

Second chance 75

Chapter 75:

Under the bed, Cailin's mind raced. The direct lie had failed. She needed a technical excuse. She typed again, reverting to the generic voice.

"My apologies. There is... a connection issue," the robotic voice returned, glitching slightly. "I am speaking through a relay. Please, let me talk to my daughter."

Hilliard wasn't buying it. Something felt wrong — calculated, like a trick. He scanned the room. The closet door was closed. The curtains were drawn.

His eyes drifted downward. To the space beneath the bed.

It was the only place left.

He took a step back, releasing Elia's wrist. He bent his knees, his hand reaching for the hem of the bed skirt.

"Sir! Your coffee!"

The voice was loud, cheerful, and startling.

Hilliard straightened up sharply, his hand retracting from the bed skirt as though he had touched a hot stove.

Ashely stood in the doorway, holding a silver tray with a steaming mug. She walked into the room with confident strides, set the tray on the nightstand, and positioned herself squarely between Hilliard and the bed.

"I didn't order coffee," Hilliard said, his eyes narrowing.

"You looked stressed," Ashely said, shrugging. "And I heard you talking to... my daughter?" She said the word with a deliberate edge of challenge.

"Elia said she was talking to 'Mommy' on the watch. You were downstairs," Hilliard said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"She calls my cousin 'Mommy' sometimes. It's a game they play." Ashely poured cream into the coffee without looking at him. "Pretend."

"Your cousin?" Hilliard raised an eyebrow. "Your file says you're an only child."

"A distant cousin. From my mother's side. She's in Europe — Elia misses her terribly," Ashely improvised. She held out the mug. "Drink. You look like you're about to collapse."

"Let me call this cousin," Hilliard said, ignoring the coffee.

"She's asleep. Time zones," Ashely replied smoothly. "It's the middle of the night in Zurich."

"I don't care." Hilliard grabbed Elia's wrist and hit the redial button on the watch.

Under the bed, Cailin saw her phone screen flare to life. She slammed her thumb onto the silence button.

The watch rang. Once. Twice. Three times.

No answer.

"See? Asleep," Ashely said, a faint smirk on her lips. She gently took Elia's arm back from him.

Hilliard tossed the watch onto the mattress and dragged a hand down his face. "I don't believe you."

"Why are you so obsessed with my child's lineage, Mr. Holloway?" Ashely stepped closer, forcing him to ease back toward the door. "Do you want her to be yours? Is that it? Are you so desperate for a replacement for what you lost?"

Hilliard flinched. The question landed on a nerve so raw he nearly gasped.

“I want truth in my house,” he muttered, his voice losing its edge.

“The truth is, you are scaring a five-year-old girl. Get out.” Ashely pointed to the door.

Hilliard stared at her. No one spoke to him like that — no one except Cailin. He looked at Elia, who watched him with wide, frightened eyes.

He turned and walked out.