

10.

"Perhaps...it was God's plan"

As Hunter walked out of the hospital, he felt a hollow ache settle in his chest, accompanied by a dull, persistent pain on his face. He had never imagined it would come to this—standing on the brink of losing Estelle and his child in such a painful way. When had the conception taken place? Was she already pregnant on their anniversary? And he had unknowingly treated her that way?

His heart constricted in pain, extending to the injuries on his face, as memories of their last ght replayed in his head: the harsh words and the threats of divorce. Christ! He'd felt justified then, but now, with the unexpected news of her accident, his child, and their critical condition, he couldn't explain or name the emotions rushing through him in waves.

His child.

The words echoed painfully in his head, replaying over and over again. Not once had he imagined a child with Estelle, but it hurt more than he could explain now that he might never meet the child. And the fact that he had hurt her in that condition and accused her of keeping such crucial information from him when she didn't know herself—and especially when he wasn't certain if he would have felt these emotions towards the child if the mother hadn't gotten involved in the accident—tore at his heartstrings.

He was a selsh jerk. He was a selsh jerk who deserved every hurtful word and punch delivered to him. He felt like crying, screaming, and hitting something—anything—to free the claws of guilt tearing at his heart because God knows he doesn't deserve to feel anything, not guilt nor pain. He deserves nothing because he gave them nothing. His feet dragged as he made his way down the corridor, oblivious to the curious looks thrown his way, and the man dashing towards him until a ash of reddish-brown hair brushed past him, knocking his shoulder and sending him sprawling on the oor.

The sudden push must have triggered it because the tears that had formed in his eyes spilt in a rush at the contact. He gasped out tears, clutching at his chest. What had he done? He should have never married her; he should have never pretended to love her when he wasn't sure if he was capable of it. Although it felt like he did then, he shouldn't have toyed with her heart. Now his actions might take her life, or the life he gave her, or both.

"He's strong," said Dave, who had followed Hunter and was now standing above him, patting Hunter's shoulder with a grim expression. "She'll pull through. She'll pull through," he repeated as if trying to reassure himself. He might not be a real family or friend, but at least he knew how much Estelle loved Hunter. Although he wasn't sure if Hunter ever did love her, Hunter being who he was, was too stubborn to detect his true emotions. However, he was sure Hunter harboured something close to love for Estelle because what else could explain the man breaking down in such a way for a woman he claimed not to love?

Fresh tears trickled down Hunter's face, and he shook his head, unable to shake the guilt that gnawed at him. He didn't think he would ever forgive himself if she didn't make it. And if she did, which he prayed she would, he didn't know how he would show his face to her when she found out about their child. He had broken her beyond repair; that he was sure of from the pure anguish he saw in Anna's eyes when she asked if he had ever lost his child. What had he done?

Minutes passed in a ash, with Hunter still sitting on the oor in a corner, his head in his hands, replaying every moment of the last few months in his mind. Every laugh, every joke they had shared. Although he had told her they were all pretence, he could swear he felt something for her then; he had felt really happy and more, but...

Dave, who had gotten tired of glaring at the people throwing both curious and accusing looks their way as they passed, hurriedly tapped on Hunter's shoulder, snapping him out of his thoughts.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your reverie, but you need to get up. Otherwise, I might end up throwing my shoes at anyone who so much as glares my way again. And why are you crying, anyway? I thought you didn't love her."

Hunter's head snapped up and ickered around to the few people passing and glancing at them as they walked, completely ignoring Dave's annoying question because he was right, and he had no answer to the question himself. He stood up immediately, just as he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. Truthfully, the phone had been ringing, but he didn't notice until he was snapped out of his daze. His eyebrows formed a crease and then widened in panic while a feeling of déjà vu washed over him when he saw the number of missed calls on his phone and his heart pounded furiously when he saw the caller IDs.

"Anyways, I'll update you about everything..." Dave started, patting Hunter's shoulder, but Hunter muttered instead, "s**t, Carla."

"...about the sur—wait, what?" Dave inquired, but Hunter was already out of the hospital in a ash, leaving Dave's mouth agape in disbelief, staring at his back. Is he for real right now?

Hunter rushed into the hospital for the second time that day, a feeling of déjà vu hitting him hard as the smell of antiseptic overpowered his senses.

Carla. Mara. The names ran through his mind as he dashed between corridors, his heart pounding hard in his chest. He didn't think he'd be able to survive if he lost Mara too. He had just met his child, and he was not about to lose her too. Not ever.

His eyes ickered to the tiny gure lying on the hospital bed immediately after he ung the door open, and his heart constricted painfully in panic when he saw the number of tubes and syringes attached to her fragile body.

Christ, he gasped, heart ragging. Is she okay?

"How could you?" said a teary voice, but Hunter couldn't bring himself to tear his eyes away from Mara. Why did she look that way? Pale. And why in hell were there so many tubes attached to her?

He wanted to scream just as Carla hit him hard on the chest. "How could you leave me alone? How could you have left us alone, Hunter?" she cried, hitting his chest hard. Hunter would have felt bad if his eyes and thoughts weren't panicked, trained on Mara.

"Ma...Mara!" he gasped, trying to get to her. Just a touch would tell him if she was still with him, but Carla didn't hear nor notice his expression as she continued her assault, screaming and hitting him while tears ran down her eyes.

"I was alone. I was scared, and you weren't here. You weren't here..." Her words got stuck in her mouth when she eventually lifted her gaze to meet Hunter's, and for a moment, she just stared at him. A gasp escaped her parted lips before she slowly brought her trembling hands to her mouth, her eyes ickering here and there at his face before she reached out to cup his cheeks.

Hunter inched at the contact, and his gaze ung to hers. He swallowed hard at the painful expression on her face as she mouthed a sorry, still assessing his face. The questions she asked earlier seeped into his ears as if they had been hung in the air, waiting for him to acknowledge them before assimilating. He winced at the words.

"What happened?" she asked again impatiently. Hunter chewed on his cheeks, thinking if it was right to tell her Estelle got into an accident and was about to lose her life and his child. Knowing Carla, she would be worried and blame herself when it's not even her fault. He needed her full attention on Mara. And speaking of Mara, his gaze ickered to her still gure on the bed, and waves of panic washed through him again.

"Why," he gasped, his voice sounding strained, "Why is she still?"

Carla followed his gaze, then sniffed before responding, "She's sleeping."

"Are you sure? How was the surgery? Has she woken up after that?" Hunter asked again, walking towards the bed and grabbing her tiny, cold hand. Unlike him with his dark brown hair, Mara had her mother's sleek black hair. Not that he minded, since Carla herself was a gorgeous woman.

Carla gave him a questioning look. "Yes, I'm sure. Her surgery was successful, and yes, she woke up brie after the surgery before falling right back asleep. She asked for you, but you weren't here."

"I'm sorry," was his response, his eyes trailing over her tiny features, from her doppelgänger face of her mother to her still body and back to her warm little hand in his large palm. Maybe Estelle losing her child was meant to be, as long as she survived. Maybe it's for the best, considering they were going to divorce. It wouldn't be right for a child to keep her tied to him and make her unhappy for the rest of her life. Maybe it was all part of God's plan. A tear ran down his face, leading to more tears and a full-body, wrecking sob. He crouched over Mara's hand and cried for a long time while Carla just stood perplexed for a moment before cuddling him from behind and cooing him to stop crying, thinking he was crying over Mara.