

Second chance 73

Chapter 73:

The tech team burst into the room then, carrying laptops and heavy equipment cases. They spread across the dining table, turning the elegant space into a chaotic war room of cables and blinking lights.

“Sir,” Gavin called out, typing furiously on a tablet. “The signature matches the previous attack. We traced the IP routing.”

Hilliard crossed to the table and leaned over Gavin’s shoulder. “Where does it lead?”

Gavin frowned. “It’s spoofed, obviously. But the bounce point routes directly through the English Estate server.” He glanced up at Hilliard, plainly unsettled by the blatant trail.

Across the room, Cailin exhaled slowly and leaned back against the wall. Her heart was hammering against her ribs. Aron. He had routed the attack through Charla’s family network. It was brilliant. It was dangerous.

Hilliard’s eyes narrowed. He saw the move for what it was — a clumsy frame-up. But a useful one. The confusion on his face hardened into suspicion.

“Get Charla on the phone,” he ordered.

Cailin watched him turn away. The crisis had shifted. The spotlight was off Elia, off her, and squarely on the woman who deserved it.

She slipped her phone from her pocket and kept it low. She typed quickly to Ashely: Pack a bag. We might need to run.

Hilliard's voice came from directly beside her ear. She hadn't heard him move. He was looking down at her screen.

"Who are you messaging?"

Cailin locked the phone instantly and looked up at him, her face smooth and unreadable.

"My boss," she said without hesitation. "Telling him I might be late tomorrow. It seems like it's going to be a long night."

The house had finally gone quiet. The tech team had packed up their gear around midnight, leaving behind a tangle of anxiety and the smell of stale coffee. Hilliard was exhausted, his eyes gritty, as though he had been staring into a sandstorm for hours.

He climbed the stairs, pulling his tie loose until it hung like a noose around his neck. The crisis was contained, but the mystery wasn't solved. Charla had denied everything, screaming and crying on the phone until his ears rang. He no longer knew what to believe.

Earlier, amid the chaos of technicians swarming the living room, Cailin had murmured something about checking on a frightened Elia and slipped up the grand staircase like a ghost in a whirlwind. No one had stopped her. Now, as Hilliard ascended, he was walking into a trap he didn't know had been set.

He passed the guest wing. The hallway was dim, lit only by the wall sconces. He intended to go straight to his room — to pass out for three hours before the markets opened — but a sliver of light stopped him.

The door to the room where Elia and Ashely were staying was cracked open.

Hilliard paused. He heard the soft thud of small feet hitting a mattress. Jumping.

“Mommy, did you see the bad man run?” Elia’s voice drifted out, followed by a giggle that sounded like bubbling water.

Hilliard froze. His hand hovered over the door handle.

Mommy.