

Second chance 40

Chapter 40:

A small girl with wild, curly hair and fierce green eyes stood between him and Cailin. Her arms were spread wide in a protective stance, her small chest heaving.

“Mommy.” Hilliard repeated the word — not as a question, but as a statement of fact, his voice dangerously quiet as he processed the scene.

Cailin’s blood ran cold. The world stopped. The birds went silent. There was nothing but the sound of her own heartbeat, deafening her.

Charla stopped crying instantly. “Who is that brat?”

Elia turned and pressed herself against Cailin’s leg, burying her face in the fabric of the dress. “Are you okay, Mommy?”

Cailin dropped to her knees. She grabbed Elia’s shoulders, her hands shaking so hard she could barely hold on.

“Elia,” she whispered. “What are you doing here?”

Hilliard stared at the child. He studied the shape of her eyes — Cailin's eyes. The stubborn set of her jaw — his jaw. The timing. The age.

"Is she..." he began, his voice trembling with a rage he was struggling to contain. He took a step closer, one hand reaching out.

Ashely came running through the open service gate, panting, her baseball cap askew.

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"Elia! Oh god, I turned my back for one second!"

Cailin looked up at Ashely. Her eyes pleaded. Help me.

"I'm sorry, Cailin! She ran to find you," Ashely gasped, bending over to catch her breath.

Hilliard didn't glance at Ashely. He couldn't take his eyes off the girl.

"Is this your child, Cailin?" he asked. His voice was steel now — cold and unyielding, a verdict rather than a question.

Cailin looked at Elia's terrified face. Then at Hilliard's suspicious one.

"She's my goddaughter," Cailin said. Her voice cracked, dry and brittle. "Ashely's child."

"Ashely's child?" Hilliard scoffed. He gestured to Elia, who was clinging to Cailin like a limpet. "She called you Mommy. Twice."

"She calls me that because I practically raised her while Ashely was working," Cailin improvised, her mind spinning desperately to weave a net of lies. "It's a nickname. An attachment issue."

Ashely nodded vigorously, stepping forward. "Yes! Single mom life — it's tough. Cailin is her surrogate mom. We live together. She gets confused."

Elia looked uncertain. She glanced up at Cailin, then at Ashely, sensing the danger radiating from the tall man. She buried her face in Cailin's neck again.

"She has your eyes," Hilliard insisted, stepping closer. He crouched down, trying to get a better look at Elia.

"Ashely has green eyes too," Cailin pointed out. Ashely blinked, her colored contacts catching the light.

Charla stomped her foot, crushing a fallen rose bloom. "Who cares whose brat it is? Get them out of here — they're trespassing!"

“Wait.”

A voice boomed from the patio terrace above them.

Amerigo Holloway had wheeled himself out to the stone balustrade to observe the commotion. He looked like an ancient emperor presiding over a gladiator match.

“Bring the child here,” Amerigo commanded.

Cailin hesitated. Every instinct told her to grab Elia and run. But the gates were monitored, and Hilliard was blocking the path.