

Second chance 41

Chapter 41:

Hilliard took her arm — gently this time, but firmly. “Grandfather wants to see her.”

He escorted them up the stone steps to the patio. Cailin held Elia’s hand so tightly her knuckles had gone white.

Elia peeked at Amerigo. He looked frightening in his wheelchair, a blanket over his legs and a scowl carved into his face.

“Hello, little one,” Amerigo said, softening his tone in a way Cailin had never heard before.

Elia stepped forward bravely and pointed a small finger at him. “Are you the King of the Castle?”

Amerigo chuckled — a rare, rusty sound, like grinding gears. “I suppose I am.”

“Why are your legs broken?” Elia asked.

“Elia!” Cailin gasped.

Amerigo laughed more fully this time. “They are tired, child. Like me.”

He looked at Hilliard and pointed a gnarled finger at Elia’s face. “She has the Holloway chin. Look at it.”

Hilliard looked. He nodded slowly. “I see it too.”

“Nonsense,” Cailin said quickly. “She looks like Ashely’s ex-husband. He had a strong chin.”

“And where is this ex-husband?” Hilliard asked, his eyes narrowing at Ashely.

“Dead,” Ashely said without hesitation. “A tragic sailing accident off the coast of Sardinia. The Italian authorities never found the body.”

Cailin fought the urge to wince. The lie was flimsy, but the added detail bought them precious seconds — a soap opera flourish that screamed fabrication yet would take time to disprove. She sent a silent prayer that Kegan’s team could build a digital ghost for this fictional man before Hilliard’s investigators found the void.

“Convenient,” Hilliard said, the word laced with derision.

"It's starting to rain," Amerigo observed, studying the grey clouds gathering overhead. "They cannot leave in this weather. The child is shivering." He settled back in his chair with the air of a man issuing an edict. "They are staying for lunch. I insist."

"But Grandfather!" Charla protested. "She assaulted me!"

"Silence!" Amerigo brought his cane down against the stone floor with a crack.

Cailin felt the trap close around her. Elia was inside the fortress now.

As they walked inside, Hilliard fell in behind them. He watched Elia move across the floor — heels first, chin lifted. She walked exactly like him.

Lunch was a torture session disguised as a meal.

Ashely was so nervous she knocked over the salt shaker twice. Elia was hungry, and her table manners were still very much a work in progress.

Elia sat on a velvet cushion to reach the table. She picked up a piece of chicken with her fingers.

Charla sneered. "No manners. Typical. Raised in a barn."

Elia set the chicken down. She looked at Amerigo at the head of the table.

"I'm sorry, Grandpa Grump."

The table went silent. Even the servants froze. Calling Amerigo Holloway "Grandpa Grump."

Amerigo's mustache twitched. Cailin held her breath, bracing for the explosion.

Then Amerigo smiled.

"Grandpa Grump. I like it," he said, cutting into his steak with renewed vigor. "Eat, child. Use your hands if you want. It tastes better that way."

Charla choked on her water.