

27.

"This is just the beginning; there is a storm ahead."

That was unlike her. Her reaction was totally unexpected. Her eyes were so devoid of emotion that they unravelled him. And the way she said that statement: "I'm sure you're aware I'm no longer a married woman, and that my ex-husband now has a wife and a child of his own"—it made it seem like she was free, like she was happy, and it was unsettling. Not that he didn't want her to move on, but wasn't it too early?

Hunter's jaw tightened, different emotions whirling inside him. Something about her look and the way she said that bothered him. He hated that he couldn't tell what she was feeling. She had always been an open book, but right then, it was difficult to tell the emotions swirling in her eyes, and it bothered him to the core.

And she had curtsied. Curtsied! What the hell? He didn't know why that angered him, but that wasn't the Estelle he knew. It felt like an insult. Where had this bravery come from? Her detached and unbothered reaction had unsettled something inside him, pulling at unknown strings deep within him, even as he stood in his office, his eyes staring blankly into the busy street. That was a side of Estelle he had never seen—a side so foreign and unsettling to him, and he didn't like it, not in the slightest.

"To be clear, are you upset by the fact that she was unbothered or by your stupid act?" Dave's question snapped Hunter out of his thoughts, and he blinked at the view in front of him for a moment, realizing he wasn't alone. Dave was in the office with him.

He pondered the question. Well, his act could be called stupid because it was. He had acted on his emotions yesterday after the drama with Estelle and Carla. He wanted to show Carla he had nothing to hide, that he was proud to show off her and his daughter, but the truth was, it was all because of Estelle. Her nonchalant behavior had riled him up and clouded his judgment, and he had acted on that emotion. Yet, the more annoying part was that she still seemed unbothered by it. It was like she was a stone with no emotion. He had expected some emotion—a teary look, maybe—but her face had been fierce and determined, and it boiled his blood.

"I can't guarantee you out, dude," Dave muttered. "You're supposed to be looking for ways to get on Estelle's good side, but you went ahead and revealed your child? And to the media, for crying out loud! What were you thinking? I thought we all agreed to keep it a secret. You know your father was furious. He's probably going to burst through that door any minute, which is exactly why I came here if you care to know." He continued rambling, wanting to get a reaction, to understand what Hunter was thinking, but Hunter didn't even turn around, not even a stiffening of his back.

Dave sighed, rubbing his stubble. "Mother almost had a heart attack over that. The poor woman didn't know how to take the news, she..."

A sudden ring pierced the air, cutting Dave off. Hunter, with a sigh, pulled his ringing phone from his chest pocket, his eyes narrowing at the caller ID.

"Hel—"

"Babeeee," came a slurred voice.

Hunter stood alert. "Carla?"

No response, but he heard shuffling. "Carla," he called again, and then he heard a piercing scream. "Carla! Mara!" he shouted into the phone, and then the line went dead.

Shit! He turned around sharply, his heart thudding as he gathered his things. He hoped they were none. For his sanity, he hoped nothing was wrong. His heart raced crazily, making his hands tremble, and he crashed to the ground due to his unsteady grip.

Dave jolted up, startled. "What is going on?" Dave asked. "What happened?"

No answer. Just documents ying around as Hunter frantically gathered his things.

"Calm down, dude. Hey, calm down, at least answer my question. Hey! Hey! We're still talking. Hey!" Dave yelled, but Hunter was already gone.

Somewhere in a room, with the smell of fruit and alcohol lingering, Carla, in her red sleeping suit, sat cross-legged on the sofa, facing the television. Her red-painted fingernails tapped lazily on the wine glass in her hand. Her eyes danced amusedly over the screen before she burst into laughter.

Mara, who had been engrossed in rearranging her toys—which Carla had almost stumbled over minutes ago—jolted, startled. But Carla didn't notice, or perhaps she chose to ignore her, still laughing until her laughter slowly subsided into mews.

Finally,—well, not so nally, but almost—she had a tiny taste of what she had always wished for: riches, wealth. She had longed for it all her life. She had scrubbed the feet of the rich and licked the soles they stepped on just to reach their level. But here it was, nally within her grasp. A mewed laugh escaped her lips again as she took the wine glass to her lips, taking a large gulp even as she chuckled.

After so many years, she nally got to outshine Estelle. She had stolen her spotlight, and it felt so sweet. It sounded crazy that she coveted Estelle's place, but no one who hadn't been in her shoes could understand how unfair it had been. Estelle had it all—everything she had ever imagined, even him—Hunter, the perfect man with all his perfections, the one who could pull her out of the stinking hole of poverty. That was why she had coveted him, seduced him. She would have had him a long time ago if only his nosy father hadn't been so involved. Her nose scrunched up at that thought, but then it was replaced by a smile.

But then, it wasn't so bad.

She had gotten a huge sum of money from it. He had offered such a large amount, it was hard to say no. But then again, the money was gone, and she needed more and... her gaze slid to Mara, who had turned back to her toys. Her "gift", as she now referred to her, had luckily fallen sick. What good timing. A broad smile brushed her lips, and she reached out to pat Mara's hair. That sickness had brought her riches, had made her dreams come true—both Hunter and his wealth. And she planned on enjoying them both for the rest of her life. She burst into laughter again, toasting the air with her wine glass just as the door burst open and Hunter, looking quite shaken, dashed in.

"Daddy!" Mara, who had been playing with her toys, ran between Hunter's legs. He just stood there, his breath ragged from rushing inside because he thought something had happened. Clearly, he had been wrong, as it didn't seem like anything was wrong. In fact, on the floor in front of a red-faced, grinning Carla were empty bottles of expensive alcoholic wine, a clear sign she had been drinking. His fists clenched beside him, anger boiling at the highest degree, running hot through his blood.

"Hey, baby," Carla slurred, staggering towards Hunter, confirming his suspicions and elevating his boiling rage.