

Lock and Guardian

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The Lock and the Key

Elira Vale was the kind of daughter newspapers called *untouchable* — heir to the Vale fortune, raised in a mansion with floors that whispered money, and with an education designed to craft brilliance. But Elira wasn't her father. Donovan Vale had built a financial empire; Elira wanted to paint, explore, live like a real person.

She got her wish one night. Then she almost died for it.

It was supposed to be an anonymous art exhibit in the old quarter. No bodyguards, no driver, just her, a hooded coat, and a sketchbook. But someone recognized her — or followed her. The attempted abduction was swift, surgical, and would've succeeded if a taxi hadn't slammed into the van blocking the alley.

That night, Donovan Vale changed the rules of her life.

"You're not stepping outside again unless you're *connected* to someone," he said, eyes like thunderclouds. "And not figuratively. *Connected.*"

Elira scoffed. "What does that mean? Like—holding hands?"

"I mean a permanent link," he said. "Technology. Steel. Something no one can break without alerting me."

Elira realized he wasn't speaking in metaphors. He meant it literally.

The First Attempt: Tether Bands

The first design was sleek. A set of smart bands worn on the wrist by both Elira and her assigned bodyguard, Lieutenant Cael Morren. The bands buzzed if they were more than thirty feet apart. They shared GPS coordinates and sent instant alerts if the signal was tampered with.

On paper, it was elegant. In reality, it was a disaster.

Elira kept straying. Deliberately.

Thirty feet? She treated it like a challenge.

Cael was always at her heels, calm but relentless. She made it harder, darting through crowds, slipping into narrow bookshops or art galleries.

"I'm not a criminal," she told him once.

"No," Cael said. "You're bait."

That stung.

The Second Attempt: Magnetic Waist Harness

The next idea was less subtle.

A double-harness belt system with retractable, magnetic tethers. They clinked together at the hip, like some kind of minimalist handcuff hidden beneath their clothes. The magnets disengaged only with facial recognition from both parties or an emergency override from Donovan.

Elira *hated* it. Walking down the street, their bodies aligned at awkward angles. Sitting on opposite sides of a bench became a negotiation. People stared.

“Why not just leash me like a dog?” she spat.

“Don’t tempt him,” Cael muttered.

She managed to snap the tether by pretending to trip into an escalator motor. It took an hour to recover the casing from a maintenance shaft.



The Third Attempt: Neural Sync Implants

Donovan called it “cutting edge.” A lightweight chip behind the ear. Both Elira and Cael had to wear it. It measured proximity and vital signs. If Elira’s stress spiked beyond normal, Cael would get an immediate pulse of pain in his temple — like a taser to the skull. If he moved too far, it would start beeping.

It *almost* worked.

Until Elira found out the chip let Cael hear parts of her inner emotional states. Not words — just emotional *spikes*.

“You *felt* that?” she asked after an argument with her father.

“Yes,” Cael said awkwardly.

“Oh my god, that was personal—!”

“You imagined strangling someone with a lamp cord. That’s not...subtle.”

She ripped the chip off in the middle of dinner. Donovan nearly fired her security team.

The Fourth Attempt: The Physical Lock

Frustrated, Donovan turned to old-school thinking with high-tech execution. A locking wrist cuff. Steel alloy, smooth and smart, with biometric failsafes and no manual release. When Elira left the

estate, the cuff snapped around her left wrist. Cael wore the twin on his right. A flexible but firm cable, three feet long, linked them.

"I feel like I'm on parole," Elira muttered.

"Technically," Cael said, "so do I."

It was the first time she laughed around him.

Unlike the others, this version couldn't be bypassed or tricked. Elira was truly bound to Cael in the most literal sense. Everything they did had to be synchronized — walking, sitting, moving through doorways. She couldn't escape him, and surprisingly, he didn't seem to want to escape her.

What changed was how *quiet* he was. How observant.

He didn't treat her like a job.

When a vendor tried to grab her at a market — fast hands, quick blade — Cael didn't hesitate. He used the connection between them to *pull* her into his arms while kicking the attacker back. It was over in seconds. Elira was breathless. Cael was bleeding from the forearm.

After, in the car, she whispered, "You could've let go."

"I *don't* let go," he said.



Acceptance

One evening, cuffed together, they sat on a rooftop she used to sneak up to alone. The skyline stretched out before them like a city made of fireflies.

"You hate this," Cael said quietly.

"Not like I used to," Elira admitted. "It's not the cuffs. It's feeling like I lost something. Freedom, maybe. Innocence."

He nodded. "I lost things too."

They didn't need to say what.

She looked at the cuff. "If I asked you to stay connected even when my father says it's safe again — would you?"

Cael hesitated.

Then: "Not because of the job. But because of you? Yes."

Epilogue: The Final Connection

Eventually, Donovan authorized a softer protocol — no more tethers, no more tech-chips. Elira was safe, they said. Security was tighter than ever. But the wrist cuffs remained — modified now into elegant bracelets of silver and carbon mesh, no longer locked, but worn anyway.

Voluntarily.

A symbol of the bond they'd forged not in surveillance, but in trust.

And when people asked Elira why she still wore it, she would smile and say, “Some connections aren’t meant to be broken. Some are chosen.”

And beside her, Cael — the lock who had become something much more — would silently agree.