

19.

"I own my bravery, for it is the strength I forged in the res of my fears."

"You're not listening to me!" Ethan bellowed, his frustration boiling over as he glared at his sister. Her blank stare only fueled his anger, an expression he still found unsettling on her face. He yanked at his hair, pacing the room in agitation before spinning toward their parents. His mother dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief, while his father wore a disturbingly pleased expression that made Ethan groan in exasperation.

"Dad, you're supposed to discourage her, not give her that approving look! She just returned; and must stay away from Hunter, not confront him. Going there will only cause more harm." He turned to Estelle, desperation creeping into his voice. "I'll go. If it's revenge you want, I'll help you destroy him. Just stay away from him."

"I don't want revenge," Estelle replied calmly.

Ethan paused, momentarily confused. "Then what do you want?"

"Freedom."

"Freedom?" he echoed, bewildered. "What does that have to do with—?"

"I'll only attain freedom when I can face my fears without hesitation."

Ethan stared at her as if she had grown another head, while their father smiled approvingly.

"I agree," Christian said rmlly.

"C'mon, Dad!"

"She'll only truly move on if she confronts her fears head-on. I support her doing what she feels is right."

Estelle's heart had soared with a mixture of pride and nervousness at that moment. But now, standing in the boardroom with only a table separating her from the man she had once called the love of her life, her emotions were a chaotic mess. She had imagined this encounter countless times, envisioning how she might react. Would she cry? Would she get angry? Yet, in this moment, all she could grasp was that he still affected her in ways she didn't want to admit.

However, despite her heart pounding erratically, threatening to burst from her chest, and her body trembling with a cocktail of emotions, she stood tall, a smile plastered on her face. It took every ounce of self-restraint not to leap up and scream in triumph over her bravery.

Her eyes swept over the shocked faces across the table. "I hope I'm not too late," she said, her gaze involuntarily drifting back to Hunter. She couldn't help it—she needed to see his reaction. And God, was she pleased. Despite the fear and hurt swirling inside her, the shock on his face was deeply satisfying.

Hunter blinked, struggling to process the sight before him. "Es...Estelle?"

"It's been a while, Hunter," she replied, her smile tilting as she took her seat directly opposite him at the long table.

"What are you doing here?" His voice was laced with disbelief, though he quickly masked it with an authoritative tone. "This is a board meeting. You can't just walk in here—"

"Oh, but I can," Estelle interjected with a short laugh, her eyes narrowing slightly as she leaned forward, placing her hands on the table. "I have every right to be here. In fact, I have more rights than anyone else in this room."

Murmurs broke out among the shareholders, their curiosity piqued by her condent declaration. Hunter clenched his sts, his teeth gritted as he struggled to keep control of the situation.

"What...what do you mean?" someone asked cautiously, their voice tinged with nervousness.

Estelle straightened, her gaze leaving Hunter's brie as she reached into her designer bag and pulled out a folder. She slid it across the table toward him. "This," she began, her voice ringing with clarity, "is proof that I am now the majority shareholder of this company."

The room fell into stunned silence, all eyes darting to Hunter, whose expression had morphed from shock to something more akin to disbelief. He blinked rapidly as if trying to convince himself he had misheard her. But the murmurs around him only conrmed the truth. His eyes darted from Estelle to the white envelope on the desk. With a tentative frown, he quickly opened the folder. His knuckles whitened as he gripped the pages, the realization hitting him like a blow to the chest.

"How...?" he started, but the words died in his throat.

Estelle smiled, but it was a kind of smile that didn't reach her eyes. "While you were busy...handling your personal matters," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand, leaning back in her seat, "and I was dealing with mine as well. You could say I had an 'aha' moment after everything that's happened." She folded her arms, her gaze unyielding.

The room fell into another tense silence as Hunter and Estelle locked gazes.

"Speaking of personal matters, Estelle," Mrs. Lawrence chimed in, her tone dripping with disapproval. "Surely you're aware that your husband's"—she emphasized the word with relish—"recent affairs have caused several investors to withdraw their support?"

Estelle arched an eyebrow, her gaze sliding back to Hunter.

"Yes," Mr Harrison added. "It's all over the news. This scandal is costing us more than just money—it's our reputation on the line."

Estelle's gaze icked from Hunter to Mr. Harrison, then to Mrs. Lawrence, her expression remaining calm. "Yes, I'm aware. It's quite unfortunate that personal matters have been allowed to interfere with business."

Mr Harrison hummed in agreement while Hunter's hands clenched around the paper, his frustration barely contained. "Estelle..." he gritted out.

"That's precisely why I'm here—to help stabilize the company and prevent further damage. And let's be clear: my ex-husband's affairs are no longer my concern, as we're already divorced," Estelle said smoothly.

Ex? Divorced?

A murmur of shock rippled through the boardroom. The other shareholders exchanged looks of disbelief, while Mrs. Lawrence, clearly enjoying the drama, leaned back in her chair with a sly smile. "Well, this certainly changes things," she muttered to herself.

Hunter's temper nally snapped. "Estelle, you have no idea what you're doing!"

She met his anger with icy calm. "On the contrary, Hunter. I know exactly what I'm doing. This company needs stability, not scandal. And if that means taking decisive action to protect it, then so be it."

Hunter stood abruptly, his chair scraping loudly against the oor. "You think this will x everything? That announcing our divorce will make it all go away?" he bellowed, jabbing a nger at the desk.

Estelle's gaze softened just a fraction, though inside, she was trembling with a whirlwind of emotions—anger, fear, nervousness, and more. "I didn't make this mess, Hunter. You did. I'm just trying to clean it up."

That shut Hunter up, and the room went still for a moment, the tension so thick it was almost suffocating. Hunter's chest heaved as he struggled to control his emotions, but he knew he had lost this battle. Estelle had outmanoeuvred him in every possible way.

"Now," Estelle said, turning her attention back to the other shareholders, her voice once again cool and composed despite the storm raging inside her. "Shall we get back to the business at hand?"

The shareholders, still in shock, could only nod in agreement.

"I believe there are some other pressing matters that need our immediate attention. And as for the investors," she added, her eyes ashing with determination, "I'll make sure they know exactly where this company stands—under my leadership."

Hunter could only stand there, stunned into silence, his sts clenched at his sides, his body tight with fury. He had always known Estelle to be resilient in some way, but this...this was something else entirely. She was different, like a stranger. And now, the woman who he had once underestimated was holding all the cards, and damn she was playing them masterfully—and infuriatingly.