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At last, the past began to release her, its grip loosening like shadows fading at dawn. She felt the weight lift, a gentle freedom unfolding. Now, she could step forward, no longer bound by echoes. Healing was hers to claim, as it was always meant to be.

Hunter returned to the city at night, the glow of its lights reflecting off the rearview mirror as he drove through familiar streets. It was his first time back since the k*****g, since the revelation about Mara—since everything had shattered. But this wasn't a grand return. He was here only to collect his things from his office and leave behind the remnants of his former life. And if he could summon the courage, to face Estelle one last time. He needed to apologize for all the wrongs he had done to her. He had been reflecting on how to do that for the past few days. Although, he never expected her forgiveness; he simply hoped to find some relief from the guilt that weighed heavily on his heart. A greedy man he is.

His hands tightened on the steering wheel as he approached the building where he was no longer

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welcome. Once, he had walked through those doors as a leader, a man with control. Now, he was reduced to a visitor with no right to stay. He swallowed hard, clenching his fists beside him as he nodded at the security guards, who stood vigilantly in place, no doubt due to recent events. Looking forward, he tried to block out the memories of the past. But he knew he was only deluding himself; it was impossible not to remember. He needed to see her, whether he liked it or not. He needed to apologize—that was all he could offer.

Inside, the halls were hauntingly silent. Only his echoing footsteps and the erratic thud of his heart accompanied him as he headed toward his old office. He had chosen to come at night, to avoid people and the inevitable whispers; he wasn't welcome here anymore. At first, he had hoped he'd return to fight for his place, but after everything that had happened, he realized he no longer had the strength. The revelations had drained him, leaving only a hollow ache in his chest. He felt too ashamed to face Estelle, and coming back to the place where it had all fallen apart opened wounds he thought had begun to heal. Facing her now, without any emotional armor, would only make them bleed anew.

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He gathered his belongings quickly, taking one last glance at the dimly lit office before shutting the door behind him. As he walked back down the empty hallway, he caught a glimpse of Estelle in the distance and he froze.

Estelle's head was bowed, her attention focused on some papers she was skimming as she walked. She looked just as he remembered—strong, and resilient, but with a guardedness that hadn't been there before. He wanted to run to her, to fall at her feet and beg for forgiveness. But she hadn't seen him yet, and somehow that felt like a small mercy. He could turn around and hide, but he found his feet glued to the tiled floor, refusing to listen to his brain's instructions.

Just then, her head lifted, and their gazes locked.

Hunter's heart clenched, and he swallowed hard as her piercing gaze assessed him, chilling him with a coldness he never thought they could possess. She didn't look surprised; if she was, she hid it well. When had her eyes become so cold? They used to be warm and bright. He felt the weight of his own regret settle heavily in his chest, weighing more heavily than before.

"Hunter," she said, her voice steady and unyielding. "What are you doing here?" She began walking

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toward him, her arms hanging loosely at her sides.

The right question. What was he doing here?

"I... I came to get my things," he managed, his voice slightly trembling. Estelle nodded, her expression unchanged, her eyes still holding him in place as if they demanded more from him.

"And..." Hunter continued, meeting her gaze with effort. "I wanted to apologize."

Estelle's brow arched, her expression unreadable except for the hint of a frown. That made Hunter feel small, a feeling he hadn't known often. He'd always been the one looking at her with a cold stare, with that familiar arch of his brow. Was this what she'd felt all those years? Insignificant, belittled?

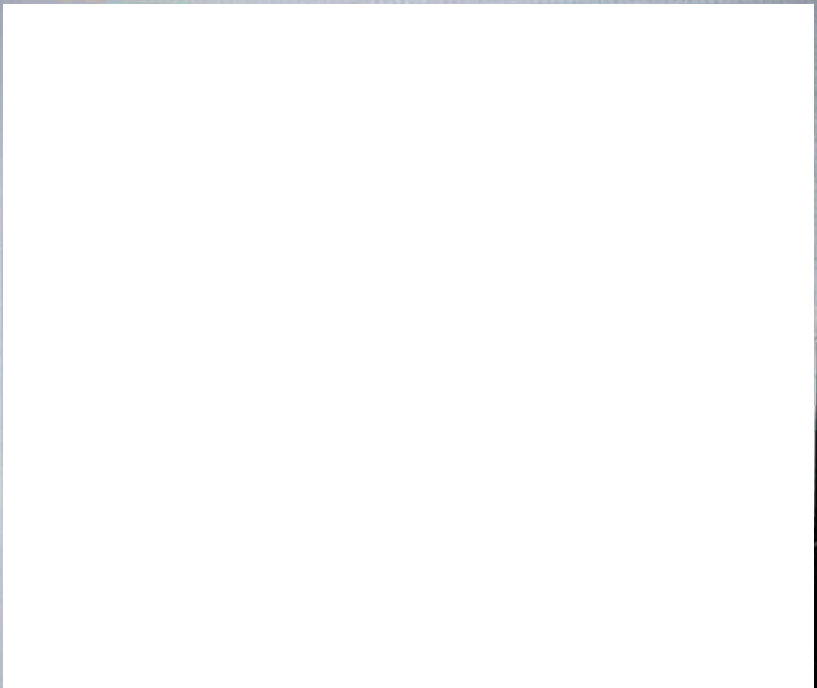
He gathered his courage and spoke again, just as she turned to walk away.

"Wait... please, Estelle." His voice rose, almost pleading, and she paused, though she didn't turn around. "I know... I've been cruel to you, for years. I've done so many unforgivable things. And I know an apology can't change anything or take away all the hurt I caused. But... I still wanted to say it. I'm sorry."

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He swallowed hard, feeling the burn in his throat. "I'm so sorry for everything. I'm sorry for how I treated you, for not being there when we lost our child. I'm sorry for not being the husband and partner you wanted. I'm sorry I couldn't love you

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the way you deserved. I'm... I'm so sorry."

The weight of his words and his guilt made his vision blur, and he looked down, unable to bear the thought of seeing her reaction. He knew he didn't deserve forgiveness. He was a terrible husband and father, and he'd be lying if he said he would have come to apologize if the whole Carla and

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Mara ordeal hadn't unfolded. That alone was proof that he was undeserving of any kindness or absolution, here on earth and hereafter.

Estelle squeezed her eyes shut, forcing back the tears that threatened to spill. She had made it her goal over the past few days not to cry or falter, not to let anything or anyone shake her. This was her past—a lesson she had been forced to learn.

However, his sudden apology and mention of the past tugged at a wound she had worked so hard to heal. She took a steadying breath, squared her shoulders, and turned to face him.

For a fleeting moment, her heart tightened as she saw the man she had once loved looking so broken, shoulders slumped, his head bowed. This was a man who never showed weakness, who never shed a tear for anyone. But that didn't mean he deserved her pity.

"You don't need to apologize," she said, her voice sharp and controlled, surprising even herself. Hunter's gaze snapped up at her words, and she saw the glassy sheen in his eyes. He looked like a lost child, but she resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

"It's all in the past," she continued, her voice firm. "And that's exactly where I want it to stay. All I need

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from you is the signed divorce papers sent to my lawyer.”

Hunter’s jaw went slack. Clearly, this wasn’t the response he’d expected. But Estelle didn’t wait for him to recover; she turned and walked away, fighting the urge to laugh or cry.

But something else surfaced instead—a smile, faint but genuine, tugging at the corners of her lips. She could finally feel the past loosening its hold, allowing her to move forward, to finally heal. As it should be.



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