

13.

"My emotions are a tangled mess, leaving me lost in a storm of confusion."

Hunter caught himself before his legs gave out beneath him, a surge of emotion—shock, regret, and something far stronger—washed over him as he stumbled back, further away from the hospital door he had been peering into. When he left Carla and Mara earlier to see Estelle, he hadn't expected to witness something so raw, so intense, that it felt like his heart was being pierced with an ice-cold stake. Never had he seen Estelle so utterly broken.

Christ, what had he done?

Estelle's breakdown was like a dam bursting inside him, unleashing a ood of emotions he couldn't comprehend, let alone control.

He did this.

He broke her.

His actions, his lies, had broken her beyond repair.

He dashed out of the hospital, desperate to escape the claws tearing at his chest. But as he sprinted to his car and sped blindly onto the road, Estelle's screams taunted him, echoing in his ears like a relentless nightmare. Her face—the pure terror etched into her features, the anguish in her cries—was unlike anything he had ever seen. It was the rst time he had seen anyone look so devastatingly terried, and that image, those screams, seared themselves into his memory. His heart twisted so painfully he could barely breathe as he drove. This was a kind of pain he had never known, a pain he hadn't even known could exist until he saw her face and heard her cries.

His eyes instinctively shut at the memory, and the car swerved in his hands, triggering a blare of horns and curses from other drivers. His eyes snapped open, and for a few seconds, he sat paralysed in the middle of the road, surrounded by chaos, his heart pounding furiously in his chest. His breaths came in ragged, heavy gasps, both from the memory and the near-accident that had just occurred. He sat there, oblivious to the mess he had caused, gripped by the realization that the pain she was experiencing was entirely his fault.

He could have prevented the accident if only he hadn't ignored her. If only he had been with her. If only he hadn't been so consumed by his own grudge and selsh desires. This was his fault. He killed his child. He broke Estelle and killed their baby. And the worst part was, even if he eventually recovered, she never would. The terror in her eyes made that painfully clear.

And her screams—Christ!—they still rang sharp and clear in his head, echoing loudly in his ears. He shook his head furiously, trying to get them off his head, his knuckles white from gripping the steering wheel. God knows, he might have caused another accident if he wasn't already home.

Home?

His eyes ickered up, then blinked at the enormous building where he had spent two years with Estelle. It used to be his home—no, it was still his house—but it held too many memories, and he couldn't bear them swirling around in his head right now, intensifying his headache. The huge black gates parted, and a man dressed in a security uniform waved him inside, but he just sat there, unmoving, staring blankly at the mansion. It looked more like a haunted house than a home to him now. He had never feared entering his own house, not even in the early days of their marriage when the thought of sleeping under the same roof made him agitated and uncomfortable.

Over time, that feeling had faded, and he had grown comfortable coming home to her, and seeing her face, even if he didn't always acknowledge it. Eventually, he couldn't remember when, but he became comfortable sharing his bed with her. Yet now, as he stared at the building, he couldn't shake the fear clutching at him. It was something different, something dark, circling in his mind. He feared that if he stepped foot into the house, it would consume him, and he might never be free from it. Instinctively, almost as if possessed, he ignited the car's engine, and instead of driving inside, he swerved around and turned towards the road, heading for his secret penthouse.

The drive to the penthouse was short. Hunter pulled into the garage and quickly made his way inside. He needed time away from the world. Though the news about Estelle hadn't spread yet, he knew it wouldn't be long before the media caught wind of it. Before that happened, he needed to pull himself together. Returning to his matrimonial home would only make things worse, but staying here in the penthouse might give him the space he needed to clear his mind and gather his thoughts.

The penthouse was a building he had bought secretly years ago, a place he retreated to whenever he needed time alone. He came here often after Carla left, and occasionally during his marriage, after returning from business trips. No one, not even Estelle, knew about it, so he was certain he would be alone until he could face the world without trembling or breaking down. Yet, the closer he got to the entrance, the tighter his throat became, and the more the tears welled up in his eyes, threatening to spill over.

Darkness and cold greeted him as the door clicked open. And as it closed behind him, he leaned against it, allowing his sorrow to take over. He brought a hand to his mouth, but it couldn't stie the ragged cry that tore from his lips, hot tears streaming down his face. He clutched at his chest, his body bent as guilt and regret ravaged his heart.

"Tsk! tsk! That...I didn't expect." A cold voice spoke mockingly from the shadows, and Hunter's cry ceased, his body tensing. He straightened, sning and wiping his eyes. He didn't need to squint to know who it was. He would recognize that proud voice even in his grave.

"A full-blooded Gray, crying like a woman? A shame if you ask me," Paul sneered as he stepped out from the shadows, his expression arrogant as he stood face-to-face with his son.