

16.

"In your arms, I found my hero and my solace."

Estelle lay on her hospital bed, her hands limp beside her and her eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. She didn't know how long she had been in the room, coned to the hospital bed, but it felt like months. The hum of machines, the sharp smell of antiseptic, and the soft pitter-patter of footsteps outside the shut door, which should have aggravated her headache, had become her only comfort in the suffocating silence.

The room was dark, except for the faint glow of the uorescent light seeping through the tiny c***k in the closed door. She hadn't bothered to turn on the lights. What was the point? Light had no place in her life anymore - not after what had happened, not after everything she had lost.

Her hand instinctively moved to her abdomen, heavily bound with an abdominal binder and empty, where just days ago she had carried her child. A choked sob escaped her lips as she remembered her rst visit to the hospital, which felt like a lifetime ago. The excitement, the fear, the dreams she had begun to weave around the tiny life growing inside her—all shattered in an instant, leaving behind nothing but a hollow ache that stretched painfully through her body.

Hunter's betrayal was nothing compared to the pain she was feeling now. And although all of this had happened because of him, she couldn't help but take the entire blame. She felt no anger toward him, no resentment; after all, he had been honest from the start. She was the one who had foolishly clung to him, to a man who had never truly loved her. And this—this was her reward for being so blind: the death of her child.

Pain tugged at her heart as she turned on her side, curling up like a child, wrapping her arms around herself as if she could shield herself from the agony. But it was futile; the pain wrapped itself around her, suffocating her with its weight. Every breath she took was a battle; every beat of her heart was a cruel reminder that she was still alive while her baby was not.

A tear slipped from her eye, followed by another, then a body-wracking sob that ceased immediately when there was a knock on the door. Estelle didn't respond, but she heard it open anyway. She didn't need to look to know it was her mother, Anna. She could feel her presence—a mixture of concern, sadness, and helplessness that only made Estelle feel worse. She just wanted to be alone, to sink into the darkness, but even that seemed impossible.

"Estelle," Anna's voice was soft, tentative. "I brought you something to eat."

Estelle didn't move. She hadn't eaten in days—not that she could eat much after the surgery—but the very idea of food was almost repulsive. But her mother wouldn't understand. No one would. How could they? They hadn't lost what she had. They hadn't been betrayed by the person they trusted most. Her father had loved her mother so dearly, and their family had always been whole. How could any of them understand her grief?

She heard Anna sigh, followed by the soft clang of the tray on the nightstand. She felt her lean forward, ngers gently threading through her hair before she whispered in that teary voice that always brought more tears to Estelle's eyes and guilt to her heart. "You need to eat, Estelle. You need to take care of yourself."

But Estelle didn't care about herself anymore. She didn't care about anything. The only thing she wanted was to feel something—anything—other than this agonizing emptiness. But even that seemed impossible.

She closed her eyes, wishing she could disappear into the darkness where the pain couldn't reach her. But it was always there, lurking in the shadows, waiting to consume her again. A tear slipped from her closed lids, and she bit down on her lower lip to stie the sob that threatened to escape. After a while, Anna sighed and left. Estelle lay on her side for long minutes, waiting until she was sure Anna had gone. She then turned to her other side and stared at the wheelchair beside her bed. She needed to escape, if only for a few moments before Anna came back.

Slowly, she pushed herself up, her muscles protesting against the movement. The pain was sharp, but somewhat bearable thanks to the abdominal binder around her waist. She gritted her teeth and pressed on nevertheless. With trembling hands, she reached for the wheelchair, her ngers gripping the cold metal handles as she struggled to pull herself into the seat. A grunt of pain escaped her lips, but she kept going. After what felt like an eternity, she nally settled into the wheelchair, her breath coming in short, painful gasps.

She wheeled herself toward the door, and then down the busy hallway. The night shift nurses were busy elsewhere, allowing her to slip past unnoticed. She manoeuvred through the corridors until she reached the exit. The automatic doors slid open with a soft hiss, and the cool night air rushed in, brushing against her skin.

Outside, the world seemed strangely distant. The parking lot was mostly empty, the streetlights casting long shadows across the pavement. She took a deep breath, savouring the fresh air, even though it did little to soothe the ache in her chest. Her parents must have thought that a change of environment would ease her pain, but she felt no relief. It was just the same. Every time she woke up, she woke up agitated, and the only source of relief had been the doses of anaesthesia they administered to her. But just a day before yesterday, they had reduced it to a minimal amount, leaving her brain clear enough to gather her thoughts.

With a sigh and shaky hands, Estelle reached into the pocket of her hospital gown and pulled out her phone. For a moment, she just stared at it, her thumb hovering over the power button. She knew she shouldn't do this, but something inside her compelled her to turn it on, so, she pressed the button, and the screen ickered to life, casting a harsh glow on her face. Her heart pounded in her chest as she navigated to the news app, her ngers moving on autopilot. She didn't know what she was searching for, but fortunately, the rst headline that appeared, wasn't about her, it was about a man.....her breath caught in her throat.

She stared at the image of Hunter. The man who had shattered her heart, whose betrayal had set off the chain of events that led her to this very moment, slumped on the oor with papers scattered around him, his face hardened into a glare. It was a scene she could hardly grasp, so she icked her eyes back to the headline to understand what had happened.

"Popular Billionaire Whose Marriage Anniversary Turned to Public Meltdown Spotted in Hospital With Some Anonymous Papers Thrown at Him."

Her father must have delivered the divorce paper as said. With another bitter sigh, Estelle turned off the phone and slipped it back into her pocket. She looked up at the sky, searching for anything to take her mind off the present but all she saw were dark clouds, shadowing out the stars. The air was thick with the promise of rain, the same kind of night when she had lost everything.

Her heart froze for a second then began to race, her breaths coming in shallow gasps as memories of the accident ooded her mind. The screeching tyres accompanied by her scream, the blinding headlights, the sickening crunch of metal against metal—it all came rushing back, overwhelming her senses. Panic gripped her, tightening around her chest like a vice.

She didn't notice at rst that the wheelchair had begun to move on its own, rolling slowly down the hospital driveway. She was too lost in her memories, too consumed by it. But the sudden sound of screams pierced through the fog in her mind, snapping her back to reality.

Her eyes widened in horror as she realized she was moving toward the street, the headlights of an oncoming car growing larger and brighter with every second. Her heart pounded wildly in her chest, and she tried to reach for the wheels, to save herself, but her hands were frozen in her body, paralyzed by fear. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't do anything but watch as the car sped toward her at alarming speed.

So, she closed her eyes instead, bracing for the impact, accepting that this was how it would end. But just as she surrendered to her fate, a strong hand grabbed her, lifting her from the wheelchair with a force that took her breath away.

Her eyes ew open, and she found herself staring into the face of a man—his expression a mix of panic and determination. His grip on her was rm, his arms holding her securely against him as the car sped past, missing them by inches. The man's lips moved, but she couldn't hear what he was saying. All she could do was stare at him, her mind struggling to process what had just happened.

She was alive.

She was safe.

And it was all because of this stranger.