

18.

"Every arrival marks the end of one journey and the beginning of another."

Hunter sat in the backseat of his car, his eyes xated on his phone, the screen glaring back at him with the latest headlines. His Assistant sat beside him; nervously rattling off updates about the shareholder meeting they were on their way to. The words barely registered; his mind was elsewhere, consumed by a swirling storm of frustration and anger.

The news had blindsided him, catching him completely off guard and setting off a barrage of calls he had no patience to answer. Now, he was forced to attend an unplanned and unexpected board meeting, all because Carla had been careless—again. His brow furrowed deeper, and he clenched his teeth until his jaw ached. He knew he shouldn't blame her entirely, but her recent behaviour made it hard to believe that her so-called "slip-up" wasn't intentional. It felt like she had wanted this all along like she had orchestrated it on purpose. She had been pestering him for weeks, questioning why he insisted on keeping their relationship a secret.

The truth was, he didn't have an answer to that. He just couldn't bring himself to take that step, no matter how many times he tried to convince himself otherwise. He had attempted to make her understand in every way he could think of, but nothing seemed to work. Now, the life he imagined with Carla felt suffocating, like a dam of rotten sh had burst the moment she was fully in his life. She was nothing like what he had expected from someone with an angelic face and soul. Where did that angelic side go? It had been replaced by something far more insidious.

"Sir, we're almost there," Andrew, his personal assistant's voice broke through his thoughts, drawing him back to the present. "The board is already gathered, and they're not pleased with the situation. I've been informed that some of the shareholders, particularly those aligned with Estelle's family, are threatening to cut ties if this scandal isn't resolved immediately."

Hunter's jaw tightened. "Of course they are," he muttered under his breath, slipping his phone into his pocket. "It's exactly what they've been waiting for." He glared out the side mirror, his heart doing a nervous ip at the mention of Estelle. It had been a month and a few weeks since he last saw her, and it was almost laughable how his heart still reacted every time he thought of her. It made him wonder what his reaction would be when they eventually crossed paths again. He couldn't be sure of the possibility, but nothing was impossible with fate.

The car pulled up to the company's entrance, and Hunter's eyes narrowed at the sight of a crowd of reporters clustered outside, cameras ashing, and microphones thrust forward. His irritation spiked. How could he have forgotten about the obnoxious reporters? They were the reason he was in this tight and infuriating spot, nosing around in his business. The moment he stepped out, questions bombarded him from all sides.

"Mr Hunter, are the rumours true? Are you and Carla married?"

"What about Estelle?"

"Have you nalized your divorce with Estelle?"

"Mr. Hunter, do you have any comment on the photo?"

He didn't answer. He didn't even glance their way. His security team moved quickly, forming a protective barrier around him as he pushed forward, ignoring the cacophony of voices. His blood boiled beneath his skin, the frustration mounting with every step he took. When will those nosy b*stards get off his back?

By the time he reached the boardroom, he was seething. The shareholders were already there, their faces a mix of anger and disapproval. The room was thick with tension, and the moment he walked in, the murmur of discontent grew louder.

"This is unacceptable, Hunter," one of the senior shareholders, Mr. Harrison, a round man with a face as smooth as his bald head began in a sharp tone, immediately Hunter took his seat at the head of the table. "The media is having a eld day with this. We've been receiving calls all morning from concerned investors, and the stock is already taking a hit."

"I understand that," Hunter snapped, his patience wearing thin. "But this is a personal matter—"

"A personal matter that's affecting the company!" Mrs. Lawrence, another shareholder interrupted, her voice cutting through the room like a knife. She had always been a staunch supporter of Estelle's family, and Hunter had never bothered to hide his dislike for her, just as she had never tried to hide her dislike for him too. "A personal matter.." She bellowed, slamming her hand on the table. ".that became the world's business a long time ago," Hunter closed his eyes, trying to rein in the fury building inside him as she continued. "You've put us all in a precarious position. The reputation of this company is at stake, and your reckless behaviour is to blame."

Hunter's hands clenched into sts under the table, and for a moment, he sat there in silence, struggling to suppress the fury boiling inside him. When he nally spoke, his voice was calm—an unsettling contrast to the storm raging within. "I didn't ask for this situation, and I'm handling it—"

"Handling it?" Mrs Lawrence scoffed, rudely cutting Hunter off. "By parading around with your new ing while the ink on your divorce papers isn't even dry? Estelle's family should be outraged, just as we are. Not only did you disrespect your Estelle and her family by aunting your affair, but you've also put this company at risk."

The room erupted into a chorus of agreement, the shareholders' voices overlapping as the argument spiralled out of control. Hunter's head throbbed with the rising noise, his frustration teetering on the edge of explosion. He had endured enough of their meddling, especially from people like Mrs. Lawrence who was obviously seizing this moment to sink her claws into him, wielding Estelle as a weapon in her assault. But that needed to end. He was seconds away from losing his temper when the door to the boardroom suddenly swung open.

The room fell silent, all eyes turning to the entrance. A woman walked in, her stride poised and composed, her presence commanding immediate attention. She wore a lacy ared gown, her hair tied tightly to the back of her head while her heels clicked against the marble oor as she approached the table. She didn't stop until she was standing opposite the chair facing Hunter, and only then did she remove her sunglasses.

Hunter's breath caught in his throat, his face draining of colour as recognition slammed into him like a truck.

It was her.

He watched her closely, trying to convince himself that he wasn't seeing things. Her gaze swept across the room, lingering on each shocked face before nally settling on him. His heart froze. It was her, but not the woman he remembered. There was no trace of the vulnerability or pain he once saw in her expression. She was different now—stronger, sharper, stunning, and in complete control.

It was Estelle.

Yet,

"I hope I'm not late," Estelle said, her voice steady, a smile playing on her lips as her gaze left Hunter and danced across the stunned faces around the table.

The room was silent, thick with tension and shock. Hunter sat frozen, his emotions in turmoil— from astonishment to guilt to confusion, all colliding in a chaotic whirlwind inside him. He couldn't tear his eyes away from her, unable to process the fact that she was really here, standing in front of him, with a big smile dancing on her lips for everyone to see.

Estelle was back.