

30.

"Hello, the unexpected. You've come again, uninvited and unyielding, reminding me that life's greatest turns often arrive without warning."

Estelle stood in the corner of the crowded room, her breath fanning over the glass of wine she pretended to be drinking while she tried to ignore the hundred glances pressing on her. The room was buzzing, but she could still feel the suffocating tension—the whispered rumours, the lingering stares from both Hayes and Hunter and the glares from Carla, who was trying to shift Hunter's attention from her to herself. It was oddly satisfying, but even so, she couldn't stop her eyes from searching for the little girl, nor could she stop her heart from pounding in her chest, the familiar ache throbbing at the memory of her loss and all she had endured, accompanied by the uncomfortable stares.

With a shaky sigh, she placed her glass down and quickly slipped through a side door, her heels clicking against the pavement as she found herself in a quiet outdoor space. The night air was crisp, a welcome change from the stifling heat of the party and the uncomfortable gazes. She closed her eyes, inhaling deeply, feeling the chill cut through the emotional fog clouding her mind. For a moment, she was alone, finally able to breathe. Finally able to think past the suffocating pain she had to endure. But then, something tugged at her hand.

Startled, she jumped, her eyes snapping open.

A small girl stood before her, her tiny fingers still curled around hers.

"Mara?" Estelle whispered in surprise, her heart skipping a beat as recognition set in. The little girl blinked up at her with wide, innocent eyes, her face illuminated by the soft light from the pool. It was Mara, Hunter and Carla's daughter.

"It's you," Mara said in her babyish voice, her head tilted back as she stared at Estelle.

Estelle frowned. "What are you doing here, sweetheart? Where's your mom or dad?" Her voice wavered slightly, unsure of how to act around the child. She glanced around, searching for Carla or Hunter, but found no one. This wasn't right. She shouldn't be alone with this child—especially their child and especially with the memory she carries with her—her child.

Mara's eyes brightened as she spoke in that blunt, unfiltered way children often do. "You're the one who makes my mom angry."

Estelle froze, her mouth parting in shock. The unexpectedness of the statement caught her off guard, and for a moment, she had no idea how to respond, only staring down at the little girl in disbelief. "What... what do you mean?"

"She gets mad whenever she sees your face on TV," Mara explained, still clutching Estelle's finger.

For a moment, Estelle couldn't find her voice. The shock of Mara's blunt honesty held her in place. She hadn't expected this, especially not from her child. But then she couldn't help but feel thrilled deep down in her heart. So, Carla wasn't as unaffected as she pretended to be.

Estelle let out a small, bitter laugh, shaking her head. "That's... refreshing." She muttered, amused, then crouched down to Mara's level. "Your mom gets upset when she sees me?"

Mara nodded.

Estelle chuckled again, a light, almost disbelieving laugh that bubbled out of her. She couldn't help herself. The knowledge that Carla was rattled by her presence was oddly satisfying. How interesting. Mara's innocent laugh joined hers, and Estelle's heart felt lighter until a sharp voice cut through the air.

"What the hell is going on here?"

Estelle's laughter died in her throat as Carla stormed over, her face contorted with fury. Without warning, she yanked Mara away from Estelle, gripping the child's arm so tightly that Estelle instinctively reached out to steady her.

"Get away from my child!" Carla shouted, pushing Mara behind her, her voice shaking with anger.

Estelle straightened with a soft sigh, regaining her composure, trying to hide the sudden pang of hurt she felt from being separated from the little girl, who was now peeking at her from behind her mother's back. "Your child came to me, Carla. I didn't—"

"I don't care!" Carla snapped, her voice rising. "What were you doing with her?"

"Having a conversation," Estelle replied with a nonchalant shrug, enjoying how much it annoyed Carla. Who wouldn't enjoy seeing her foe rattled just by her mere existence? "She said something interesting. Something about you getting upset every time you see me."

Carla's face flushed red with anger—or was it embarrassment? Estelle couldn't tell.

"You better stay away from my child," Carla warned, her voice low and menacing.

"Like I said," Estelle shot back, her voice calm but sharp, "I didn't seek her out. She came to me." Her lips curled into a smirk. "And frankly, it's satisfying to know that just being alive bothers you so much. It's a little attering, really."

Carla's face reddened in anger, "What did you say to her?" Carla demanded, her voice shaking with barely contained rage.

Estelle's smile widened, cruel and mocking. "Nothing, really. Though I'm curious. Why do I upset you so much? I mean, after all, you stole my husband, didn't you? Shouldn't you be happy?"

Carla's lips twisted into a sneer, and Estelle's heart made a nervous lip. "Twice," she said.

"What?"

"Twice," Carla repeated, her eyes gleaming with cruel satisfaction. "I stole him twice, in case you forgot."

The words hit Estelle like a punch to the gut. For a second, she felt the familiar sting and memories of betrayal wash over her. But then, something shifted inside her—anger and disgust at Carla's shamelessness. How could someone be this shameless? She wouldn't give Carla the satisfaction of seeing her break. She wouldn't let her win. Not here, not now. Not ever.

So with a smile, she shot back, "Yet, I'm the one who's still smiling," her voice calm yet taunting, watching as Carla's triumphant expression faltered just a little. "You see, you're nothing more than a greedy little girl who wants what she can't have. And now that you have him? You're still not satisfied. Because you can never be satisfied. You're starving and will never quench your greed, no matter what. And that's exactly why you're angry, why you can never attain happiness."

Carla's eyes blazed. She took a step forward, folding her arms across her chest, the gesture pushing her cleavage up. "At least I got what I wanted," she hissed. "What should be said about you? The woman who got dumped after chasing a man for her entire life?"

Estelle's pulse quickened, her anger simmering beneath the surface, ready to explode right into Carla's not-so-ugly face. But she kept her voice calm, her brow arched in a mocking gesture. "And yet, here you are, insecure, jealous, clinging to the fact that I still matter more than you ever will."

Carla's smile faltered. "You don't matter. Not anymore. What am I even saying? You never mattered, not once." Estelle's heart tightened. She was right. She had never mattered—not even once in Hunter's life. It had always been Carla. But tonight—or recently—she mattered. It was obvious, and Carla knew it, because why else had Hunter's eyes been on her all through the night? She had caught him looking at her several times and seen Carla try to get his attention to no avail.

"Then why are you so angry?" Estelle took a threatening step forward, forcing Carla to take one back. "If I'm nothing, why do I still make you feel like this? Why were Hunter's eyes on me all through the night?"

"Shut up! They weren't!" Carla hissed, taking another step back as Estelle advanced.

But Estelle wasn't done. "You stole him, but you'll never really have him, will you? You'll always wonder if you were enough. You'll always be afraid that the only reason he's with you is because you tricked him into it."

Carla's eyes filled with rage, her breath coming in sharp bursts. She backed up again, her heels wobbling on the edge of the pool.

"And that's why you'll always lose, because you coveted what wasn't yours," Estelle whispered, her eyes locked on Carla's.

With one final step, Carla, whose body was shaking with barely contained anger, slipped. Her eyes widened in surprise and terror, mirroring Estelle's. Before she could regain her balance, and before Estelle could grab her ailing hands, Carla tumbled backwards and splashed into the pool. Water sprayed everywhere, and a gasp escaped Estelle. For a few seconds, all Estelle could do was stare until her memory instantly reminded her of the disaster.

Carla can't swim.

Shit! And then... splash