

23.

"What is this feeling, this ache that won't let go? Could it be love, or just the ghost of something I've never known?"

If anyone asked why he was here, in a county far from his own, he wouldn't be able to say. It was a question that gnawed at him, one he couldn't bring himself to answer. He told himself it was mere curiosity, nothing more. But even he knew that wasn't the real reason. It was something deeper, something he didn't dare explore.

He downed the drink in one gulp, his eyes lingering on the empty glass before sweeping lazily across the room.

Her eyes. Her eyes were one of the reasons he couldn't let her go. The look in them, the raw emotion, it was so close, so familiar to the ones his mother had worn. He shut his eyes, trying to block out the memory, but it only grew stronger. Frustration surged through him, and he poured another drink, swallowing it quickly in a futile attempt to forget but the images only became bolder, more vivid, and he let out a groan, rubbing his forehead with the back of his hand.

He had convinced himself that the sudden urge to understand the pain in her eyes was nothing more than concern for her well-being. That was why he had visited the hospital some weeks ago—to see if she was alright, to quell the urge so he could return to his life, unburdened by the haunting look in her eyes. But he was wrong. The curiosity, or whatever it was, had only intensified when he learned she had left the hospital. Especially when he overheard the nurses gossiping about her husband had treated her and pity—a combination he detested with every fiber of his being.

"Mrs. Gray," a voice called, pulling him from his thoughts. He turned his head and locked eyes with a beautiful woman. He only saw the side of her face, but even that was enough to mesmerize him. For a moment, he forgot his worries, lost in her smile, until his gaze drifted to the crinkled old man in front of her. The man took hold of her hand and dared to kiss her delicate skin.

He scoffed, taking note of the old man's features before returning to his half-empty drink. He reminded himself of why he was here: to see the woman, to ensure she was here, and then leave. That should satisfy his curiosity, right?

But why the hell couldn't he stop his eyes from straying back to the woman sitting across the table? Why was he so fascinated by the shine of her chocolate-brown hair, so tempted to reach out and touch it?

Focus.

He scolded himself, but his eyes kept drifting back to her. His brow furrowed when he noticed the amount of alcohol on their table. Was the sly-looking old man trying to get her drunk? Or was she okay with it? His gaze returned to the woman, whose body looked stiff, and he cursed himself for not seeing her face. How badly he wanted to see her face.

What the f**k! He forced himself to look away, trying to get his act together when a movement caught his attention. He turned his head slowly, his eyes following the old man's hand as it moved along the woman's thigh under the table. He sprang to his feet at the same moment the woman jumped up, her trembling body mirroring his own—except his was fueled by anger, disgust, and the urge to break a hand, and maybe a neck.

His body tensed with rage as he watched the man feign surprise, pulling out a handkerchief. He better not try what I'm thinking, he warned in his head. His suspicions were confirmed when the man's trembling hand reached out towards her chest. And he lost it. He didn't have time to control himself, to remind himself it was none of his business before his fist connected with the man's jaw.

"Mr. Crooke!" a woman screamed, and his brow furrowed. Who the hell is Mr. Crooke? The woman he had been watching earlier, the same one he had just come to her rescue, rushed to help the man. Confusion knotted his brow. When would he ever understand women? Hadn't the man just tried to grope her, and now she was saving him?

The woman turned around with a glare, and his heart skipped a beat.

Heavens!

It was her. The same woman who had been haunting him. He hadn't seen her face clearly that night, but he had seen her pictures, though they did her no justice. There was none of the pain he had seen that night, and she wasn't wearing the fake smiles from her photos. But in person?

God, she was beautiful.

She had the kind of beauty that made you stop and stare without realizing it. Or maybe it was just his brain playing tricks on him, but who cares? His eyes stayed glued to her, afraid that if he so much as blinked, she would disappear. But her next action stunned him into oblivion.

Her hand met his face with a resounding slap, and he could only laugh when she screamed, "Who the hell are you?"

When would he ever fully understand women?

"And here I thought I was saving you," he grinned, though he resisted the urge to rub his cheek where she had hit him. The woman sure packed a punch.

Her eyes softened for a split second before hardening into a glare. "I don't remember asking you to. You should learn to stay out of people's business when you're not invited," she snapped, before turning around as if remembering something and then gasped.

Well, where the hell did that old p****t go?

He must have said it out loud because her head snapped back to him. Her eyes still glared, but her cheeks were rosy, and he smiled. She's feisty. He was beginning to know her.

She hissed and dashed out of the bar, obviously to chase after the p****t. He stood there, smiling to himself, ignoring the eyes on him because the only eyes he was seeing were hers. They were so beautiful, so piercing, he felt they would sink him in if she hadn't left.

He must have been daydreaming because by the time he snapped out of it, a worker was already sweeping up the shattered glass from the floor.

Estelle.

He dashed out, his eyes scanning the dimly lit space for her. He spotted her quickly. She was screaming after a moving car, her shoulders slumped as she watched it drive off.

He watched her, leaning on a wall, his arms folded across his chest, searching for the despair he had seen in her that night. But he found none, even as he assessed her. Either she had healed from her wounds, or she hid the pain well. He wanted to believe it was the former because just this morning, he had seen the news of how she had announced her divorce. Call it stalking, but he had spent the last few weeks learning about her since he found out who she was. He knew her name, and her family—she was the only daughter and had a brother a year younger. He knew about Hunter, the bastard she was married to, and the stunt he pulled at their wedding anniversary. His blood boiled, as it always did whenever he thought about it as if it were his pain.

He looked up at her again and noticed a change in her demeanor. Her arms were wrapped tightly around her body, the strain in her muscles visible even in the dimly lit grounds. Her body was trembling, not like a normal shiver, but like she was convulsing, if he wasn't exaggerating. It was familiar, almost like the episode she had that night at the hospital. As if to confirm his suspicion, her legs gave out, and she collapsed onto the pavement.

Shit! He rushed toward her, his mind barely processing what was happening.

"Hey, hey! What's wrong? Are you okay?" he asked, squatting beside her.

But she didn't respond. No, it didn't seem like she could hear or see him. Her breathing was erratic and shallow, her chest heaving as she made strange sounds like she couldn't get enough air. Her body trembled uncontrollably, and her eyes—Christ, her eyes—were wide with terror, darting around as if searching for an escape.

She's panicking, he realized, his heart sinking. What should he do? He had no experience with this kind of situation. His hands hovered over her shoulders for a moment before tentatively resting on them.

"Hey, can you hear me?"

Of course, she can't, you i****t, he scolded himself, moving closer to her.

"Calm down. Breathe with me," he murmured, gently massaging her back, hoping it would help. After what felt like hours, her breathing began to steady, and the trembling subsided. Her wild eyes were gone, and for a brief moment, they softened, showing a vulnerability that clenched his heart. But it was quickly replaced by something else—anger? Why would...?

She pushed herself away, stumbling to her feet and he stumbled back on his butt at the force of her push.

"Hey," he called after her, scrambling to his feet but she was already bolting toward a car driving towards her. The sound of her footsteps echoed sharply against the pavement. He stood frozen, his hands hovering in the air, his lips parted as he watched the car door slam shut before it drove away, leaving him standing there, bewildered and alone, with the same emotions he had been battling for weeks, now more intense than ever.

What is this? He asked himself for the millionth time since he met her.