

Second chance 24

Chapter 24:

She pushed off the door and started down the stairs, taking them two at a time, her bare feet slapping softly against the concrete.

Then she heard it.

Footsteps — not the heavy tread of security guards, but the rapid, chaotic patter of small rubber soles. They were coming up.

“Hurry up, Elia! My pack is heavy!” a whisper hissed from the landing below.

Cailin gasped. She gripped the metal railing and peered down into the red-tinted gloom.

Three small figures were rounding the corner. They looked like miniature special ops agents — black hoodies, dark cargo pants, and backpacks clearly stuffed with electronic gadgets. Aron held up a tablet displaying a grainy, green-tinted image of the stairwell, a low-light camera filter.

They collided with her on the landing between the fifth and fourth floors.

“Mommy!” Elia squeaked.

Cailin dropped to her knees, disregarding the grit on the floor, and pulled all three of them into her arms. The impact knocked the wind out of her. She buried her face in their hoods, breathing in the familiar scent of baby shampoo and ozone.

“What are you doing here?” she whispered, her voice fierce with fear. “It’s dangerous! You were supposed to stay with Ash!”

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“Saving you,” Aron said, tapping his tablet. He looked so proud, so terrifyingly like his father in that moment. “I killed the grid. We have a three-minute window.”

“We brought the drone,” Davy added, patting a bulky case strapped to his chest. “To shoot the bad guys.”

“No shooting,” Cailin ordered, quickly checking them over for injuries. “We have to go. Down. Now.”

She stood and began herding them toward the downward stairs.

Then heavy boots slammed against metal steps two floors above them.

“Security sweep! Check every floor — the system is compromised!” a deep voice boomed, the words echoing down the shaft like thunder.

Cailin froze. She looked down. From the floor below, the beam of a powerful flashlight cut through the red gloom. The Hotel Manager was coming up with another guard.

“We have a breach on level four,” the Manager radioed.

They were trapped — pincered between the security team above and hotel management below.

Cailin’s eyes snapped to the service door she had just come through. The penthouse. It was the only floor they hadn’t swept yet, because Hilliard was there. The lion’s den — but it was the only room with a lock she could control from the inside.

“Back inside,” she hissed. “Now.”

“But Mommy—” Aron protested.

“Move!”

She pushed them up the half-flight of stairs, swiped the key card she had quietly lifted from the entry table earlier — thank god she had grabbed it — and the service door clicked open. They stumbled into the darkened kitchenette of the penthouse suite.

The air inside was still and silent. Cailin locked the service door and engaged the deadbolt.

“Where do we hide?” Davy asked, clutching his laptop to his chest, his eyes wide behind his glasses.

From the main foyer, Hilliard’s voice rang out. He was shouting into his phone.

“She’s gone! Lock down the exits! Check the perimeter!”