

## 7.

"His heart shattered as the words sank in. Regret gnawed at his soul, a reminder of the love he had failed to see."

Hunter clenched and unclenched his fists, gripping the steering wheel in a death grip as anger poured out of him like ames. His tongue rolled inside his mouth, testing the swollen cheek where his father had slapped him. He had deeded his father's demands, and in return, he was met with violence. Confronting his father had been a mistake, as it always fueled his rage. But this time, despite the stinging pain, he couldn't help but feel a twisted sense of satisfaction seeing the powerful man, who always got his way, red-faced and fuming. His father's words, however, still echoed painfully in his mind: "I might be a money-monger, but at least I never broke your mother the way you broke that innocent girl." and that had hit him squarely in his heart.

His jaw clenched, and his knuckles turned white from the pressure. The image of Estelle's teary face had been haunting him and pulling at his heart since then when her pain shouldn't concern him. She knew their relationship would come to an end eventually, even without Carla's sudden appearance. But his father's words had lodged in his heart, and they hurt more than he wanted to admit.

His car screeched to a halt, and he rushed out, not caring about the rain drenching him, and then jogged towards the building. He shouldn't be thinking about Estelle or his father's annoying words right now. He had come to sign important documents left by his assistant, then he needed to return to the hospital to prepare for the transplant.

The image of his daughter's big, curious blue eyes ached through his mind, lling him with a mix of pride and anger. He had almost lost his child before even meeting her, all because of their greed—his parents' and Estelle's. But now, he would make things right. He had to. Estelle and his father's pitiful act be damned.

He burst into his office, rushed to the desk, and quickly signed the necessary documents without sitting down. Finished, he dashed back to his car, his phone ringing incessantly. It was Estelle again. Her persistence was both disbelieving and annoying. Didn't she understand he wanted nothing more to do with her? All he wanted was to see a message saying she had signed the divorce papers. He groaned and hissed at the relentless calls but ignored them.

At the hospital, he hurried to the ward where he had spent the past few days. "You're here," Carla murmured as he entered, her eyes fixed on Mara's sleeping face, her fingers combing through her blonde hair.

"Yes, I am. I'm sorry I had to go do that." He kissed her forehead, pulled off his wet jacket, and lifted her onto his lap.

"How's our little angel doing today?" Carla blushed, and Hunter smirked, noting the color beautiful on her face.

"She's good. The doctor said she's ready for the transplant."

"Good," he nodded, a smile spreading across his face and into his heart as Mara let out a contented sigh when his fingers threaded through her hair. He grinned at Carla, who laughed, warming his heart. This is it - his family, the ones who made him happy and complete, and he vowed not to let them down again.

Soon, it was time for the transplant. Dressed in a surgical gown, Hunter glared at his ringing phone. It wasn't Estelle this time but his father and then Dave. Why were they calling now? It could be one of Estelle's tricks, which he had no interest in playing along with.

"Are you ready, sir?" a nurse asked, gesturing to his phone.

"Oh! Yeah, I am. I'll just drop this and go inside." The nurse nodded and disappeared into the adjacent room. Hunter turned off his phone, smiled, and kissed a nervous Carla, sliding his phone into her pocket as he did. "Keep that for me, baby, while daddy goes to do something magical for our princess."

Carla burst into a mix of laughter and tears, making Hunter's smile widen. He wiped her tears, kissed her again, and said, "I'll be back, love." With that, he left.

An hour later, after the transplant, Hunter sat outside the operating room while Carla paced, chewing on her thumb nervously.

"You're going to make me dizzy if you keep pacing like that, love," Hunter groaned. He had just finished donating his bone marrow to Mara and was exhausted, having not rested because he couldn't leave Carla worrying alone.

Carla, on the other hand, didn't seem to hear him, because her pacing and finger-biting continued. Frustrated, Hunter stood up with a sigh but quickly held onto the armrest when the room tilted. Once steady, he made his way to Carla, grabbing her shoulders. She turned abruptly, her glassy eyes wide in shock as if she had forgotten he was there.

Tears pooled in her eyes as she pointed to the closed operating room door, "Mara..."

Hunter's jaw tensed at the raw pain and panic in her eyes. As he pulled her into his embrace, her tears soaking his shirt as she sobbed silently into his shirt, he hated himself. He hated himself for not feeling half of what she was feeling. He hated himself for not being with them all along. He hated himself for everything so badly he couldn't bring himself to console her properly.

A phone vibrating broke the moment, and Carla pulled away, sniffling before retrieving Hunter's phone from her pocket. "It's your phone," she croaked, handing it to him.

Hunter hesitated, his eyes lingering on her flushed face before looking at the phone. Reluctantly, he took it, and his features twisted into shock at the number of missed calls.

"It rang the whole time you were in the operating room. I didn't mention it because my mind was elsewhere," Carla muttered softly, frowning at Hunter's worried expression. He met her gaze, and she opened her mouth to speak—

"A moment, please, I need to make a call," Hunter said apologetically, pressing the phone to his ear as he hurried out of the hall.

The phone rang before Dave's sarcastic voice greeted him. "Why? Do you suddenly feel the need to bestow us with your call?"

Hunter frowned at the tone, as Dave had never spoken to him like that. He shut his eyes, massaging his forehead. "You left me hundreds of calls. You left me no choice but to call back. Now, why did you call?"

"I don't understand what she saw in you."

"What?"

"You heard me. I don't see what Estelle saw in a pathetic man like you."

"You better—"

"But if you wish to change your status and be a good partner for once in your life, you'd come to your family hospital right now."

Hunter's brows furrowed. "Why should I—" Then panic lled him at the thought of his parents. He might detest them now, but not in death.

"Estelle got into an accident."

The world froze, and for a moment, Hunter felt nothing. Just frantic images of Estelle's teary, shocked eyes aching across his vision.

"It's bad. You need to come."