

Second chance 38

Chapter 38:

Hilliard looked at her with a strange mixture of annoyance and reluctant respect. She was fighting. She was vicious. And god help him, it was the most alive he had seen her in years.

Charla let out a strangled sob and stormed out of the room, her heels clicking furiously across the hardwood.

“Drama,” Hilliard muttered, picking up his coffee.

“You created it,” Cailin reminded him, chewing her toast.

The service gate was a rusty iron affair hidden behind overgrown rhododendrons in the east garden. At ten o'clock sharp, Cailin slipped out through the side door, glancing over her shoulder to make sure no servants were following.

A battered van bearing a “Dave’s Plumbing” logo — a shell company Kegan had registered months ago for exactly this kind of occasion — pulled up to the gate. The estate’s security system, temporarily blinded by a loop Kegan was feeding it, ignored the vehicle entirely. The window rolled down. Ashely sat in the driver’s seat, a baseball cap pulled low over her face.

“You look like a fugitive,” Ashely whispered, passing a small canvas bag through the iron bars. “Vitamins, cash, a burner phone charger. And the encrypted drive Kegan sent.”

Cailin grabbed the bag and clutched it to her chest. “Where are the kids?” she whispered, her eyes sweeping the van desperately.

Ashely grimaced, her face pale with stress. “Aron and Davy are at the safe house. But Elia — she must have snuck into the van while I was loading the gear. I didn’t notice until I was halfway here. She locked herself in the back, and I couldn’t turn around without missing the window.”

“I want to see Mommy!” a small, muffled voice cried from the darkness of the cargo area.

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Cailin’s heart lurched. “Shh, Elia. Not now. It’s too dangerous,” she hissed, pressing her hand against the cold iron bars as though she could reach through the metal.

“Well, well. What do we have here?”

The voice cut through the morning air like a whip. Cailin spun around.

Charla stood on the gravel path, arms crossed, a smirk plastered across her face. The gaudy diamond bracelet caught the light on her wrist.

Cailin mouthed urgently at the window: “Go, Ash.”

Ashely revved the engine. The van lurched forward and pulled away down the service road. But just around the bend, hidden by the hedge, the brake lights flared. Elia, applying the stealth skills Aron had drilled into her during their spy games, had slipped the child lock and was already easing the door open.

Charla’s heels crunched toward her on the gravel. “Drug deal? Or selling company secrets to the competition?”

“None of your business,” Cailin said, hugging the canvas bag tighter.

“You know,” Charla said, stopping a few feet away, “your mother was a whore too. Did you know that?” She examined her nails with casual indifference. “She died owing money to everyone in town. A pathetic drunk — just like you will be. And your father? A coward who couldn’t handle the shame of raising a bastard, so he took the easy way out.”