

## Second chance 110

Chapter 110:

Hilliard studied them. The data points warred in his head — the doctored test against the evidence of his own eyes. He chose to trust his eyes and treat their lie as a temporary inconvenience.

“I see,” Hilliard said. He ran a hand through his hair, looking almost persuaded. “So ‘Asset 1’ ...”

“Is my kid,” Ashely cut in. “I texted Cali because I was losing my mind over a fever and needed backup. Sorry if I interrupted your business meeting.”

“It’s fine,” Hilliard said, his voice flat. He looked at Cailin again. “I apologize. I jumped to conclusions.”

Cailin released a breath she hadn’t known she was holding. Her knees felt like water.

“To apologize for the confusion,” Ashely said, pressing forward with startling boldness, “and for tracking us through a public park — why don’t you join us for dinner tonight? My treat. You can meet the Asset properly. Unless toddlers frighten you.”

Cailin’s eyes went wide behind her sunglasses. What are you doing? she mouthed.

Ashely didn't look at her. It was a gamble — hiding in plain sight. If Hilliard sat across the table from Ashely playing the devoted mother, it might extinguish his suspicion for good.

Hilliard looked at Cailin. He saw her hesitation. He recognized the shape of the trap being set — and chose to walk into it with his eyes open.

"I accept," Hilliard said. "Tonight."

He turned and walked back to his car.

Ashely let out a long, shaky breath. "Alright. We have a dinner to survive."

The afternoon sun reflected off the glass display windows of Madison Avenue, but Cailin wasn't looking at the merchandise. She was sitting in a corner booth of a café, watching the boutique across the street.

Charla English stormed out of the jewelry store, her face twisted in a scowl, yelling at a terrified assistant who trailed behind her under the weight of several shopping bags.

"I said I want a replica of the Ocean's Tear! Now!" Charla's voice was shrill enough to penetrate the café glass.

Cailin took a sip of her black coffee and watched as Charla snatched a blue velvet box from the assistant's hands. She opened it right there on the sidewalk and lifted out a necklace.

It was large. It was blue. And from across the street, Cailin could see immediately that it lacked the inner fire of a real diamond. It was glass — high-quality crystal, perhaps, but glass nonetheless.

Charla clasped it around her neck, pulled out her phone, adjusted her hair, and snapped a photograph. Her expression transformed instantly from fury to a beatific, manufactured smile.

Cailin checked her own phone. She opened Instagram. Charla's post was already live.

Spoiled by my love Hilliard. The Ocean's Tear is finally mine.

Cailin set the phone down. "He gave me the real one... and lets her pretend she has it?"