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All that remained was a single strand, a fragile thread that could unravel the truth of his existence and reveal whether his life had been built on

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nothing but deception.

“What do you mean you lost her?” Hunter barked. The head security guard discreetly shuffled back a little, his head bowed.

After finding the letter, Hunter hadn't been himself. He had locked himself in his room, rejecting any

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visitors or calls. He just needed time to process what he had read. Well, it couldn't be true. Mara was his child. Apart from the DNA proving she was his, he felt a deep connection to her—a special bond he believed was the father-daughter bond people often talked about. How could that child, with whom he felt such a connection, not be his? She might not entirely look like him; in fact, she might not resemble him at all, but not all children resemble their parents, so that wasn't a concern. He wanted answers, and he needed them from Carla.

And that was exactly why he had called the guards he specifically commanded to keep an eye on Carla since her spending spree began to find her. It was supposed to be discreet; he didn't want her to have any reason to hide or be alarmed, and they had confirmed they knew where she was. He was relieved yet anxious and was supposed to see her that morning, only to receive a call that she had been seen leaving with some men, and then they lost track of the car. How?

"What does the man look like? Is he someone I know?"

"I don't think so, sir," the guard replied, his brow furrowed. "He looks rathertannish"

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"Tannish?" Hunter muttered. Carla had never mentioned any friends, making it difficult to know whom she left the hotel with. She also didn't share anything about how she spent the years they were apart. It hadn't felt necessary then, but thinking about it now, he realized he had been a fool—so easy to manipulate, and she had played him well.

"Any particular identifying features apart from that?"

"I'm afraid not, sir."

"f**k!" Hunter yelled, but the bodyguard didn't flinch, as if he expected the outburst.

What does he do now? He needed to find Mara. He didn't think he'd be sane for days if he didn't see his child. To hell with any DNA results that might have been doctored; all he wanted was to see his daughter's face again, and to do that, he needed to find Carla first.

"But a guard mentioned something about them being part of an Italian mafia," the guard said. Hunter's confused eyes snapped to him.

"What do you mean, Italian mafia? What would Carla and my child be doing with people like that?"

"I can't be sure, sir, but he identified one of them

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and said that is who they were. He also informed me—”

“Why are you just telling me this?” Hunter snapped

“That’s because I wanted to confirm it...”

“Until when?” He snapped again, cutting off the guard. “Just get my car ready this instant!”

They were on the road in no time, speeding through the open highway. Hunter’s heart pounded loudly in his ears. It wasn’t from the thrill of the fast-moving car; it was from the anxiety that he might get to the airport late and lose the chance to get his daughter back. Strangely, he realized he didn’t care what Carla turned out to be, as long as she cleared up the trick she played on him and gave him back his child. Now he regretted not legally marrying her. Maybe if he had, it would be easier to claim custody of Mara; however, all that mattered now was finding them quickly.

Soon, they arrived at the airport. His heart leapt into his throat as he scanned the area for thugs or anyone who might look like a mafia, but he found nothing. No, this couldn’t happen to him. He couldn’t lose twice. He couldn’t lose one child and then lose the other. His heart wouldn’t be able to handle the shock of it.

From the far end of the airport, a sleek black car came to a screeching halt. Hunter's heart skidded as he squinted to see heavily built men dressed in black suits step out of the car. He couldn't see much of their faces since they were far away, but judging by their choice of outfits, build, and stance, it certainly could be them. His suspicions were confirmed when he saw a woman step down, followed by a man on the other side. But what made his suspicion undeniable was the child the man was carrying. Mara. It had to be his Mara. He stood frozen, his eyes squinted in search of clarity, but they snapped wide open when he realized they weren't coming his way; instead, they were heading toward a private jet not far from them.

"s**t!" he muttered, sprinting like a madman toward them.

The men, seeing someone running toward them, became alarmed immediately. They crowded around Carbone, their boss, who was watching with interest, Mara sitting stiffly in his arms. His men shouted for Hunter to stop, but in the rush of adrenaline, he couldn't stop running even if he wanted to. His gaze was locked on the little girl, stiff in another man's hands.

The men, realizing the approaching threat, sprang

into action. Guns flew out as someone shouted, "Protect the master!" while others shouted for Hunter to stop.

Bang!

Hunter, in shock, missed his step and fell like the walls of Jericho. His head hit the tiled floor so hard that stars danced in his vision, and his ears rang from how loud the gunshot had been. His body shook with fear. He had never heard the sound of a gunshot this close before, and it terrified him that it was aimed at him. It took all his strength and ego as a man not to piss himself.

