

Second chance 31

Chapter 31:

Terror seized her. She froze, a small, frightened whimper escaping her lips.

Hilliard saw her face clearly for the first time in daylight. The shape of her nose. The arch of her eyebrows. The vivid green eyes staring back at him with a mixture of fear and defiance.

It was like looking into a mirror that reflected Cailin's soul.

"You..." Hilliard whispered. The recognition was visceral, a blow to the chest.

Elia's small body began to tremble violently, her teeth chattering from the cold rain and pure terror. A dark, wet patch spread slowly across the front of her light-colored jeans.

She started to cry — a high, thin wail of absolute fear. "Mommy!"

Standing by the car door, Cailin gripped the handle until her nails threatened to snap. Every instinct screamed at her to run to her child, to scoop her up and hold her. But to do so would be to sign away her freedom.

Charla sauntered over and looked down at the crying child with open contempt.

“Ugh. Look at that,” she sneered, wrinkling her nose. “She peed herself. How pathetic. Get away from it, Hilliard. It’s filthy.”

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Hilliard rose slowly. He didn’t step back. He didn’t glance at his suit jacket where Elia had bumped against him. Instead, he carefully removed the jacket and draped it over her trembling shoulders, shielding her from Charla’s disgusted gaze and the cold rain alike. Then he looked at Charla. His eyes were murderous.

“She’s scared, Charla. Shut up,” he said.

He straightened and swept his gaze across the tarmac, his voice rising above the downpour. “Whose child is this?”

Ashely came running, breathless and soaked.

Ashely skidded to a halt, splashing water across Hilliard’s shoes.

“Elia! Oh my god!”

She reached down to grab her, but Hilliard scooped the child up first, wrapping her in his jacket. He held her awkwardly, his expensive suit absorbing the rain. He didn't care. He felt the small, rapid thud-thud-thud of her heart against his chest. It felt right. It felt like a missing piece of his own heart had just been slotted back into place.

"She had an accident. She's shaking," he said, his eyes cutting to Ashely with an accusatory edge.

"I'm sorry! She slipped away while I was dealing with the luggage," Ashely said, her voice thick with genuine panic, as she finally took Elia from his arms.

Elia buried her face in Ashely's neck, sobbing uncontrollably.

Hilliard stood there, his arms suddenly empty, feeling a strange cold void where the child had been. He looked at Ashely. "You again. And the green-eyed girl."

"We live in New York, genius. We just landed too," Ashely snapped, stepping back.

"You followed us," Hilliard said.

"Don't flatter yourself."

Cailin stayed by the car, turning her face toward the grey horizon. She couldn't look. If she looked, she would break.

Hilliard glanced at Cailin, then back at Elia. The resemblance was undeniable — not just a likeness, but a copy.