

Second chance 12

Chapter 12:

She skidded the bike into the hotel's underground loading bay, dodging a delivery truck. The darkness of the tunnel swallowed them whole.

Cailin killed the engine for a split second, letting momentum carry them into a blind spot behind a dumpster.

She lifted Elia off the bike. The helmet was too big, making her look like a bobblehead. Cailin unbuckled it and pulled it off. Elia's face was pale, her green eyes wide with terror.

"Go to the lobby," Cailin instructed, gripping Elia's shoulders — fingers digging in, trying to convey a strength she didn't feel. "Sit by the fountain. Eat your candy. Don't talk to anyone until Auntie Ash comes."

"What about the Bad Daddy?" Elia whispered.

"He's chasing me," Cailin said. "He won't look for a little girl sitting alone. The password is 'Blueberry'. Don't move for anyone who doesn't say it."

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Elia nodded, swallowing hard and pushing back tears. “I can do it.”

Cailin kissed her forehead — a desperate, hard kiss. Then she pointed her toward the service elevator.

“Go!”

Elia ran. The elevator doors slid shut, cutting off the sight of her daughter.

Cailin revved the engine and peeled out of the loading bay through the exit ramp, making sure the drone overhead caught the movement.

She was the bait.

She dialed Ashley Trevino as she merged back into traffic. “Code Red, Ash,” she screamed into the wind. “The Grand Hotel lobby. Retrieve the package. Now.”

“On it,” Ashley’s voice came through, groggy but immediate. “I’m moving.”

In the SUV, Hilliard watched the thermal feed. The red streak split — a small heat signature remained stationary at the hotel while the larger one sped away.

“The rider dropped something,” Gavin noted.

Hilliard narrowed his eyes. The predator instinct flared in his gut. “Not something,” he said. “Someone.”

He grabbed the door handle. “Turn the car around. To the Grand Hotel.”

Three blocks away, Cailin ditched the Ducati in a graffiti-covered alley and yanked a disposable burner phone from her pocket as she blended into the stream of people heading for the subway entrance. She couldn’t risk her primary line. She typed a quick encrypted message.

To: Asset A-1 — Wipe the Ducati’s GPS and thermal history. Full scrub. Now.

She dropped the burner into a trash can and disappeared down the stairs into the anonymous crush of the city’s underground, her heart a cold, heavy stone in her chest.

She had done her part. Now it was up to Ash.

Elia sat on the velvet bench in the center of the Grand Hotel lobby. The crystal chandelier above was dizzying. The air smelled of expensive lilies and floor wax.

She unwrapped a lollipop with trembling fingers — cherry red. She stuck it in her mouth, the sugar doing nothing to settle the acid in her stomach.

The revolving doors at the main entrance spun.

Hilliard Holloway walked in.

He looked like a storm cloud in a suit. His energy was dark and heavy, pushing the air out of the room. People stepped aside instinctively.

Elia gripped the velvet fabric of the bench. Invisible Game. Deny everything.