

15.

"A mortified heart is a silent storm, raging beneath a calm facade."

To stamp that, Hunter marched into the hospital the next day, his stride purposeful, his posture tense. He hadn't slept a wink after the disastrous confrontation with his father. Instead, he had spent the night hunched over the wreckage he made, consumed by guilt and seething with anger—anger at his father for enraging him so easily, and anger at himself for allowing it. But as dawn broke, the weight of it all became too much to bear. The urge to nally put an end to his father's insatiable greed and free himself from this suffocating burden overwhelmed him. He decided he would apologize to Estelle, offer to cover all her medical bills, proceed with the divorce, and maybe—just maybe—relieve a fraction of the guilt crushing his heart. He knew it wouldn't dissipate entirely, but even a small reprieve might allow him to breathe again.

His heart pounded with every step as he rounded the corner to Estelle's ward. When he reached the door, it felt like his heart dropped to the oor. This was it. He clenched and unclenched his sts, trying to steady his nerves. All he needed to do was knock, apologize, accept whatever anger or hurt she threw at him, agree to the divorce if it came up, and then leave with a lighter heart. Yes, that's it, he told himself.

But just as he raised his hand to knock, the door swung open from the inside. A nurse stepped out, looking him up and down with a bored expression that quickly melted into a bright, beaming smile. "How may I help you?" she asked, almost bouncing on her toes with a le clutched to her chest.

Hunter barely registered her smile or the chipper tone of her voice. His brow furrowed deeply as his eyes locked on the empty, well-made bed inside the room. His hand hovered above the nurse's head, and in a breathless voice, he asked, "Where is she?"

The nurse's smile faltered, her brow furrowing in confusion. She glanced over her shoulder into the room, and her expression hardened into a scowl. When she turned back to Hunter, her tone was bitter. "And you are?"

Hunter hesitated, his expression a mix of shock at her glare and confusion at the question. "Her...hus..." The words stuck in his throat. Who was he to her now? Technically, he was still her husband, but the term felt sour and heavy on his lips. Why should he even have to explain himself, anyway? He was a known gure—he and Estelle were public gures, and even if this nurse was new, she had to recognize him. He eyed her suspiciously, certain she was playing dumb. The glare she gave him conrmed his suspicion: she knew exactly who he was.

"I'm her husband," he nally said, his voice laced with irritation.

The nurse responded with a dismissive "Huh," followed by a condescending once-over. "I see. Well, she was transferred this morning, before dawn, precisely."

Hunter's jaw dropped in astonishment. Transferred? To where? The question must have slipped out because the nurse rolled her eyes and muttered something under her breath before brushing past him. But Hunter barely noticed her departure. His gaze remained xed on the empty bed, a sense of unexpected devastation washing over him. He should have felt relieved that he didn't have to face her, but instead, he felt oddly crushed.

As he turned to leave, his mind swirling with confusion and frustration, he nearly collided with a gure standing in the hallway. He apologized and was about to continue going his way when a familiar voice all but bummed, halting his stride.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Ethan demanded, his voice low and venomous and his stance one of a predator ready to devour his prey. Hunter glanced at the doctor beside him who quickly averted his eyes and then whispered something to Ethan's assistant before leaving.

"I came to see Estelle," Hunter replied, his voice hardening as he met Ethan's gaze.

"Well, you're too late. She's gone. She doesn't need to see you, and she certainly doesn't need your pity."

Hunter's heart clenched at the accusation, but he didn't let it show. Instead, he gave Ethan a bored look, which only seemed to piss him off more. "It's not pity. I'm here to apologize, but it seems it's futile since she's not here." He hadn't meant to sound rude or indifferent, because God knows he was trembling inside with emotions he couldn't even name. But the need to rile Ethan up was too tempting.

Ethan let out a sharp, bitter laugh. "Apologize? After everything you've done?" His eyes darkened as he closed the gap between them, his voice dripping with contempt. "You've got some nerve, Hunter."

"I know. So if you don't mind, I have somewhere else to be," Hunter said, his voice tightening with frustration. He made a move to walk past him.

"You mean to your side chick? The w\*\*\*e you left my sister for?" Ethan mocked, a pained look on his face. Hunter went stiff for a moment and then slowly turned around, the two men glaring at each other with equal intensity. Ethan smirked while Hunter gave him a death glare, barely containing his anger. "Don't you dare say that word again."

"w\*\*\*e? I'm sorry, I can't W-H-O-R-E you." Ethan taunted.

Hunter's face turned red, and he instantly lunged for Ethan. But Ethan, expecting the reaction, surprised Hunter with a swift blow to the jaw before he could reach him. Hunter fell back to the ground with a grunt. Ethan's assistant yelped, attracting the attention of onlookers.

"Whoa!" Ethan exclaimed, bouncing on his feet for a second and wiggling his ngers. "I wasn't planning to hit you, but everything about you annoys me to no end. And seeing you get all riled up over me calling your b\*\*\*h what she is made me lose my temper."

Hunter dabbed the corner of his lips and seethed with anger when he saw blood on his ngers. Enough was enough. He was done restraining himself out of guilt and letting a worm-like Ethan draw blood from him every time they crossed paths.

He stood, determined to make his stance, but was stunned back to the ground when a urry of papers suddenly ooded his vision.

"Here's your divorce." Ethan spat. "Estelle doesn't want anything to do with you anymore. Sign it and stay away from my family."

Hunter stared down at the papers, his heart pounding in his chest, a mixture of anger and shock coursing through him. He knew it would come to this, but the sudden assault of papers and the public humiliation stunned him. This wasn't the place for this, and someone like Ethan should know better.

"Why are you doing this here?" Hunter asked, his voice strained as he scrambled to his feet, his eyes darting around nervously. "This isn't the place."

Ethan's eyes blazed with fury. "You think I care about where this happens? You humiliated my sister, destroyed her life, and now you think you can just waltz in here with your half-baked apologies, whining about being humiliated? You don't deserve a shred of decency."

Hunter's sts clenched at his sides, his knuckles turning white. The urge to lash out, to defend himself, was overwhelming, but he didn't want to draw any more attention, especially since people were already glancing their way.

"I know, but can we do this—" Hunter began in a calm voice

"Just sign the damn papers and mail them to me," Ethan snapped, cutting him off.

Without another word, Ethan turned and walked away, his assistant trailing behind him, leaving Hunter standing alone in the hallway, the divorce papers crumpled under his feet. He watched Ethan disappear around the corner, then glanced at the onlookers before looking down at the scattered papers on the oor.

"Did it really have to happen here?" he muttered, clearly mortified. With a glance at the curious eyes watching him, he hurriedly gathered the papers and walked out. His expression was of devil-may-care attitude, but his heart was mortified.