"Who are you?" he heard a voice demand before feeling the coldness of metal pressed against his forehead. His body went still at the realization that it was a gun. "Get up," the voice ordered, not waiting for him to process what was happening. He should have expected this rash behaviour from the mafia, but he wasn't given time to think before the man snapped again. "Get up!" Hunter almost jumped in fright, only for the man to press the gun harder against the side of his head. "Slowly, buddy."

Hunter would have rolled his eyes at the choice of nickname and the man's indecision, but he was too focused on the cold metal pressing into his

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skull. One wrong move could lead to his death. He wasn't there to provoke them; he was just there to get his daughter—that was all.

"Mara," he muttered, desperation lacing his voice as he caught a glimpse of his girl's face and rose

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to his feet.

"Dada," Mara screamed, lunging for Hunter, tears streaming down her face. Carbone's face twisted with irritation at the fact that a strange man could elicit such a heartfelt reaction from his daughter while all he had received since they met was coldness and a wet face.

Carla, on the other hand, stood, not even bothering to lift her head. She was exhausted from the sleepless and chaotic night she had endured. Never in her life had she experienced something as cruel as the previous night. Carbone didn't lie; he didn't take his promise as a joke.

Carbone passed the struggling and screaming little girl to one of his men, and for a brief moment, Hunter's heart soared as he watched his daughter being taken away from him.

"Hey, let the girl go! Who are you people?"

But his words died on his lips when he felt the cold, hard metal pressed on the side of his head again. His wide eyes watched as the thugs in front of him parted, revealing a towering man with his hair styled back just like Ryan's. He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. *Why do men with long hair always rile him up?*

"Hunter, I guess," Carbone said, his tone dripping with amusement while his eyes conveyed that he was far from amused. "So nice of you to drop by. I was..."

"I'm here for my daughter." Hunter bothered to spare his mind the thought of how the stranger knew his name. That was the least of his

concerns. He was here for his daughter only, nothing else. "Give me my daughter and I'll be out of your nose" Hunter demanded, trying to keep his voice steady, willing his gaze not to falter under the man's overpowering stare. Maybe it was because he knew he belonged to the mafia; maybe that was why the man's gaze and smirk were so terrifying.

Carbone chuckled softly. "Your daughter? Oh, you mean our daughter." He gestured toward the child in his companion's arms.

Hunter's spine went stiff. His heart skipped a beat. Our daughter?

Carbone raised an eyebrow, feeling a mix of amusement and irritation. The sound of Hunter calling his child - his, made him wish he could rip out his tongue. "You see," Carbone said with his signature grin, spreading his arms wide as he turned to face Carla, who leaned wearily against the car. He then whirled back around to Hunter. "I'm not a fan of delivering bad news, but Carla lied to you. Mara is mine, not yours."

The words hit Hunter like a punch to the gut. "You're lying!" he found himself saying, his gaze flickering from Carbone to Carla, who still hadn't met his gaze.

"Am I?" Carbone's smile widened, clearly enjoying Hunter's distress. "I would love to indulge you in a long conversation about Carla's fraudulent activities. I'm sure you'll be intrigued by it all but it's a pity I have no time to spare for that. So, here's a little something for you." He turned to one of his men. "Get a strand of her hair, will you?"

Hunter's eyes widened in disbelief as one of the men approached Mara. "Don't you dare touch her!" he shouted, adrenaline fueling his veins as he watched Mara thrash and scream. Who the hell was this man?

"Relax," Carbone said, raising his hands to stop one of his men who was ready to hit Hunter. "This will just take a moment."

Hunter watched the man retrieve a strand of hair from Mara's head, then watched in horror as Carbone grabbed a few strands from his own hair and held them up triumphantly with a grin. He gestured toward Hunter's hand with a tilt of his head, but Hunter just stared at him, perplexed and struggling to contain his anger.

Seemingly impatient with Hunter's hesitation, Carbone seized Hunter's hand and roughly dumped the strands into his palm. "Here you go. A little DNA test will confirm everything."

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Hunter's heart raced as he processed the reality of what was going on. His heart ached as he watched Mara scream for him, her cries fading as she disappeared into the jet with the rest of the men in black while he couldn't do anything. All that remained was a single strand of her hair—a painful memory clutched tightly in his fist. A strand that could tell if his life had been a lie after all.



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