

Bonus Chapter I

Ember, a name that burns with quiet grace, a flicker of warmth in the coldest space, a spark that ignites the darkened skies, with fire that lives in her steadfast eyes. She carries the glow of an untamed heart, a flame of passion that can't be named. Soft as ash yet fierce as the blaze, her spirit dances in infinite ways. She burns with a fire that never fades, a name that speaks of passion and grace. Ember, the light in the darkest place.

Hunter stood beside his mother, staring down at the freshly turned earth that now covered his father's casket. He wasn't sure how to feel - whether to cry or feel relieved. The only thing he could manage was to stand there, stiff as a board, while the sun beat down mercilessly on the back of his neck. The burn was scorching, almost taunting, as though mocking him for the years of turmoil his father had brought into his life, mocking him that his presence was still alive even in death.

The accident had changed everything. When Dave's revengeful actions left his father paralyzed, Hunter thought perhaps the ordeal might soften

the old man. But even in his weakened state, with a speech that was often incomprehensible, his father's tantrums never ceased. Though Hunter had distanced from himself after everything fell apart, he still received updates - from his father's refusal to cooperate with caregivers to his endless bitterness and outbursts.

Even at death, his father demanded attention, the crowd packed with acquaintances, reporters, and business associates. There were mourners, some genuine, but many fake and filled with curiosity, eager to observe and, perhaps, gossip later.

Hunter clenched his jaw as a reporter's camera lens caught the sunlight, flashing momentarily into his vision. Out of everyone there, even though their shamness was hidden behind hollow sympathy, the reporters were the most shameless of all. Even at a situation like that, they positioned themselves at the edges of the crowd, hoping to capture an emotional moment, ready to ask dumb questions like, "How do you feel about your father's death?" immediately they get the chance to.

Beside him, his mother stood with a tissue pressed to her nose, her face neutral, but her red-rimmed eyes and every sniff betrayed the

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hours she must have spent crying. Hunter envied her. Even after the divorce, she had cared enough to stay by his father's side during his final days, putting aside her feelings to ensure he wasn't alone. He didn't have that strength or affection, and that was exactly why he envied her.

The ceremony stretched endlessly, with well-wishers lining up to shake his hand and offer their sympathies.

"We're so sorry for your loss."

"How are you holding up?"

"It must be so hard on you."

Hunter's skin crawled under their scrutiny, their concern feeling more like an intrusion. He wanted to scream. They didn't care. They just wanted a glimpse of his reaction, something to speculate about over their next cocktail party, because they all knew how strained his relationship with his father was.

Eventually, he couldn't take it anymore.

"Excuse me," he muttered to his mother before slipping away from the crowd.

A few minutes later, Hunter found himself at the very back of the chapel grounds, where the noise

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of murmured conversations faded into a blessed silence. Leaning against the cool stone wall, he closed his eyes and let out a slow, shaky breath. Even with that, the weight in his chest refused to dissolve; a hard lump of emotions he didn't know how to process.

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His father was gone. The man who had shaped so much of who he was - his ambition, flaws, and anger- was now nothing more than a memory. Death was inevitable for everyone, but Hunter hadn't imagined this moment. He didn't know how to feel about it all.

As he stood there, trying to piece together his scattered thoughts, a faint shuffle caught his attention. His body stiffened as he leaned off the wall, scanning the area to locate the disturbance. Then he heard it: the unmistakable click of a camera shutter. His brow furrowed, his ears strained as he whipped his head toward the corner of the building where the sound came from.

A hand darted back just as he turned, disappearing behind the wall. Anger surged through him, and he marched toward where he had seen the hand disappeared.

Rounding the corner, he found himself face-to-face with a young woman. She jumped, her eyes widening in surprise as she pressed a hand to her chest as if she hadn't expected him to confront her after taking a shot of him.

"Who the hell are you?" Hunter demanded, his voice sharp with anger. "Why are you taking pictures of me?"

The woman blinked at him, her blue eyes so startlingly vivid that for a split second, his anger faltered. They were bluer than any ocean he'd ever seen. Her glossy lips parted in shock, and Hunter noticed she cradled a phone against her chest like a child caught sneaking cookies.

"Did you follow me here?" he continued, his voice rising, the veins of his neck taunt. "Do you people have no shame? Are you that desperate for a story that you had to invade my privacy? God, don't you reporters have any decency? Or is that too much to expect from vultures like you? Is my life just your entertainment?"

The woman blinked at him, her mouth opening and closing like she couldn't decide what to say. Her expression was one of surprise rather than guilt. And then, to his utter disbelief, she burst out laughing.

