

Second chance 109

Chapter 109:

He opened the door and stepped out into moving traffic. Cars honked. He ignored them, moving with singular, terrifying focus.

“He was waiting,” Cailin whispered. “He tracked my phone.”

“Elia, come to Auntie Ash,” Cailin said softly, her voice carefully controlled.

But Elia didn’t move. She turned and saw the tall man in the dark suit walking toward them. Recognition lit her face.

“It’s the Rich Man!” Elia announced, her voice carrying clearly through the crisp morning air.

Hilliard stepped up onto the curb and stopped five feet away. He looked impeccable, as always, but his eyes were red-rimmed and intensely focused.

“Cailin,” he said — though his gaze had already moved past her to Elia, studying the child’s face with the careful attention of a man searching for his own reflection.

Elia looked up at Cailin, confused by the tension radiating from her mother. She tugged on her hand.

“Mommy, is he a friend?”

The word hung in the air like a grenade with the pin pulled.

Mommy.

Hilliard went pale. The color drained from his face as though he had been struck. His eyes snapped to Cailin.

“She called you Mommy,” he said. It was barely a whisper, but it sounded like thunder.

Cailin opened her mouth. Her throat had closed. There was no lie large enough to cover this — the truth was standing right in front of him, holding a pretzel.

Ashely swept in like a hawk.

“Elia! Stop calling your godmother ‘Mommy’!” Ashely scolded, loudly and clearly, scooping the child up onto her hip in one fluid motion. “I told you, it confuses people when you play pretend!” She tapped Elia’s nose. “You have one Mommy, and she is holding you. Auntie Cali is Auntie Cali. Remember?”

Elia blinked. She looked from Ashely to Cailin, reading the fear in the air with the quiet perceptiveness of a child who understood more than anyone gave her credit for. She buried her face in Ashely's neck.

Ashely turned to Hilliard with a wide, bright smile that showed slightly too many teeth.

"Mr. Holloway! I'm so sorry. My daughter is going through a phase — she calls everyone Mommy. The postman, the delivery driver, everyone. It's a linguistic development quirk."

Hilliard blinked. The shock on his face slowly rearranged itself into an expression of careful, neutral confusion. He looked from Ashely to the child on her hip, then back to Cailin.

A convenient lie, he thought. It fits the falsified DNA report. But it doesn't fit the birthmark I saw. It doesn't fit her eyes.

He decided, in that instant, to play along. Let them build their house of cards higher. It would only make the fall more satisfying.

"Your daughter?" Hilliard asked, his tone carefully neutral.

"Yes. Elia Trevino. My chaotic little spawn," Ashely said, pressing a loud kiss to Elia's cheek. "Single-mom life. Cali helps out — she's the cool aunt."