

Second chance 44

Chapter 44:

Elia bounced on the bed. "I like Grandpa Grump! He has cool toys!"

Cailin sat her down and took her small face in both hands.

"Elia, listen to me. You cannot call me Mommy here. You have to call me Auntie Cali. Do you understand?"

Elia's lip trembled. "Why? Are you ashamed of me?"

"No. Never." Cailin pulled her into a fierce, desperate hug. "I love you more than anything. But it's a game. A spy game. Like Aron plays. Remember?"

Elia's eyes lit up instantly. "Spy game? Okay! I'm Agent Elia!"

Cailin looked up at Ashely over the top of Elia's head. "Where are your brothers?"

"Safe house in Brooklyn. Kegan has guards on them," Ashely reported.

“Kegan,” Cailin sighed. “He’s going to kill me for this.”

A knock at the door made them both jump.

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“Cailin? Open up,” Hilliard’s voice came through the wood.

Cailin signaled Ashely to hide the burner phones and the encrypted drive under the pillow. Then she opened the door a crack.

Hilliard stood in the hallway holding a teddy bear — old, the fur matted in places, one eye slightly loose.

“Amerigo thought the child might need this,” he said, with an awkwardness that didn’t suit him. “It was mine. Mr. Paws.”

Cailin felt a lump rise in her throat. She recognized the bear from photographs she had once found in the attic.

“Thank you,” she said, taking it. “She’s sleeping.”

"I heard her laughing," Hilliard said dryly.

Elia appeared at that moment, ducking around Cailin's legs to peer through the gap. "Is that a bear?"

She snatched it from Cailin's hands without ceremony. "Thanks, Mister Giant!"

Hilliard looked down at her. He smiled — a genuine, unguarded smile that transformed his face entirely, erasing years of bitterness.

"You're welcome, Elia."

He looked at Cailin. "She's special."

"Goodnight, Hilliard," Cailin said, and closed the door. Her heart was pounding so hard it hurt.

Hilliard stood in the hallway for a long time. He was falling for the child. And he was terrified that he was falling back for the woman who had lied to him.

The following afternoon, Amerigo requested tea in the sunroom — a glass-walled enclosure filled with exotic plants and the steady percussion of rain on the roof.

Elia played with Mr. Paws on the Persian rug. Hilliard sat in a wicker chair with a newspaper, though his eyes drifted to Elia every few seconds. Charla sat on the sofa, seething and ignored.

A maid arrived with a silver tray bearing a steaming porcelain pot of tea.

Charla rose from her seat. "I'll pour. The maid can go." She dismissed the woman with a wave, picked up the heavy pot, and moved around the table toward Hilliard, passing Elia on the floor.

"Oops."