

21.

"What's the point of anger when you are the devil, knowing every ame you ignite only burns your own soul?"

Hunter was seething with rage; his sts clenched so tightly that his knuckles turned white. The tension in his body was unbearable; every muscle was tight as he sat stiy in his car, his head leaning back against the seat, eyes shut as if trying to escape the world around him. But shutting his eyes only made it worse because all he could see was her face—bold, alluring, and captivating. She had captured his attention in a way that left him reeling. Her presence had shocked him to the core. He hadn't expected to see her today, not at the board meeting, and certainly not looking so composed and resolute.

"That's it," he told himself, trying to rationalize his reaction. "I wasn't prepared to see her." That had to be why she got to him so easily today. But deep down, he knew it wasn't just that. Her sudden appearance at the meeting, her condent stance, the way she commanded the room—it all shook him to the core. Estelle had never shown interest in the business, especially their line of work. So why now? Why had she acquired so many shares behind his back? Was this all just to beat him at his own game?

Her words echoed in his mind, each one a stab of guilt. "For once, this is about me reclaiming my life, my freedom, and my dignity—something you took from me, piece by piece." Guilt gnawed at him, but he quickly shoved it aside. He hadn't caged her in their marriage or stripped her of anything. He had made it clear, perhaps not with words but through his actions, that he didn't love her. And she had never shown interest in the company. Not that he had ever bothered to ask, but did he really need to? To him, he hadn't trapped her; if anything, it was the other way around. Yet here she was, accusing him? The absurdity of it all made his blood boil.

His driver pulled up to his mansion, and a new wave of anger surged through him, this time directed at Carla. "This is all her fault," he muttered, clenching his st as he glared at the mansion. If she hadn't made that stupid 'slip-up' with the photo, Estelle wouldn't have had the opportunity to humiliate him in front of everyone. But deep down, he knew that wasn't entirely true. It wasn't entirely Carla's fault—he had made the mistakes, and now they were catching up with him. But it was just easier to blame someone else.

He walked into the house, determined to avoid Carla if possible. All he wanted was a shower, a nap, and to wake up from this nightmare where Estelle wasn't back and trying to strip everything away from him. But as soon as the door slid open, he came face to face with Carla, her dark hair a wild mess around her face, eyes blazing with anger.

His gaze swept over her, and his anger ared even higher. She was wearing it—the same dress she had worn when she took that damned sele without his permission, the one she claimed to have posted by mistake. And now, on a day like this, she dared to wear it again, as if mocking him. His sts clenched at his sides, and he moved to walk past her, trying to contain the fury boiling inside him. But she stepped forward, blocking his path.

"Are you going to explain this?" Carla demanded

His blazing eyes met hers before icking to the phone she held up, and shock rippled through him —how? His brow furrowed deeply as he stared at the image on the screen, anger simmering dangerously close to the surface. It was a picture of him dragging Estelle into a corner, now plastered online with the headline: 'Estelle Brown Declares Divorce with Hunter Gray.'

"Why were you holding her?" Carla's voice trembled with emotion, breaking through his thoughts.

His eyes snapped back to hers, disbelief colouring his features. "Is that what you're concerned about? The fact that I was holding her?"

"Don't I have the right to be upset?" she shot back, her voice rising then lowering. "Oh, now I get it."

Christ! Hunter groaned inwardly. Do women think they're cute when they act like this? Because there was nothing cute about this conversation. "What do you think you understand?" he gritted out, desperately wanting to end this conversation before he did something he'd regret.

"The reason you're so bent on keeping our relationship and even Mara a secret." Tears began to spill down her cheeks, and Hunter groaned inwardly, again. He hated it when she cried, which seemed to happen all too frequently. "At rst," she continued, her voice cracking with a sniff, "I thought it was because you were ashamed of me, or because you didn't want it to affect your image, but now I understand."

"What are you saying, Carla? And for God's sake, why are you crying?"

"You love her," she stated, and Hunter recoiled in shock.

"Yes, you love her! Or if not, then you deem her worthy while I'm not. Isn't that right?" she shouted, then whispered, "I'm right, aren't I?" Her eyes were lled with such raw pain that Hunter couldn't help but wince.

"Carla," he started, but she wasn't done.

"And that's why you've never really acknowledged Mara, even after you demanded a DNA test." He winced again, shame ooding him. That was a mistake he shouldn't have made. He knew he hadn't treated Mara the way a father should. But how could he put his reason in words? How could he explain the guilt that consumed him, the guilt for letting his father's words cloud his judgment, and how could he possibly tell her that every time he looked at Mara, he was reminded of the child he lost with Estelle? Mara was a constant reminder of that loss, and it tore him apart.

"How could you do that?" she sobbed.

Hunter parted his lips to speak, to say something—anything—but stopped short when he saw movement. His head snapped up to see Mara peeking out from behind a door. Their eyes met for a brief moment before she ran off, and his heart clenched painfully.

Carla was right. He had neglected his child, his only family, because of his guilt and regret. He was at fault, right from the beginning. His sts clenched painfully at his sides as Carla cried, now squatting in front of him, her sobs shaking her entire frame. He needed to make things right. He didn't know how or why he didn't know why he hadn't before—maybe it was the guilt he felt for Estelle. But now that Estelle had announced their separation, he needed to set things right in his life. After all, he truly loved Carla, and he had a daughter. He needed to act fast before he lost the trust and love of his family.

With a tentative sigh, he pulled Carla up and into his arms, holding her soft body against his. "I'm sorry," he muttered, patting her back and kissing the top of her head, his eyes xed on the door Mara had disappeared through, hoping she would come back, but she didn't. He shut his eyes, pain searing through him. For Mara, he thought. For Mara, he would try to make things work and be better. He promised.