

20.

"These are the tears that come after a battle hard-won—born of both loss and victory, where triumph and sorrow are inseparable."

She did it.

It was unbelievable, but she had done it.

Estelle had faced Hunter without betraying the storm of emotions that raged within her. It was terrifying yet exhilarating, and she had carried herself with a grace she hadn't known she possessed. But as a big, shaky smile spread across her lips, it faltered when she recalled how she had rushed out of the meeting, desperate to escape his presence.

She gasped, her heart leaping into her throat when a strong hand grabbed her wrist, jerking her to a stop. She spun around, only to find herself face-to-face with a very furious Hunter. His jaw was clenched tight, and his eyes burned with so much anger that she involuntarily shrank under his terrifying gaze.

"Hunter," his name slipped past her lips in a whisper, almost involuntarily. He didn't respond. Instead, he nodded curtly to his security, who were keeping Estelle's assistant at bay, but Estelle didn't seem to notice. Her eyes were glued to Hunter's face, a whirlwind of emotions warring inside her. It felt like years since she had seen him, and it made her want to...

"What the hell did you think you were doing?" he hissed, his voice low and dangerous, snapping her out of her daze.

Estelle's bravado faltered momentarily under his intense gaze, but she quickly gathered herself, her eyes narrowing in defiance. "Let go of me, Hunter," she demanded, trying to yank her wrist free from his grip, but his hold only tightened.

"Not until you explain yourself," he growled, pulling her closer. "What kind of childish game of revenge are you playing?"

Estelle's pulse quickened, both from the physical proximity and the sheer force of his anger. For a fleeting moment, the old Estelle—the one who would have cowered under his fury—surfaced. But just as quickly, a wave of anger surged through her, washing away her hesitation.

"Revenge?" she spat, finally wrenching her wrist free from his grasp, her voice trembling with a mix of fury and hurt. "You think this is about revenge? After everything you've put me through, you still believe the world revolves around you?"

She couldn't believe he still thought everything was about him after everything he had put her through. She hadn't expected an apology, yes, but not this...not this anger.

Hunter's eyes narrowed, his fists clenched tightly beside him. "You're damn right it's about me. You didn't come back here for some noble cause. This is just your twisted way of getting back at me."

Estelle's heart pounded in her chest. "You don't get it, do you, Hunter? This isn't about you. It's about me." Her voice shook with emotion. "For once, this is about me reclaiming my life, my freedom, and my dignity—something you took from me, piece by piece."

Hunter's expression flickered, a flash of something—regret, perhaps?—crossing his features, but it was quickly buried under his anger. "And you think announcing our divorce in front of everyone, blindsiding me in that room, is going to fix everything? You're deluding yourself, Estelle."

"I don't care what you think anymore," she shot back. "You don't get to control me or my life anymore....."

"We've arrived," her driver announced, pulling her back to the present. Estelle blinked, disoriented, realizing she was home. The memory had consumed her so completely that she felt disconnected from reality for a moment. With a bitter sigh, she stepped out of the car and noticed a familiar vehicle parked outside the house—one that had no reason to be there. Ethan! She didn't have the strength to deal with him right now. Not now.

Her suspicions were confirmed the moment she walked through the door.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Ethan demanded.

"Not now, Ethan," she murmured, desperately wanting to be anywhere else. The sight of him made her emotions well up, and she didn't want him to see her like this. She just wanted to be alone, but Ethan either didn't notice her distress or chose to ignore it.

"I'm proud of how you handled the meeting, but announcing the divorce like that? Do you have any idea how quickly word has already spread? You're the centre of attention again, Estelle. Did you even think about that?"

"I didn't think," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. Was it her fault that she couldn't think at that moment? In her peripheral vision, she spotted her parents making their way down the stairs, and she could only sigh inwardly. "Not now, please," she almost cried out. She couldn't deal with any scolding at the moment, or she might burst into tears.

"Oh, that's clear. Because if you had, you wouldn't have—" His words were cut off as Estelle broke down, a sob escaping her lips. Ethan stood stunned, his lips parted, shock and concern replacing anger.

"Estelle? Are you okay?" he asked, his voice gentle.

That simple question broke her further. The tears she had been holding back poured out, and she crumpled, her voice loud with anguish.

"Oh, f\*\*k," Ethan muttered, alarmed by her sudden outburst. He rushed to her side, his hands hovering uncertainly before finally gripping her shoulders. "Did he hurt you? Estelle, where are you hurt? Tell me."

She shook her head, unable to explain the sudden wave of emotion. The moment she saw her family, the fragile facade she had been clinging to shattered. All the pain she had buried deep inside surged to the surface, overwhelming her.

"Estelle, come here, darling," her mother's voice was soft, and understanding. She pulled Estelle into her arms, and Estelle clung to her as if that hug was the only thing keeping her together. Her mother whispered soothing words, gently patting her shoulder as Estelle cried, finally letting go of everything she had tried so hard to hold in.

Ethan stood frozen for a moment, stunned by the depth of her pain. But then his gaze hardened, and his jaw clenched with rage.

"I'll kill him," he growled, his voice low and dangerous. "I'll kill him for hurting her." He turned to leave, his fists clenched, but Christian stepped in, stopping him in his tracks.

"Let it be," he said, his gaze on Estelle.

"But—"

"Look at her," Christian said. Ethan did, "That's the kind of tear one sheds after winning a battle. It's a tear of loss and victory."

Ethan's brow furrowed in confusion as he stared at Estelle, trying to decide if his father was spouting nonsense, trying to dissuade him, or being honest. Which is it?