

## 8.

"Would you nally see me if I were gone? Would you love me if I were miles away?"

Hunter's heart pounded in his chest as he sprinted through the hospital's sliding doors, his clothes soaked by the rain. His breath came in ragged gasps, his face as hard as stone. The sterile antiseptic scent lled his nostrils, making the moment all too real. Did she have to take it this far to get his attention? Could she be more despicable than she already was? Getting into an accident to draw him out—and then what? Hope that he would pity her and comfort her? She was in for a surprise because nothing she did would make him go back to her. But then, he hoped the accident wasn't as serious as Dave had painted it so that he could tell her his mind once again and hope she would nally let him go without creating more drama.

However, as he walked through the white-walled corridors toward the family section of the hospital, he couldn't shake off the fear squeezing his heart. His restless mind kept replaying the image of her teary eyes, their last conversation, the way she looked at him in pain, the way her voice wavered when she asked if he was joking. Sh\*t! He groaned as he turned a corner and came to a full stop when he spotted the cluster of familiar faces in the waiting room.

His heart sank as he recognized his family and Estelle's, their faces etched with grief. Is it that serious? He asked himself, taking note of each one of them. His mother's eyes were red and swollen as she cried in his father's arms, while he just petted her with a frown. Estelle's father stood frozen, staring unblinkingly at the wall, while Ethan, her brother, paced the room, tugging roughly at his hair. Estelle's mother clutched a handkerchief to her mouth, her shoulders shaking with silent sobs as Dave consoled her.

"Hunter!" a voice bellowed, thick with anger. Hunter turned to see Ethan striding toward him, his expression etched with pure fury. Without warning, Ethan's st connected with Hunter's jaw, sending him staggering back. Hunter's head hit the wall, and for a moment, stars danced in his vision.

"You did this!" Ethan shouted, his face contorted with fury, his voice cracked with anguish as he rained blows on Hunter, who tried to push him away to no avail. "If you hadn't been such a jerk to her, she wouldn't have been out there! She wouldn't be here!"

"And how is that my fault?" Hunter shouted, nally shoving Ethan away. "How is it my fault?" he repeated, his voice breaking with anger as he glared at Ethan who wore the same expression. "None of this would have happened if she hadn't clung to me, even though she knew I could never love her the way she deserved!" His voice grew louder, raw with emotion as he pointed accusingly toward the operating room, the veins in his neck and forehead bulging with the force of his outburst.

"What?" Ethan gasped, completely astonished.

"You heard me loud and clear. Don't you dare try to blame me for what happened to her. You all knew I only ever wanted Carla, and that hasn't changed—not for a single moment."

"You... you..." Ethan stammered, his body trembling with anger and tears. "You're a bast\*\*d!" he nally roared. His st loosened from Hunter's shirt for a moment, then slammed hard into Hunter's face. Bl\*\*d erupted from Hunter's split lips, but he didn't try to ght back or shield himself. He just laid there, his mind whirled with guilt and regret

He knew the pain he had caused wasn't entirely his fault—after all, Estelle had her own issues, always seeking attention. Part of him wondered if this was just another desperate attempt to grab the spotlight. But deep down, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was partially to blame. He had led her on, only to push her away abruptly. Perhaps if he had ended things more gently, or communicated his feelings more clearly, things might have turned out differently. Maybe if he had been more responsive to her calls and texts, none of this would have happened.

D\*mn it! Maybe he shouldn't have toyed with the love she had for him. For that, he would endure the blows and the pain that came with it—not out of cowardice or a sense of responsibility, but because, deep down, he felt he deserved it. He needed to be punished, and since he couldn't bring himself to do it, he would let Ethan do it for him. Perhaps, after this, the crushing guilt that had suddenly settled in his heart would lift. Maybe then, he'd be able to free himself from the guilt that was slowly eating him alive from the inside out.

"Calm down, both of you!" a voice commanded, and Dave stepped between them, pulling Ethan away from Hunter with a struggle. He eyed Ethan's bl\*\*dy knuckles, then raised his brow at the de'th glare Ethan was shooting at Hunter. By the look of it, Ethan wouldn't regret injuring Hunter, and it seemed Hunter intentionally didn't raise a hand because a red belt could injure a scrawny-looking Ethan. Dave turned his gaze to Hunter for conrmation of his thoughts and could only wince at his sight. The dude really got a beating. Maybe he was wrong about Ethan being too scrawny-looking, given how battered Hunter looked. Bl\*\*d dripped from everywhere from his messy and battered face down to his unbuttoned white shirt.

Dave cleared his throat, his eyes ickering from one man to another. "This isn't helping anyone. Fighting won't help Estelle either," he said rmly.

Ethan shrugged off Dave's grip, his eyes still burning with anger. "If she di\*s, Hunter, it's on you."

Hunter's chest tightened at Ethan's words, but before he could respond, the door to the waiting room burst open, and a group of nurses hurried out.

Everyone stood at alert, and Estelle's mother stood up abruptly and grabbed the arm of a nurse. "What's happening? How's my daughter?" The nurse sent her a nervous smile, her eyes darting everywhere but the woman's face.

"Is she..."

"Mr. Brown?" A familiar voice sliced through the tension in the room, and every eye turned to the doctor, allowing the nervous nurse to scurry away. Estelle's mother rushed to the doctor. "Where's Estelle? How's my daughter?" she demanded in a hurry, fresh tears trickling down her swollen eyelids. The room fell into tense silence, and Hunter's pulse quickened, a sick feeling settling in his stomach. Why he felt that way, he couldn't comprehend.

The doctor took a deep breath, his gaze ickering from one set of eyes to another but lingering a fraction on Hunter's battered face before returning to Anna. He couldn't help but glance at Hunter's slowly swelling lid before responding. "Estelle is in critical condition. We did everything we could, but she had severe internal injuries. There's... one more thing. She's pregnant. Approximately two weeks and..."

Gasps, mostly from Hunter and his family, lled the room. Hunter felt like the ground had been pulled out from under him. Pregnant? Estelle was pregnant?

"We need to act fast," the doctor continued, his voice gentle but rm. "Like I said, Estelle's condition is critical. Unfortunately, the embryo is only two weeks old and cannot survive outside the womb. Our priority must be to save Estelle."