

Second chance 28

Chapter 28:

Hilliard reached for the handle of the left door. The children were huddled on the right side, behind the winter coats. He opened the left door, pulled a blue dress shirt from the rack, and cast a brief glance toward the other side of the closet, where the coats were bulging slightly more than usual.

“Get dressed,” he said, shutting the closet door without investigating further. “We leave for the airport in twenty minutes.”

Cailin let out a breath that was dangerously close to a sob.

“I need to shower,” she said, her voice unsteady.

“Make it quick. Leave the bathroom door unlocked.” He began unbuttoning his rumpled shirt as he walked into the living room to take a call.

The moment he was gone, Cailin threw off the covers. She rushed to the closet and ripped open the right-hand door.

Three sleepy, terrified faces looked up at her from a nest of cashmere coats. Elia had fallen asleep on Davy’s shoulder. Aron was wide awake, clutching his tablet.

“Operation: Ghost Protocol,” Cailin whispered urgently. “We move now.”

Cailin pulled the children out of the closet one by one. They were stiff and smelled of cedar and expensive wool.

“Listen to me,” she whispered, her hands moving quickly to straighten their clothes and check for scuffs. “You’re going out through the balcony. The door to the adjoining suite’s balcony is unlocked.” She had slipped it open herself during the chaos of the blackout — a contingency she always looked for.

She quickly sent a text to Ashely: Suite 402. Now. Balcony. Code Red.

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Aron, ever the pragmatist, nodded. “We can do it. It’s only a two-foot gap over the divider.”

“Be careful,” Cailin whispered, kissing each of their foreheads in a frantic, desperate gesture. She turned on the shower, the powerful spray creating a wall of sound to mask any noise they might make.

She guided them gently toward the heavy glass balcony doors. They slid them open, and a gust of cool morning air rushed into the room. One by one, like little spies, they slipped outside onto the terrace. Cailin watched as Aron went first, tested the divider, then helped Elia and Davy across the gap to the balcony of the next suite.

The door to Suite 402 slid open. Ashely, already dressed and looking every bit the spy in oversized sunglasses, yanked them inside and gave Cailin a sharp, single nod before disappearing.

A moment later, Cailin's phone buzzed. A single thumbs-up from Ashely.

Cailin exhaled a breath she felt she had been holding all night, her knees nearly buckling with relief. She stepped into the shower and let the hot water hit her like a welcome shock.

Ten minutes later, she walked out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel.

Hilliard was back in the bedroom, standing near the balcony door, which was slightly ajar, the sheer curtains billowing in the breeze.

"You took long enough," he grumbled, checking his watch.

He walked over to slide the door shut. As he did, his eyes caught something on the floor, nearly hidden beneath the door track. He bent down and picked it up.

It was a small, crinkled wrapper. Bright yellow. A lemon drop candy wrapper.