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It had to be karma—carving wounds in places I never knew could ache, leaving me stranded with memories of what I thought was mine but was only borrowed. In the end, the pain and regret were my only truth. A wound that time cannot heal, a reminder that some things, once lost, are gone forever.

Hunter leaned back in the car, staring out the window as the city rushed by. In his hand, he clenched the strands of hair that Carbone had practically shoved into his hand. The tiny, weightless strands felt heavier than anything he'd ever held; they carried the burden of memories, lies, and a truth he couldn't yet face. Mara... not his? It couldn't be possible. How could everything he believed and cherished be a lie? His mind rebelled, clinging to memories of Mara's innocent smile when she called him "Daddy," the way she'd reach for him with a trust only a true father and daughter could share. It had to be real. *It just had to be.*

But Carbone's words wouldn't stop taunting him. And his face, his eyes—those deep blue eyes that

matched Mara's so startlingly. He'd never questioned the source of her piercing blue gaze, assuming her eyes were a blend of his and Carla's. Mara looked so much like Carla, a perfect replica of her mother. He had been self-assured; since he knew most children didn't resemble both parents equally. But now, meeting Carbone, made him doubt that concept. Hunter shook his head, tightening his grip around the strands, refusing to let the doubts settle. *Mara was his daughter—no one else's.*

Just then, the car stopped at a red light, and a sign in front of a building caught his attention through the window. A clinic. It was as if fate were taunting him, daring him to confront the truth head-on. His chest tightened along with his fist as he stared at the building, watching people move in and out. *With these strands of hair, he thought, I could know, once and for all.*

"Pull over," he ordered abruptly, surprising himself. The driver glanced back, surprised but compliant, and parked a short distance from the clinic entrance. Hunter stepped out, still clutching the strands of hair as if they held every answer he needed. But as he approached the entrance of the clinic, fear gripped him, almost pulling him back. *What if Carbone was right?* The thought was

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paralyzing. *Maybe it's better not to know,* he told himself. But, taking a deep breath, he pushed the doors open and stepped inside.

The clinic was modest, with a small waiting area and a receptionist's desk just inside the entrance.

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The receptionist, a young woman with a bright smile, looked up as he approached.

"Hello, sir. How can we assist you today?" she asked cheerfully, unaware of the storm brewing inside him.

Hunter's voice was gruff and short. "I need to see

a doctor.”

“Of course, just a moment.” She typed a few things on her computer, her smile never faltering. “I’ll need you to fill out a few forms, and then you’ll be directed to the waiting area.”

Hunter’s jaw tightened. Forms? Waiting? He wasn’t accustomed to waiting, nor did he have the patience for it—especially not today. But he filled them out, his hand trembling as he scribbled the answers, and returned them to the receptionist.

“Thank you, Mr. Gray,” she said brightly as she lifted her eyes from the form. “You can have a seat. We’ll call you shortly.”

Hunter paced in the waiting room, his agitation growing as each patient was called before him. He wasn’t used to places like this, and he began to blame himself for coming here. He could have waited and had it done at his usual hospital. But then he remembered how it was there that the original result had been tampered with. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, he heard his name.

“Mr. Gray, you’re up.”

He shot to his feet, following the nurse down the sterile hallway to the doctor’s office. The doctor, a middle-aged man with a kind but curious

expression, took a long look at Hunter, no doubt noticing his expensive suit and strained demeanour as if trying to piece together why a man like him would be here.

"How can I help you today, Mr. Gray?" the doctor asked, his voice calm.

Hunter didn't bother with pleasantries. He thrust his fist forward, releasing the strands of Mara's hair onto the desk. "I need a DNA test on these. Immediately."

The doctor's brow furrowed as he glanced from the hair to Hunter's tense face. "A DNA test? We can do that, but I must inform you that we can't proceed without the donor's consent."

"It's for my daughter." Hunter gritted. The doctor's mouth formed an "O." "I need to know if..." Hunter swallowed. "...she's really my daughter."

The doctor nodded, understanding dawning on his face. "Alright. But I need you to know that the process takes around 48 hours."

"That's fine. Just make sure it's accurate," Hunter replied, his voice clipped.

The doctor nodded. "Very well, Mr. Gray. Our lab will handle this with the utmost care. I'll have the

receptionist assist you with the details on how to receive the results."

Hunter only nodded, feeling his throat tighten as the doctor placed the hair sample into a sealed bag and gave him one last, understanding look. He left the room without another word, feeling the ache in his chest intensified. He completed the remaining procedures quickly, barely aware of his surroundings, his mind was consumed with a single thought: *48 hours until the truth.*

Two days later, Hunter sat alone in his massive living room, the silence thick and suffocating. The house felt hollow, and lifeless. It had once been filled with laughter and warmth, with Mara's small voice ringing through the halls, her footsteps light but always in hurry. Now, as he sat with a bottle of whiskey clutched in his hand and his phone lying face-up beside him, he felt the weight of emptiness pressing down on him.

Just minutes ago, he'd received a notification in his email, confirming his worst fear with a single scan of the report.

Not a biological match. Mara wasn't his after all.

A strangled noise escaped him, a mix between a sob and a bitter laugh. How could she have

deceived him so thoroughly? How could Carla make him believe a child was his, only to tear her away so cruelly? *Why?* He grabbed the whiskey bottle, poured another glass, and downed it, ignoring the burn as it slid down his throat.

He could feel hot tears slipping down his cheeks, but he didn't bother to wipe them away. All those moments with Mara, the love he'd finally allowed himself to feel—none of it had been real. He'd given his heart, his love, his everything to a child who wasn't even his. His hands trembled as he gripped the glass, the reality tearing through him.

Why, Carla? He had always thought of Mara as a second chance, a light in his darkest moments. He'd built his life around her, allowed her presence to fill the void left by the child he'd lost with Estelle. And now, to find out it was all a lie? He had created a bond so fierce, only for it to shatter. *What a perfect life this turned out to be.* His father would be laughing if he knew.

Pouring himself another glass, he drank in large gulps, his hand shaking, and let out a broken laugh that filled the empty room. How ironic. He had left Estelle for Carla, only to end up with nothing—not even the child he thought he'd sacrificed everything for. It had to be karma, he thought.

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Karma, mocking him for all the sins he'd committed out of stubbornness. Karma, punishing him for making Estelle suffer while he chased an illusion.

How could he have been so blind? Carla had never loved him; she only wanted his money and influence. She had used a child to manipulate him, and he'd fallen for it—not once, but twice.

He drained the last of his drink, the glass still clutched in his hand. His vision blurred with tears, and the room spun from the alc*hol. But no matter how much he drank, it did nothing to dull the pain in his heart. If anything, it seemed to intensify, mocking him for everything he'd lost—mocking the life he'd built on lies.

With a cry, he slammed the glass to the floor. It shattered into pieces, shards tearing into his hand, but he didn't seem to care or be aware of the pain and bl**d beating out of the wound. He let out a broken, grief sob, letting the pain and regret pour out in waves.



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