

Second chance 51

Chapter 51:

"I'll get it," he said, and walked out.

The moment the latch clicked, Cailin was at the door. She twisted the lock and ran back to the bed.

"Elia, listen to me," she whispered, gripping the child's hand. "Auntie Ash is outside. She took the boys."

"Aron? Davy?" Elia's eyes widened. "Are they here?"

"They were. But they had to go," Cailin said, smoothing the hair from Elia's forehead. "You have to stay here tonight. With me."

"Why?" Elia whimpered. "I want to go with them!"

"Because the Giant Man — Hilliard — he needs to sign papers for you to leave," Cailin said.

Elia looked toward the door. "Is he the Bad Man from the picture? He doesn't seem so bad. He was mad at the Bad Lady."

The blood drained from Cailin's face. The question hung in the air, heavy and suffocating.

"Why do you ask that?" Cailin managed.

"He looks like Davy," Elia said simply. "And daddies get mad when someone hurts their kids. Like in the movies."

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Cailin swallowed the lump in her throat. She couldn't tell her the truth. Not here. Not with Hilliard ten feet away.

"He is a friend," Cailin said. The word tasted like ash. "A powerful friend."

She leaned closer, her eyes intent. "Listen, baby. We have to play a new game — a very important secret game. In this big house, with all these strange people, you can only call me Mommy when we are completely alone. To everyone else, I'm Auntie Cailin. That's how we get the most points and win."

Elia studied her mother's desperate face. She nodded slowly, sadly. "Okay, Auntie."

The doorknob rattled.

Then a knock. Firm. Authoritative.

“Cailin?” Hilliard’s voice.

Cailin unlocked the door. “Sorry. I was checking her dressing.”

Hilliard walked in holding a small bag of blue gummy bears. He glanced at the lock, then at Cailin. He knew she was lying. Again.

He crossed to the bed and held out the bag.

“Here,” he said, his voice gentle.

Elia took it. Her small fingers brushed his large hand.

“Thank you, Mister,” she said quietly, a careful distance in her tone.

Hilliard flinched. The shift was palpable — she had gone from vulnerable child to guarded stranger in the span of five minutes. He looked at Cailin.

"The doctor says she can be discharged tomorrow morning."

"Good," Cailin exhaled. "Ashely will pick her up."

"No," Hilliard said.

The word dropped like a stone.

"She returns to the Estate," he said, his voice settling back into its cold CEO edge. "I have arranged a medical suite in the West Wing. Nurses. A sterile environment."

"You can't keep her!" Cailin stepped between him and the bed.

"I can," Hilliard said, crossing his arms. "Until the internal investigation regarding Charla is complete, the child is a material witness to an assault on Holloway property."

"A material witness?" Cailin laughed in disbelief. "She is five years old."