

Second chance 20

Chapter 20:

"I can't. He's at a sleepover," Ashley said.

Hilliard checked his watch. "It's 4 PM."

"It's a nap-over," Ashley retorted. "Look, Hilliard, stop harassing my family. You took Cailin — isn't that enough?"

"I'll FaceTime him then," Hilliard challenged. "If he's your son, prove it."

Cailin held her breath. This was it. Game over.

"Fine," Ashley said, sounding annoyed. "Hang on. I have to call the other mom."

There was a rustling sound, then silence as she set the phone down.

In the safe house, Ashley grabbed Davy. "Act dumb," she whispered frantically. "You're my kid. Cailin is Auntie. Put these on."

She shoved a pair of thick non-prescription glasses onto his face — part of a disguise kit Aron had assembled. They had an anti-glare coating designed to catch the light and obscure eye color on a low-quality video call.

Davy nodded. He mussed his hair until it stood up in spikes, then let his mouth hang open slightly.

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Ashley switched the call to video.

A glitchy, poorly lit image of Davy's face appeared on Hilliard's screen. The connection seemed unstable, the image pixelating at intervals — deliberate interference run by Aron from his laptop. Through the thick glasses and the bad lighting, the boy looked like a miniature Cailin, but his eyes were reduced to dark, undefined pools.

"Hi, Auntie Cali!" Davy waved enthusiastically at the camera. He let a little drool escape the corner of his mouth. It was Oscar-worthy.

"Who's the grumpy man?" Davy asked, pointing a chubby finger at Hilliard.

Hilliard studied the boy, searching for the green eyes. The glasses and the poor lighting made it impossible to tell.

“Where is your mommy?” Hilliard asked.

Davy swung the camera toward Ashley. “Mommy is eating pizza.”

Ashley waved from behind a slice of pepperoni. “See? Satisfied? Now leave us alone.”

The performance was flawless.

Hilliard felt faintly foolish. The “Auntie” title matched the godmother story perfectly, and the kid seemed — simple. Nothing like the calculated mind of a child hacker.

“Fine,” Hilliard grunted. “Goodbye.”

He hung up.

Cailin slumped against the door, nearly faint with relief. Her heart was beating so fast she thought it might give out entirely.

“You’re paranoid,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Hilliard looked out the window as the car pulled up to the Grand Hotel.

"Maybe," he said. "But you're not leaving my sight until I'm sure."

In a separate, nondescript hotel room across town, Ashley collapsed onto the bed.

"That took ten years off my life," she groaned.

Davy pulled off the thick glasses and wiped the fake drool from his chin. "I think I sold it."

Aron sat at the table, typing furiously on his laptop. "Mom is being taken to the Grand Hotel Penthouse. I'm tracking Hilliard's phone."

"The Bad Daddy has her," Elia whimpered from the corner, hugging a pillow.

"He won't hurt her. He wants her back," Ashley said gently.

"But Charla is there," Aron noted, pulling up the hotel guest list. "Suite 501. Ms. Charla English."