

## **Second chance 14**

### **Chapter 14:**

"I need to verify this," Hilliard said. He signaled Gavin, who was standing by the door.

Ashley grabbed Elia's hand. "Verify whatever you like. We're leaving." She turned to walk away.

Hilliard stepped into their path. He didn't touch them, but his presence was a wall.

"No one leaves," he said, "until I get answers."

Hilliard herded them into a semi-private seating area near the concierge desk. Gavin stood guard at the exit, arms crossed.

"Sit," Hilliard ordered.

Ashley sat, pulling Elia onto her lap. She glared at him. "You have five minutes before I call the cops for unlawful imprisonment."

"Explain why your daughter was on a motorcycle with a fugitive," Hilliard said, ignoring the threat.

“Fugitive? That was my cousin, Cali,” Ashley lied, improvising wildly. “She took Elia for a joyride. She’s reckless. I already yelled at her.”

“Cali is your cousin?” Hilliard’s mind worked quickly. This connected the mysterious broker directly to Cailin’s best friend. It was too convenient.

“Distant cousin,” Ashley corrected. “We don’t talk much.”

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Elia kicked her legs against the chair and crunched loudly on the last of her lollipop.

Hilliard stared at the child. He couldn’t look away from her eyes — the exact shade of moss green that Cailin’s had been.

“Why does she have green eyes?” he asked.

Ashley sighed and launched into the story she had rehearsed for years. “Her father was an Irish bartender I met in Cabo. A one-night stand. Are you happy now, Hilliard? Do you want the details of my sex life?”

His expression didn't change.

"He left me when I got pregnant," Ashley continued, adding a wobble to her voice. "I raised her alone. That's why she wandered off — she's looking for a father figure. Clearly, she has bad taste picking you."

It was a cliché. It was pathetic. It was biologically plausible.

Hilliard looked at Elia. "Is that true? Is she your mommy?"

Elia nodded vigorously. "Yes. Mommy Ash buys me ponies."

Hilliard felt a headache forming behind his eyes. The pieces didn't fit, but he couldn't find the crack in the wall.

Gavin approached, holding a tablet. "Sir," he said softly. "The background check on 'Cali' just came through."

Hilliard took the tablet and turned away from Ashley.

The screen displayed a dossier compiled by his private intelligence team — not a simple timeline, but a complex web of data points.

Subject: 'Cali'. First appearance: Zurich. Date: Five years, one month ago.

The date was a gut punch. Exactly five months after Cailin Morton had disappeared.

He swiped to the next image — a grainy photo of “Cali” at an art auction in Berlin. She stood in the background, her back mostly to the camera, holding a clutch. He zoomed in. The way she held it, the slight unconscious tilt of her neck as she listened to the auctioneer — it was a ghost of a gesture he knew better than his own reflection.