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34.

"What in the world had he gotten himself into? He had thought he was in control, but now it felt like the ground was crumbling beneath his feet."

Hunter sat still in his seat, his gaze fixed on the room's emptiness as some shareholders shuffled out, their angry voices fading into the hallway. He barely acknowledged them—why should he? They already had more than enough on their plates, thanks to Ryan.

His eyes darted to Ryan, who was still chatting amicably with the remaining shareholders, particularly those tied to Estelle's family, no doubt receiving thanks for clearing her name. Hunter's jaw tightened. It wasn't that he wanted Estelle's reputation dragged through the mud—far from it—but this wasn't about her anymore. It was about how Ryan had gone behind his back, making a public spectacle of something that should have stayed private.

And yet, as his eyes flicked at Ryan again, he couldn't shake the gnawing suspicion about the man's true intentions. Why was he so eager to protect Estelle? Why had he been staring at her all

34.

night?

Hunter's mind flashed back to the way Ryan's gaze had followed Estelle throughout the night. Sure, she looked incredible—stunning even—in that form-fitting dress. He hissed through his teeth as his body reacted to the memory of how it had clung to her curves. It wasn't jealousy—he wasn't with Estelle anymore. But he knew men like Ryan, who were clearly up to something. He could feel it. There was more to this man than met the eye.

Hunter groaned in frustration, dragging a hand down his face. Why was he even thinking about this? He should be focused on damage control, figuring out how to spin this scandal into something manageable. But no, instead, he was obsessing over Estelle. And Ryan. His eyes flicked back to Ryan, who was now on his phone. No, this wasn't an obsession. It was just random concern and protectiveness, nothing else. After all, he had been friends with Estelle for a long time, and he knew her—fragile, trusting Estelle. She would fall for a guy like Ryan, and he couldn't allow that. She'd only get hurt, and he didn't want that for her again. Yeah, that's it.

"I thought you, of all people, would've defended her." Ryan's smooth, almost mocking voice cut

through Hunter's internal thoughts.

Hunter's eyes snapped open, narrowing as he glared up at Ryan, whom he hadn't noticed approaching. "Is that why you revealed a video about my family without consulting me first?" His voice was cold, controlled—but inside, his anger simmering dangerously close to boiling point.

"This isn't just about you, Hunter." Ryan retorted, his voice calm but icy. "Did you think about her? Or were you too busy protecting your own reputation to put hers into consideration too?"

Hunter's jaw twitched. He opened his mouth to respond, but Ryan raised a hand, cutting him off. "Let's put it in perspective. Let's say I did run it by you. Would you have let me release the footage?"

Hunter's jaw tightened. They both knew the answer. He would've shut the whole thing down, swept it under the rug to avoid the hit to his reputation. But he wasn't about to admit that. Not to Ryan. Instead, he hardened his expression, his voice cold as he forced his response through gritted teeth. "I would've handled it differently. There was no need to go public when dealing with it behind closed doors would have been enough to clear the misunderstanding."

34.

"Behind closed doors?" Ryan questioned in disbelief, releasing a scoff as he shook his head. "In case you missed it, she was being slandered both in here and out there." He shot back, his hands gesturing to the room and the door, his eyes blazing with anger. "And you?" now pointing at Hunter, who was red with fury. "You sat there, doing nothing."

Hunter's temper flared at the accusation, his muscles taut with rage. "You have no right to get involved in my personal matters," he growled. "You're not even family."

"Yeah! Yeah! I'm not family but dude, personal matters?" Ryan's lips curled into a mocking smirk. "Your personal matters became public the moment you let them," he shot back, emphasizing the word "public" like a challenge.

Hunter bolted to his feet, fury coursing through him. Ryan had struck a nerve. His hands trembled with rage, his body vibrating with the need to punch that smug look off Ryan's face. But before he could make a move, the door swung open, and Dave strolled in, his eyes flickering between the two men.

"Am I interrupting something?" Dave asked, his gaze bouncing between them.

34.

Ryan shot Hunter a final mocking glance before turning to Dave with that infuriating smile still plastered on his face. "Not at all. I was just leaving." With a smug wave, he sauntered out of the room, leaving Hunter standing there, shaking

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with fury.

Dave gave Hunter a quizzical look. "You two weren't in an argument, were you?"

Hunter didn't respond, his mind still echoing with Ryan's words. *You made your personal matters public.* That mocking tone, the truth behind it—it drove him mad. *Who is he to say such things to*

34.

me?

"Is this about Estelle and Carla's incident?"

Hunter didn't respond.

"Hmm, I guess it is." After a long pause, Dave continued. "I think it's safe to say Carla's not the saint you thought she was. Honestly, I don't know how you didn't see through her act earlier."

Hunter shot him a glare but said nothing.

Carla. What was he going to do about her? He understood she must have acted out because she still felt insecure about Estelle. But her careless behavior had crumbled, pulling him down with it. And now, he was beginning to regret his choice.

"But on another note, your father asked to see you."
"

Hunter's body tensed, and his expression hardened at the mention of his father. Of course, his father would want to see him and probably gloat. His father had been waiting for this moment—waiting for Hunter to fail. And now, he'd use this chance to push him back toward Estelle, to clean up the mess he had made with Carla. But Hunter wasn't going to play along.

"Tell him I'm busy," Hunter muttered, brushing past

34.

Dave and out of the room. He wasn't ready to deal with his father right now, not after everything that had gone down, nor did he want to listen to him gloat and point out his mistakes. God help him, he might lose his temper.

Dave hurried after him, lowering his voice. "You know he won't take that as an answer. Better you go to him first before he barges into your office and makes a scene."

"Let him do that," was Hunter's response as they hurried down the hallway toward his office. What's the use bothering about that anyway, when Ryan had already made a scene of him. It's palpable. He could feel their stares, hear the whispers of the workers as they passed by. They'd seen the video. They knew.

He stormed into his office, slamming the door behind him and collapsing into his chair. His head fell back against the headrest as regret gnawed at his chest. *What the hell is he going to do?* His reputation was on the line. Things were rapidly falling apart for him, and now he was beginning to question his choices, because this wouldn't have happened with Estelle. Estelle was calm, composed, the total opposite of the Carla he was beginning to know. He groaned, leaning his head

34.

further into the headrest. Lately, Estelle had been on his mind more than he cared to admit. He thought about her calm composure and couldn't help but compare her with Carla every damn time, which always left him feeling dirty, like he was cheating—and he hated it.

"Hunter," Dave's voice was pleading now. "Just go see your father. Do whatever he asks—for your own sake."

Hunter opened his eyes, meeting Dave's concerned gaze for the first time. "What about Mara?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper. "If I give in to my father for my own sake, what happens to her?"

Dave was silent, his brow furrowed in thought.

What would he say to the little child who had just started to see him as her father? How could he sever the father-daughter bond they were beginning to form? Just how?

Hunter's phone buzzed, pulling him from his thoughts. With a sigh, he grabbed it from the desk, his brow furrowed as he brought it to his ear—and then he went pale.

What in the world had he gotten himself into?