

Second chance 74

Chapter 74:

She wasn't talking to Ashely. Ashely was downstairs in the kitchen, scrounging for food. He had seen her pass the library ten minutes ago.

He pushed the door open.

Inside, Cailin was sitting on the floor on the far side of the bed. She heard the hinges creak. In a split second she flattened herself, rolling silently under the heavy bed frame. The dust beneath was thick, coating her face instantly, but she didn't dare breathe. The low hum of the old estate's air conditioning suddenly felt like a roar in her ears — a welcome blanket of sound.

Hilliard stepped into the room.

He saw Elia alone on the mattress, her dark curls flying as she bounced. She dropped to her knees the moment she spotted him, her gaze darting instinctively to the spot on the floor where Cailin had been just a second before.

"Who are you talking to, Elia?" Hilliard asked. His voice was trembling. He felt as though he were chasing a ghost.

"My Mommy!" Elia held up her wrist, defiant.

Hilliard stepped closer. Strapped to her tiny arm was a smartwatch with a black screen — chunky and pink, something between a toy and a real device.

“On the watch?” he asked.

“Yes! She called me!” Elia tapped the dark screen with fierce determination.

Hilliard reached out and took her small wrist in his hand. His touch was gentle but firm. “Let me speak to her.”

Under the bed, Cailin pressed her hand over her mouth. Her heart was beating so hard she was certain he could hear it through the floorboards. She had to act. If he checked the call log and found nothing, he would know Elia had been talking to someone in the room.

She pulled out her phone and cupped it beneath the folds of her sweater to hide the sudden glow of the screen. She tapped the app connected to Elia’s watch and initiated a call. On Elia’s wrist, the screen lit up. Incoming Call: Mommy.

Hilliard stared at the screen. The air left his lungs. It was real. She was on a call.

He pressed the answer button.

“Hello?” Hilliard said.

Silence.

“Who is this?” he demanded. “Speak to me.”

Under the bed, Cailin typed furiously into a text-to-speech app she used for secure broker dealings. She selected the voice profile labeled Generic Female — Low Pitch.

“Give the phone to my daughter,” a robotic, slightly filtered voice spoke from the watch.

Hilliard frowned. The voice sounded synthetic, distorted by the tiny speaker.

“Why are you hiding?” he asked. “Are you Cailin?”

Cailin’s blood ran cold. He knew — or suspected. She quickly switched from the text-to-speech app to a soundboard of pre-recorded voice clips. Kegan had insisted she keep samples of Ashely’s voice for emergencies. This was one.

“This is Ashely,” a voice spoke from the watch — a perfect replica of Ashely’s tone, though slightly tinny through the small speaker. “I’m Elia’s mother. Who is this?”

Hilliard's eyes narrowed. "Ashely is downstairs in the kitchen. I just saw her."