

Second chance 39

Chapter 39:

Something inside Cailin snapped. It was a physical sensation, like a rubber band breaking in her chest.

She stepped forward and slapped Charla across the face.

Snap.

The sound was crisp and sharp in the quiet garden. Charla stumbled back, her hand flying to her cheek, eyes wide with shock.

"You bitch!" Charla shrieked.

"Don't you ever speak of them," Cailin said, her voice trembling with a rage so pure it felt like fire.

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Charla lunged at her, fingers hooked like talons, aiming for Cailin's eyes.

Cailin caught her wrist in mid-air. She twisted it, using Charla's momentum against her, and slapped her again with her free hand.

Crack.

Charla lost her balance and fell backward, landing squarely in the prize-winning rose bushes. Thorns tore at her silk dress and skin.

"Ahhh!" Charla screamed.

Behind the hedge, Elia had climbed out of the van. She found a blind spot in the sensor grid Kegan had mapped and squeezed through a gap in the fence, her small face twisted in fury. She had seen the Bad Lady attacking her mom.

Elia crouched down and scooped up a handful of dirt and pebbles.

Charla had begun wailing like a siren. "Help! She's killing me! Help!"

Heavy footsteps pounded on the path. Hilliard came running from the direction of the stables, a riding crop still in his hand, his boots dusty from the ride.

"What is going on here?" he roared.

Charla pointed a trembling finger at Cailin from the midst of the rose bushes. "She attacked me! She's crazy! She tried to kill me!"

Cailin stood over her, chest heaving, the canvas bag forgotten on the ground.

Hilliard reached down and hauled Charla out of the rose bush. A long, thin scratch beaded with blood ran down her cheek from a thorn, and several snags marred her expensive dress.

"Look at what she did! She's a monster!" Charla sobbed into his chest, clutching his lapels and deliberately angling her scratched cheek toward him for maximum effect.

Hilliard looked at Cailin. His eyes were cold, hard flint.

"Explain yourself," he demanded.

"She insulted my parents," Cailin said. She didn't tremble. She didn't look away. "I taught her manners."

"Violence is not the answer, Cailin. Apologize," Hilliard ordered.

"Never," Cailin said.

Hilliard stepped away from Charla and moved toward Cailin. He loomed over her, using his height and presence to intimidate — a tactic that worked in boardrooms, a tactic that once worked on his wife.

“You will apologize,” he said, his voice dropping low, “or you will leave this house with nothing. No money. No settlement. Nothing.”

From the bushes, Elia saw the Giant Man threatening her mom. She saw him towering over Cailin, making her look small.

Her fear overcame her training. Her Spy Game rules evaporated.

“Leave Mommy alone!”

The scream was high-pitched and fierce. Elia burst from the hedge like a cannonball. She hurled the handful of pebbles with all her might.

They bounced harmlessly off Hilliard’s leather riding boots. Ping. Ping. Ping.

Hilliard froze. He looked down.