

Second chance 57

Chapter 57:

Cailin held her breath. The birthmark was on Elia's lower right back. Maybe he wouldn't see it. Maybe the angle was wrong.

The door opened. Jeraldine walked in.

"I brought the special herbal salve," she announced, holding up a jar. "Amerigo sent me. He insists on this over that honey nonsense."

Elia twisted around on the vanity to reach her toy robot, which she had left near the sink.

The movement made her pajama pants slip slightly at the waist.

There it was.

A distinct, crescent-shaped mark on her lower right back. The Holloway Moon.

Jeraldine dropped the jar.

Thud.

The glass didn't shatter, but the sound was leaden.

"The Holloway Moon," Jeraldine whispered, her eyes going wide.

Hilliard leaned in and looked. He had the exact same mark, in the exact same location — a genetic trait, dominant and unmistakable, that had appeared on every firstborn Holloway for four generations.

"That mark," Jeraldine said, her pointing finger trembling. "It's unmistakable."

Cailin snatched a towel and threw it over Elia's shoulders, covering her back. "She's cold."

"She is your daughter," Hilliard said. It was not a question. His voice was hollow, stripped of all doubt and filled instead with chilling certainty — the voice he used when a deal was closed and the truth was no longer negotiable.

"Lots of people have birthmarks," Cailin said, her voice shaking so hard the words barely held together.

"Not that one," Jeraldine hissed. "You lied to us. You hid her."

Hilliard turned to the open doorway. Gavin stood in the hallway.

“Tell the lab to stop processing the samples from the sunroom,” Hilliard said, his voice like ice. “We have a direct source now. Get a buccal swab kit. I want samples from the child and from me. Rush it — I want results in two hours.”

“No!” Cailin stepped forward. “You can’t do this!”

“You have no choice, Cailin.” Hilliard turned to face her, his eyes blazing. “If she is yours, and we are married, she is presumptively mine under the law. Unless you’d like to stand here and confess to adultery?”

The trap closed from both sides. If she admitted adultery, she risked her reputation and potentially her fitness as a parent in any custody hearing. If she denied it, she confirmed Elia was his.

“Get the swab,” Hilliard ordered Gavin.

Cailin pulled Elia close and held her tight. The secret was out. The walls had fallen.

Noon. Times Square.

The city was alive with its usual midday chaos. Tourists took selfies. Businessmen rushed to lunch. High above the crowd, the giant LED screens wrapping the Holloway Group Headquarters played a sleek advertisement for a new banking app.

Then the screens glitched.

Static tore through the image.

A cartoon animation appeared — crude and pixelated, clearly drawn by a child, but devastatingly effective. A caricature of Hilliard, wearing a crown pulled down over his eyes, stood beside a Witch with green skin and a diamond bracelet. The Witch pushed a small bear into a fire. The Blind King did nothing.