

Second chance 45

Chapter 45:

Her foot seemed to catch on the edge of the rug — but Cailin, watching her with predatory focus, saw it all in slow motion. She saw the minute, deliberate shift of Charla's weight onto her back foot, the tightening of her grip on the silver pot, the slight and almost imperceptible angling of her wrist as she began to "fall." It wasn't a stumble. It was a launch.

A stream of boiling water arced through the air, aimed directly at Elia's face.

"Elia!" Cailin screamed.

She dove from her chair across the rug without a single conscious thought, covering Elia with her body just as the water hit.

Splash.

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The boiling liquid drenched Cailin's left arm and hand.

The pain was instant and blinding, searing through her nerve endings like fire. She cried out, unable to stop herself. The pot shattered on the floor.

Elia was safe beneath her, shielded by her mother's body, but trembling with terror at the noise and the scream.

Hilliard leaped up, his heavy wicker chair overturning behind him.

"Cailin!" He rushed to her side.

Charla stood motionless, one hand pressed over her mouth. "Oh my god! I tripped! It was an accident!"

Cailin rolled over and clutched her arm to her chest. The skin was already turning an angry red, blisters forming in real time.

She looked up at Charla with pure, undiluted hatred.

"You did that on purpose," Cailin said through gritted teeth.

"No! It was an accident!" Charla wailed.

Hilliard knelt beside Cailin. "Let me see."

He examined the burn. His face went pale.

"Alfred!" His voice was a thunderclap. "Have Dr. Evans meet us in the medical wing immediately. And tell Gavin to put the helicopter on standby for a transfer to Mount Sinai if the burn is severe."

Elia crawled out from under Cailin. She saw her mother in pain. Every last trace of her Spy Game training evaporated in an instant.

Elia saw the blisters rising on Cailin's skin. She saw the tears squeezed from Cailin's pain-clenched eyes.

She began to shake violently.

"Mommy! Mommy, you're hurt!" Elia screamed, tears streaming down her face. She grabbed Cailin's uninjured hand. "Mommy, wake up!"

The room went silent except for Elia's cries.

"Mommy."

Not Auntie. Not Godmother. Mommy.

Hilliard looked from the burn to the child. The raw terror in Elia's voice was not the cry of a friend. It was the primal cry of a child fearing for her mother.

Ashely moved to pull Elia back. "Come here, Elia."

"No! I want Mommy!" Elia fought her off, kicking and sobbing.

Cailin ground her teeth against the pain. She couldn't lie now. She couldn't correct her.

"I'm okay, baby. I'm okay," Cailin murmured, stroking Elia's hair with her trembling hand.

Hilliard rose to his feet, his face unreadable. He lifted Cailin into his arms, ignoring Charla entirely.

"Get the car," he said to a servant. "We're going to the medical wing." He looked at Charla. "You stay here. Don't move."

"Hilliard, it was an accident!" Charla pleaded.

“We will check the security cameras later,” he said coldly.

He carried Cailin out into the rain. Ashely followed with a sobbing Elia, hurrying toward the black SUV waiting to take them across the vast estate to the private medical wing.