze. She knew that walk. Fast, choppy, entitled.

Chloe.

Cold panic flooded her stomach. If Chloe walked in right now — if Hilliard pulled the veil off while her cousin stood in the doorway — it was over. Chloe would recognize her instantly. The changed hair wouldn't matter. The scars wouldn't matter. Chloe knew her bone structure, her posture, the particular way she held her hands when she was cornered.

"Cali? I have the inventory for—" Chloe's voice drifted in from the corridor, growing louder with every step.

There was no exit. Hilliard was a solid wall of muscle blocking the only path to the back office. The glass walls of the showroom offered no cover whatsoever.

Cailin looked at his hand, still reaching for her veil.