

29.

"Surprise! I didn't expect you to show up with all the steeze!"

Life could be magical if you allowed yourself to believe it. Estelle had whispered those words to herself countless times since her encounter with the man whose name still eluded her. Something about him had sparked a change, a shift in her energy. It could've been his words, the way he had looked at her as if seeing past her facade, or maybe it was the therapy session that had left her with aching muscles yet strangely liberated. Whatever it was, it had given her the strength to ght for herself again, and she loved it.

She sat in the back of her car, smoothing the deep red fabric of her dress, (a color she specically chose because it stood out against her skin, making her look both strong and stunning. The neckline dipped low, showing just enough to make her feel condent but still classy. The thin straps rested on her shoulders, and the dress hugged her waist before owing down smoothly with a slit on one side revealing her leg as she moved, adding a bold touch. Tonight was going to be different because she was different. No more clinging to the past, no more retreating into herself. It was time to break free from her shackles.

The car slowed to a halt in front of the grand hall, where the shareholders' party was already in full swing.

The crowd of reporters outside was expected—just as she knew the ashing cameras would be merciless—but tonight, that didn't faze her. Rather, she was strangely exhilarated. One would have thought it was all because of her family's presence, but she knew her condence had come from within. As the car door opened, her driver stepped out rst, and she followed, greeted by a barrage of camera ashes. The light was blinding, but Estelle kept her head high, ashing a smile that felt more natural than it had in a long time.

This time was different. She could feel it. And she loved it.

Her family anked her, their presence reassuring but quiet. They posed for a few pictures, ignoring the shouted questions, especially the ones directed at her. There were always questions—about Hunter, about Carla, about the child—but Estelle wasn't there to feed them gossip about her personal life. She was there for herself, to show that she wasn't broken.

Inside, the party was just as extravagant as she had imagined. High ceilings, chandeliers, and a sea of elites dressed to the nines. The atmosphere buzzed with muted excitement and the hum of conversation. Nothing surprised her about the decor—it was exactly as she'd anticipated.

"The Browns!" A familiar, jolly voice cut through the room.

Estelle stiffened, just as the rest of her family did. Mrs. Parker. The one person she hadn't been in the mood for. The elderly heiress, dressed in an opulent gold gown, approached with a broad grin that somehow seemed genuine and false at the same time. Her grey hair was pinned back, making her crinkled but lovely face the focal point. Though she came off as friendly—well, to be fair, she was, except, she was loose-lipped and would spill your secret in a heartbeat, even after swearing not to just moments before.

"Mrs. Parker," Estelle's mother, Anna, greeted her warmly while the rest of the family followed with polite nods.

"Oh, it's always lovely to see you, Anna" Mrs. Parker responded before her gaze ickered to Estelle. Her bright eyes narrowed, assessing her.

"And Estelle! Now, I didn't expect you here."

Estelle frowned. "Me?"

"Yes, you." Mrs. Parker's smile remained, but her voice carried an edge. "Quite brave of you, considering all the chaos in your life right now."

Estelle's shoulders tightened, but she forced a smile, refusing to show her discomfort. "Thank you for your concern."

"Allow me to speak for everyone," Mrs. Parker continued, interrupting and waving off Estelle's false gratitude. You could always trust her to know what others were thinking. "No one expected you to make it here with everything going on in your life right now." Estelle tensed, but Mrs. Parker pressed on. "It's quite brave of you to show up, still managing to ash that captivating smile of yours. But..." Her voice trailed off, and Estelle noticed her gaze had shifted to something behind her. "...I hope you can hold onto it for the rest of the night." Estelle followed her eyes, turning just in time to see the exact moment the room grew deathly quiet.

"For Christ's sake," Ethan muttered.

And then she saw them.

Hunter. Carla. And their daughter.

Estelle's breath caught in her throat as the room seemed to shrink around her. There they were—his new family. Carla, glowing in an elegant gown, their child holding her hand, a little replica of her mother. Estelle's legs almost gave out, but she felt Ethan's grip on her arm, steadying her. She tried to focus on that, on his reassuring presence, but her gaze was locked on the little girl, so innocent and carefree, unaware of the weight of grief she carried in her existence.

Hunter's eyes met hers, and for a moment, the world around them disappeared, with just their eyes locked on each other. And while hers carried shock and pain, his carried nothing, just blank and dark, just as it had always been. She couldn't stop the bitter scoff that escaped her parted lips. Not in a million years had she imagined him having the effrontery to tag along with his new family. And with a calmness that annoyed the hell out of her.

How could he look so calm and unbothered? How could he think of bringing them here? Today was supposed to be different. Today, she was supposed to break free, but as her gaze ickered back to the little girl, all she could feel was the crushing emptiness inside her. The child should have been hers. Their child. They could have been parading with their child. But now...

The door to the hall swung open suddenly, cutting through the tense silence. Estelle didn't want to look, not that she could even if she wanted to. She was so engrossed in looking at the little child, her heartbreaking with each breath she took, but the silence in the room got to her, and she looked up, getting another moment of shock twice that night.

Right there standing at the door was the man from before—the one whose name she couldn't remember, the one whose words had stirred up a feeling of strength and courage despite her being rude to him. Except now, there was nothing but confusion about what he was doing there.

What is he doing here? She thought

Her brows furrowed in confusion as he walked in slowly, his motion sleek and calm, as if he wasn't bothered by the fact that the entire room had stopped to watch him. His silver eyes burned into hers, the heat of it burning through her skin, trailing hot lava everywhere his eyes touched. Her breath hitched as he moved closer, his smile soft but cunning—the one she had seen him wear before.

Behind him, Mr. Crookes stepped forward, his voice booming through the hall. "Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce my boss—Mr. Hayes."

A murmur spread through the crowd, but Estelle couldn't focus on the whispers. Her mind raced, trying to catch up with what she was seeing. She knew the name. Mr. Hayes wasn't just any man—he was the man, the largest investor and shareholder in the company, well, after her. And somehow, in all her interactions, she hadn't known—no, she had known, but hadn't met him, as he had always been passive. So why was he here now?

Her pulse quickened as his eyes held hers, amusement ickering in his gaze as if he knew exactly what she was thinking. Estelle's lips parted, but no words came out.

And she had acted rudely towards him, not once but twice.

God, was she doomed!