

Second chance 71

Chapter 71:

Jeraldine stared at her hand, a ring of small teeth marks already welling with blood. Then she looked at Elia. She thought of the birthmark — the Holloway Moon was proof enough for the family, but the world ran on paper. This wildness had to be controlled, and for that, she needed legal, undeniable proof to bring before the lawyers.

“That’s it,” Jeraldine declared, her eyes cold. “We are not waiting for Hilliard’s sentimental delays. We are getting the proof the lawyers need. Now.”

She seized Elia by the arm. “Come with me.”

“No!” Elia screamed, but she was too small to fight.

The air in the living room was stale, heavy with the scent of potpourri and old money. Jeraldine Holloway’s grip on Elia’s small arm was tight, her knuckles white against the child’s tanned skin. In her other hand she held a long, sterile swab — the kind doctors used to steal secrets from the inside of a cheek.

“Open your mouth, child,” Jeraldine commanded. Her voice wasn’t loud, but it carried the weight of a gavel striking a sounding block.

Elia clamped her lips together until they turned white. Her eyes, usually so bright and defiant, swam with tears. She shook her head, her dark curls bouncing, but Jeraldine didn't release her grip. She only squeezed harder.

"It will only take a second. Stop fighting me," Jeraldine hissed, bringing the cotton tip closer to Elia's face.

The front door slammed open with a force that rattled the crystal chandelier overhead.

Ashely sprinted into the room, chest heaving, her hair wild. She looked as though she had run a marathon in seconds.

"Stop!" Ashely screamed. The sound was raw, tearing through the polite silence of the estate. "She has a severe latex allergy! That glove will kill her!"

Jeraldine flinched. The sudden noise made her jump, and the swab dropped from her fingers, landing silently on the Persian rug. She looked at the thin white latex glove on her left hand, then back at Ashely.

"What?" Jeraldine asked, blinking.

Ashely didn't wait for an invitation. She crossed the room in three strides and scooped Elia up into her arms, burying her face in the child's hair and checking her skin with frantic, trembling hands.

“Did she touch you? Did the glove touch your mouth?” Ashely asked, her voice pitching upward in panic. It was a performance, but the fear beneath it was real. If that swab had touched Elia’s cheek, the game would be over.

Elia buried her face in the crook of Ashely’s neck, her small body shaking. “Bad witch,” she mumbled into the fabric of Ashely’s shirt.

“You are hysterical,” Jeraldine scoffed, peeling the glove from her hand with a snap. “I was merely—”

The sound of tires screeching on gravel cut her off. It was a violent, tearing sound from the driveway, followed by the heavy thud of a car door.

Seconds later, Hilliard stormed into the house.

He didn’t look at his mother. He didn’t look at the child clinging to Ashely. He had his phone pressed to his ear, his face a mask of pale, cold fury.

“Shut down the servers! Now! I don’t care if it crashes the trading platform — pull the plug!” Hilliard roared into the phone.