

Second chance 63

Chapter 63:

“Monitor all outgoing signals from the Estate,” Hilliard ordered, his voice tight. “If she contacts a man — any man — I want to know immediately.”

Back at the Estate, Cailin was kneeling on the floor of her room.

The guards had taken the television, the tablet, even the digital alarm clock. But in the back of the deep walk-in closet, behind a stack of antique hat boxes, they had missed the old pre-war radio that had always been part of the room’s original décor — a heavy, wood-cased antique that appeared on no modern security inventory.

She had a nail file stolen from the bathroom and a pair of tweezers. She was carefully prying the back casing off the radio, her tongue pressed between her teeth in concentration.

She didn’t have a lover. She had a mission. She needed to reach Kegan — not for romance, but for money. For an extraction plan.

She twisted a wire. The Hacker Mom was at work.

It was late when Hilliard returned to the estate. The house was quiet, the heavy drapes drawn against the night. He loosened his tie as he climbed the grand staircase, the day’s battles weighing on his shoulders.

He passed the guest wing. He intended to continue to his own room, but his feet stopped outside Elia's door.

It was ajar.

He heard a sound — a soft, bubbling giggle. It was a sound that hadn't existed in this house for five years. It was the sound of life.

"No, Mommy, I ate the broccoli. Mostly," a small voice said.

Hilliard's shoulders tensed. Mommy. The word was no longer a surprise — it was a sharp, painful confirmation that twisted in his gut. A title he had been robbed of hearing for five years.

He stepped closer, moving silently on the plush carpet, and peered through the gap in the door.

Elia sat cross-legged on the bed in oversized pajamas that looked like a spacesuit. She was holding a pillow upright in front of her and speaking to it with great seriousness.

"I miss you too," Elia told the pillow. "The Bad Man is scary, but he gave me candy. And he has a nice car."

Hilliard felt a pang in his chest. Bad Man. That was his name in her world.

He knocked gently on the doorframe.

Elia startled, shoving the pillow behind her back. She looked at him with wide, wary eyes.

“Who were you talking to?” Hilliard asked softly, stepping inside.

“Nobody,” Elia whispered.

He sat on the edge of the bed. The mattress dipped under his weight. “I heard you say Mommy.”

“I was practicing,” Elia said. It was a terrible lie — just like Cailin’s.

“Where is your mommy, Elia?” he asked. He already knew the answer. He wanted to hear the story Cailin had woven for her.

“She is working. Far away,” Elia recited, like a line rehearsed.

“Does she look like Auntie Cailin?” Hilliard asked.

Elia nodded slowly. "Yes. Pretty like her."