

14.

"No one asked," Hunter spat through gritted teeth, his voice hoarse from crying, but his eyes burned with a palpable hatred. "How did you get in here?"

"The better question, my son, is how I knew about your secret possession."

Hunter glared at him, the muscles in his jaw tightening. He shouldn't be surprised his father had found out about his secret penthouse; He had always been a nosy bastard, constantly prying into his life. That kind of intrusion annoyed him, but he wouldn't give his father the satisfaction of seeing him lose control. His knuckles whitened as he clenched his fists, lifting his head deantly.

"I guess it's no longer a secret since you found it," he said, his voice laced with bitter sarcasm.

Paul's smile curled in that sickening way Hunter had always despised. As much as he admired his son's bravery, Paul detested the deance in his tone, the lack of respect that should have been there. "Yeah, right. Or I wouldn't have found you crying like a baby," he sneered, raising an eyebrow in mockery. But Hunter remained stone-faced, his expression one of boredom, though his blood boiled beneath the surface. "Care to explain why? Because I'm sure as hell it's not about Estelle or that doll I know you spent your day with."

Hunter's body tensed at the mention of Carla, his eyes twitched, and his jaw locked so tightly he feared his teeth might shatter. But Paul wasn't nished. He savoured the moment, enjoying how he'd caught Hunter off guard twice in one day.

"Are you even sure that little girl is yours?" Paul sneered again.

Hunter lunged forward, only to stop himself at the last second. His veins bulged, his whole body straining as if ghting against an invisible force. "Don't even think about getting near them," He gritted in a low, dangerous voice. He knew better than to waste time asking how Paul knew about Mara. It was obvious he'd been keeping tabs on his every move. But Hunter couldn't shake off the sudden protectiveness that aared up when Paul mentioned Carla and Mara.

"Oh, trust me, I have no intention of doing so. I'm only here to warn you."

Hunter's brow furrowed, suspicion darkening his features. "If this is about me leaving Carla, I'd advise you to leave now because it's a waste of your time—not like you have much left. My decision hasn't changed. It's nal."

Paul studied him for a long moment in silence, his gaze piercing while Hunter held his stare, unincing. Finally, Paul rubbed his jaw thoughtfully, a twisted smirk playing at the corners of his mouth. "I'm just wondering," He began, his voice feigning curiosity as he paced around Hunter, whose fists were clenched tightly at his sides.

"It's nothing serious, just a thought that's both confusing and fascinating. One minute you were crying for Estelle—I might've said it was out of pity because, I won't lie, her situation brought tears to my eyes too—but your tears were different. They were raw, coming from deep within. It felt genuine, almost like you have feelings for her. But the next minute, you're all stubborn about Carla. So, who exactly do you have feelings for?"

Hunter froze, his mind reeling as he stared blankly at his father, who was watching him with interest. The question caught him off guard; it was one he hadn't expected, one he hadn't even dared to ask himself. Who does he have feelings for? The answer is clear. It was Carla. It had always been Carla... wasn't it? His jaw ticked, his brow furrowed deeper, and his fists clenched in frustration. How had he let his father get into his head? Yes, he did care for Estelle, but it was purely platonic. And Carla... with Carla, it was different. It was love. He was sure of it. Wasn't he?

"I'm surprised," Paul said, breaking into his thoughts, his tone dripping with mockery. "I expected a quick response, not a battle of wills with your thoughts. But that isn't why I'm here." He waved off the topic dismissively, opping down on the three-seater sofa across from Hunter, crossing his legs with a lazy air of superiority. "Christian has led for divorce. You might be served soon. I want you to reject it."

"Excuse me?" Hunter's voice was lled with disbelief, his brow furrowed deeply.

"Mhm, you know I hate repeating myself."

"Why would I do that?" Hunter's voice dripped with incredulity and disdain.

"Well, because you don't want to." Paul placed his palm on his thigh and looked up at Hunter. "Because you've reected on your actions, you feel sorry for everything you did, and you want another chance. Just something, anything confusing, to keep the marriage intact." He waved his hand dismissively as if the matter were trivial.

Hunter scoffed, "Why do you want me to do that? What's in it for you?"

