

24.

"A surprising news can shatter even the strongest heart, leaving a wound that time alone cannot heal."

Although her panic attack had subsided, she couldn't help but wrap her arms tightly around herself. The terror had been overwhelming, gripping her heart like a vice, squeezing until she thought it would burst. She had felt this fear before and knew its suffocating grip, but that didn't make it any less terrifying when it returned. Her fingers trembled as she picked at them, tears filling her eyes. When would she heal? When would she be able to let go of the past and move on as if nothing had happened? Why was the world so cruel to her alone? Why did she have to carry the scars and haunting memories of her trauma? Why?

A sob-like whimper escaped her lips, and she bit down hard to keep it in. She hadn't planned to be late. In fact, she'd intended to wrap up the meeting quickly, fearing this might happen. But it did happen, and the fear still clung to her, even as her car sped through the streets.

Earlier, after the incident, she had snapped at her saviour, running after that perverted bastard because she refused to be seen as a failure. She had been so engrossed in placating that disgusting old man that she hadn't noticed nightfall—a beautiful moment for some but a living nightmare for her.

She hadn't realised it until he drove off, the sound of the engine roaring in the darkness, the ash of headlights cutting through the night. The memories she had fought so hard to suppress came crashing back. Her body trembled again, threatening another panic attack, and for a moment, she couldn't think, couldn't do anything but take deep breaths until the tightness in her muscles began to ease. Tears spilt down her face as she leaned her head against the armrest, eyes shut tight.

She had thought she was past her trauma, especially since the nightmares had stopped a few weeks ago, but it seemed she would never be free of these chains. They had wrapped themselves around her soul, draining her strength, and leaving her too exhausted to fight anymore. And to make matters worse, her saviour—the one she'd been so rude to—had witnessed her at her most vulnerable, trapped in her fear. He had tried to help her, but even he couldn't free her from this prison. No one could.

Tears continued to stream down her face as her mind replayed the moment she had come back to herself and met his gaze. Those dark eyes, filled with concern, had reminded her of someone she used to know. She sighed at the memory. She would have to find a way to thank him for saving her, even though she wasn't sure she would ever see him again.

By morning, her mood had darkened even further, and she had snapped at Ethan when he pointed it out. Now, as her car suddenly stopped in front of the company, she looked up to see the reason for the delay and could only roll her eyes—the reporters.

The crisp morning air hit her face, doing little to calm the storm brewing inside as she stepped out of the sleek black car. She didn't bother to fake a smile as her heels clicked sharply against the pavement, heading toward the towering glass building. Reporters swarmed the entrance, their cameras flashing like a swarm of bees. She had grown used to their prying eyes and invasive questions about her personal life. But today, something felt different—more aggressive, more frantic - that they rushed toward her like vultures. This must be about her divorce announcement, she thought. She regretted mentioning it at the meeting, knowing someone would leak it to the ears of these vultures.

"Estelle! How do you feel about the news?"

Other than being harassed by you people? Elated, she wanted to say but instead kept walking with her head held high while her security team busied themselves with keeping the reporters at bay.

But then, one question sliced through the noise like a knife.

"Do you have any comments on Hunter's child?"

The words hit her like a freight train, freezing her in place. She felt the blood drain from her face, her breath catching in her throat. Her eyes darted to the source of the question, a reporter practically shoving a microphone in her face.

"What... did you say?" she managed to whisper, her voice barely audible over the din of the crowd.

Sensing vulnerability, another reporter jumped in. "It's all over the news! Hunter had a child with Carla. You weren't aware?"

The world tilted, and for a moment, she thought she might collapse. Her body went cold, numb, as the words sank in. Hunter had a baby? With Carla? The same Carla who had driven a wedge between them, who had played a role in the destruction of their marriage? The same Carla whose presence had led to that awful accident, the one that had taken everything from her—her marriage, her happiness, and her baby?

The reporters' questions blurred into the background as a piercing pain shot through Estelle's chest. She tried to steady herself, her hand ailing to her side, but she only grabbed air, so she clenched her purse instead. She couldn't let them see her like this, not when she was supposed to be the strong, composed woman who had risen from the ashes of her life.

But the image of a child—his child—screamed through her mind, tearing open a wound that had barely begun to heal. The baby she'd lost, and the emptiness that had consumed her since that terrible night, all came rushing back in a tidal wave of grief and anger. So, she tapped into that anger, burning so fiercely inside her, fueling her with a temporary courage she never believed she could possess in such a situation. She lifted her chin in defiance, wearing her armour of bravado, and with a smirk that didn't reach her eyes, she replied:

"Oh, a child?" Her voice was laced with mock surprise. "How... charming. I suppose I should congratulate them"

The reporters exchanged glances, momentarily taken aback by her unexpected response.

"And as for your question about whether I was aware—well, they've always been good at... surprises."

With another forced smile, she turned to leave—actually, she forced herself to move, to keep walking, to escape the relentless barrage of questions and cameras. Her heels wobbled for a moment, but she caught herself, holding her head high as she entered the building. The doors closed behind her, shutting out the noise, but not the pain.

Her heart squeezed and trembled with such intensity that she felt the first tear teetering at the edge of her eyelid. Hunter had a child with Carla? Since when? Before their marriage? Had he known all those years they were together? Was that why he never gave her his heart? And she had...she had been careless and lost hers?

"Mrs. Gray." A very familiar, yet annoying, voice snapped her out of her thoughts. Estelle shut her eyes for a second before turning to face the crinkled old man in a very expensive suit, his wanna-be hair slicked back with gel. But it wasn't his crinkled, creepy, and disgusting smile that made her heart pound with anger. No, it was the sight of Hunter standing beside him, in his impeccable suit, his dark locks slightly ruffled. She always found his hair so sexy, so tempting but, at that moment, she wished she could pull it out strand by strand.

"Mr. Crookes," she greeted, dragging her eyes away from Hunter's hair before she succumbed to the temptation to uproot it from his head. She was worth more than that. "How nice to see you this bright morning," she said with a half-smile.

"It is a..."

"And, it's Ms. Brown to you," Estelle interrupted, cutting off Mr. Crookes, who looked stunned. "I'm sure you're aware I'm no longer a married woman, and that my ex-husband," her eyes darted to Hunter, with a sick smile that didn't reach her eyes, "now has a wife and a child of his own."

Hunter's jaw tightened, and she could swear she saw a faint flush on his face. How dare he try to act embarrassed when he had done this himself.

"That... that," Mr Crookes stuttered, clearly not expecting her interruption or sarcasm.

"If that's understood, I'd like to take my leave first," she said with a curtsey, giving Hunter one last glance before turning to leave.

Why should she care anymore? It was obvious the old man had already chosen sides. So why should she care any longer? In fact, she regretted not slapping him across the face yesterday. And as for Hunter? Her heart squeezed in pain. She truly wished him good luck with his new family.