

Second chance 56

Chapter 56

Cailin buried her face in Hilliard's chest and hid the small, cold smile that touched her lips.

An hour later, Hilliard summoned everyone to the living room.

Cailin sat on the sofa, wrapped in a cashmere blanket Hilliard had draped over her shoulders. It was a prop, but it was warm.

Charla stood by the fireplace in dry clothes, looking sullen.

"Apologize," Hilliard ordered. He didn't look at Charla. He was studying his watch.

"For what? Being wet?" Charla scoffed.

"For the burn. And the threat," Hilliard said. "If you don't, I will release the video to the police. Merger or no merger."

Charla froze. She searched his face. He wasn't bluffing.

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She ground her teeth — the sound audible in the quiet room.

She turned to Cailin. “I’m sorry that you misunderstood my accident.”

“Try again,” Cailin said coolly. She didn’t shrink back.

“I’m sorry Elia got hurt,” Charla ground out, as though pulling the words from somewhere deep and painful.

“And?” Cailin raised an eyebrow.

“And I will stay away from her,” Charla muttered.

“Good. Now get out,” Hilliard said, dismissing her with a wave.

Charla left, humiliated.

Elia appeared at the top of the stairs, clutching Mr. Paws by one arm.

“Mommy? Is the Bad Lady gone?”

Cailin let the blanket fall. “Yes, baby.”

Hilliard watched Elia descend the stairs — the way she held the railing, the tilt of her head. It was like looking into a mirror from twenty-five years ago. Like watching old home movies of himself.

“Elia, come here,” Hilliard said gently.

Elia hesitated. She looked at Cailin. Cailin gave a small nod.

Elia walked to him.

“Does your arm hurt?” he asked.

“A little. But Mommy kissed it,” Elia said.

Hilliard looked at Cailin. “You are a good mother. Even to a goddaughter.” He was testing her, pressing the lie to see where it would crack.

"I love all children," Cailin said, looking away.

"We need to change her dressing," Hilliard said. "The doctor said every four hours."

"I'll do it," Cailin rose quickly.

"I'll help," Hilliard said. "I want to assess the wound myself. I don't trust anyone else's judgment on this." He was already moving toward the guest room.

"It's fine, Hilliard. Really," Cailin said, a spike of panic sharpening her voice.

"I insist," he replied, without slowing down.

Cailin had no choice but to follow, her mind racing ahead of her feet.

The birthmark. She had to hide the birthmark.

The guest bathroom was small and brightly lit, the fluorescent bulbs humming overhead.

Cailin laid out gauze and Manuka honey ointment on the counter. Her hands were trembling slightly.

Hilliard lifted Elia onto the marble vanity.

“Let’s take the shirt off so we don’t get anything on it,” Hilliard said, reaching for the hem of Elia’s oversized t-shirt.

Cailin panicked. “No — just roll up the sleeve.”

“It’s tight. It hurts,” Elia complained, tugging at the fabric.

“See? Off with it,” Hilliard said gently, and pulled the shirt over Elia’s head.