Paul's eyes gleamed, and he shued forward in his seat. "The same as always. The wealth. Christian might be my friend, and we might be in the same wealth bracket, but he has more than me. And..." He pointed an accusing nger at Hunter, who looked back at him with disbelief and disgust. "This divorce will put an end to the additional benets his wealth has provided our family, no matter the friendship between us—especially since you embarrassed him in front of the whole world, and now his daughter has been unconscious for two days."

"She's awake," Hunter almost said, but he bit his tongue. How could someone be so selsh? Always focused on nothing else but his wealth? His father's greed had no bounds. It had always irked him, but now it was suffocating. The sheer audacity, the vile disregard for anything but money, disgusted Hunter so deeply that his hands trembled with the urge to wipe that smug look off Paul's face.

Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath, ghting for control. When he opened them, his gaze was icy and lled with disdain. "You'll never change, will you? Even after everything that's happened, your only concern is increasing your riches." Hunter scoffed again, shaking his head in disbelief. "Unbelievable." His expression hardened. "Let me make this clear: I will never bend to your will, not anymore. And just so you know, I led for divorce before Christian even had the chance—long before the accident."

Paul's jaw tightened, his face twisting in anger. He stood abruptly, his posture rigid with fury as he sauntered toward Hunter. "That was an impulsive action!" he bellowed, closing the distance between them, his nger jabbing toward Hunter's chest. "You get that? That was a mistake!" But Hunter stood his ground, seething with barely restrained fury.

"And I'm sure Estelle wouldn't mention it as long as you don't, so you're going to dissuade Christian. And that's nal."

Hunter's frown deepened. That was one of the reasons he had detested Estelle—she would pretend not to see certain things, things he expected her to throw a t over, but she'd only smile and continue to grovel around him. She had been like a puppet, an easy target, and that was why his father thought it'd be easy to use her and dissuade her easily. The thought made Hunter sick. But something in the back of his mind told him that the loss of their child would change her completely, and he wasn't sure if he could deal with her new side. But wouldn't that be for the better? His father wouldn't get his way, and he would.

"You don't have a say in anything that concerns my life," Hunter said coldly, his voice steady but lled with pent-up anger. "You might have dictated my marriage for me once, but not anymore. It's my life, and I'll live it however I see t. So if you're done, I'd like you to leave."

Paul's eyes narrowed, his lips curling into a mocking sneer. "I see that girl still has you wrapped around her thumb," he taunted, the words making Hunter's heart pound violently with rage.

"Don't you dare touch Carla—not even a strand of her hair."

Paul's smirk widened. "Ah!" he mocked, his voice dripping with amusement. "Did she say I did something last time?" He placed one hand on Hunter's shoulder and leaned close to his ear. "Because I might do something if you don't do as I say. And believe me; you won't like what happens next."

With that, he gingerly walked out of the room, leaving a heavy tension in his wake.

As the door clicked shut, Hunter stood frozen, his muscles taut, his eyes xed on the spot where his father had been. The silence was deafening, with only the fury within him boiling furiously and about to break loose. His father's last words echoed in his mind, feeding the re that raged inside him.

His father's greed had shaped him into the man he is today; in fact, it was the catalyst for everything that had gone wrong between him and Estelle. This same greed had ignited in him an unexplainable, burning desire to defy his father at all costs. It was this same burning desire to defy his father that had driven him to distance himself from Estelle in the rst place. Her clinginess, her puppet-like obedience, and refusal to see the lies from the truth had only fueled his disgust until he could no longer bear to be near her. And then, there was Carla—like a breath of fresh air, love at rst sight, and everything his father would despise. He wanted her and still wants her.

But now, his father dared to demand that he leave Carla, to return to the woman he had broken beyond repair. And all for what? His father's insatiable greed? After everything was ruined? After he had driven him to destroy Estelle and lose their child?

With a roar of frustration, Hunter lashed out, his fists slamming into the nearest object. A vase shattered against the wall, shards of porcelain scattering across the oor. His chest heaved with ragged breaths as he grabbed the centre table, hurling it across the room with all his strength. It crashed against the wall, the glass shattering on impact.

He stood there, panting over the wreckage, his body trembling with the force of his anger. His father's greed had cost him everything, and now, even after all the devastation, he wanted more. But he wouldn't let it. Not this time. Not after everything