It wasn't a chuckle or a nervous giggle - it was a full-bodied laugh, loud and and body shaking. She doubled over, clutching her stomach, her straight black hair falling forward as she laughed harder.

Hunter stared, dumbfounded and irritated. "What the hell is so funny?" he finally gritted out angrily.

She tried to straighten, her face red from laughter. "You... You need to see your face right now," she managed between giggles.

His scowl deepened. "I'm glad you find this amusing," he snapped.

The woman finally stopped laughing, taking a deep sniff and standing to her full height. She

looked at him with an unapologetic grin. "Sorry, I couldn't help myself. You looked like you were about to breathe fire or something." She chuckled again, but it died as fast as it came when she met Hunter's glare. "Well, I'm not a reporter and... I wasn't taking pictures of you."

"Right," Hunter said, changing his footing and pocketing his hands, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "And I'm supposed to believe that?"

She sighed, then with a swift tap of her phone's screen, she held it up, showing him the screen. It was filled with selfies, each one more ridiculous than the last. "See? Just selfies. I came out here to get away from my family, not to snap pictures of some grumpy guy."

Hunter stared at the pictures of her smiling at the camera, in the same spot he'd found her. He felt his anger slowly ebbing away into guilt.

"From your behavior," she added, slipping her phone back into her pocket, "I'm guessing you've had your fair share of reporters on your neck."

"You have no idea," Hunter muttered, turning to leave.

"Thought so," she said with a knowing nod. "Hey."

Her voice stopped him. He turned back, finding her leaning casually against the wall now, her arms crossed, and her expression carefree like nothing could crush her energy.

"You're here for the same reason as me, aren't you?" she asked.

Hunter frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"Fresh air." She gestured to the building. "Funerals are suffocating, especially with all the fake sympathy and judgmental stares. Trust me, I know."

Hunter hesitated, her words hitting closer to home than he expected. "How would you know that?"

"Well, that's because my family's inside, pretending to mourn while throwing daggers at me with their eyes. I'm the prodigal daughter, you know. The shame of the family," she concluded with a grin.

Hunter raised an eyebrow. "Your father's funeral?"
He guessed.

"Yep," she said with a nonchalant shrug, still grinning. "But don't worry, he'd have been the first to tell you I was a disappointment. Guess it's fitting I ended up out here instead of in there."

Her carefree tone struck him with bewilderment. He folded his arms, his brow raised as he tried to pretend he wasn't in her shoe. "You don't seem too broken up about it."

The woman's smile faltered just a tiny bit. "Why should I be? My father didn't care about me when he was alive. Why should I pretend now that he's gone?"

Her bluntness took him aback, and he shifted uncomfortably. "That's... harsh."

"Is it?" she questioned rhetorically, her gaze zoning into emptiness as if lost in her thoughts.

"I wasn't close to my father either," Hunter admitted, the words surprising even himself.

She glanced at him, her blue eyes softening as they met his. "It's funny, isn't it? How death makes everyone suddenly act like we were all one big happy family."

Hunter smirked despite himself. "Yeah, funny."

She tilted her head, studying him. "But hey, it's okay to feel nothing, you know. Or to feel everything all at once. There's no rulebook for this stuff."

Their gazes met, and Hunter could only allow

himself to get lost in her calm, ocean-blue eyes. It was totally weird to find solace in a stranger's words and presence. But he did, with this strange and crazy woman. Her carefree demeanor was infectious, and it felt just right. Maybe it was

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because he needed a breath of sunshine amidst all the dark emotions clouding his mind.

She gave him a playful nudge with her shoulder, snapping him out of his daze. "So, from one black sheep to another, welcome to the club."

Hunter let out a small chuckle, shaking his head. "You're something else."

The woman grinned, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "See? I knew you had a sense of humor in there somewhere behind your grumpy self."

She reached out, patting his shoulder lightly. "Hang in there, dragon."

Hunter froze from the contact but he quickly recover. He shook his head, a reluctant smile tugging at his lips. For the first time that day, he felt the weight on his chest lighten.

As he turned to leave, she called after him. "Hey, what's your name?"

He paused, glancing back. "Hunter. And you?"

"Ember," she said with a playful wink. "Let's not make this the last time we run into each other, okay?"

Hunter didn't respond, but as he walked away, he found himself smirking, playing with her name under his tongue. *Ember*. Talk about a name that matched its owner's personality. He found himself chuckling to himself again. Maybe today wasn't entirely terrible after all.



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