

36.

5 Points

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*"I feel a lightness in my heart, not because the pain has faded, but because I've finally let it go."*

Estelle stepped out of her car, the crisp morning air biting her skin as the warm sun bathed the street in a soft glow. She glanced around, relieved to see that, for once, the reporters who usually crowded the company entrance like vultures were gone. *Maybe today won't be as disastrous as the last few days*, she thought. But the moment she rounded the corner of the first floor, her hopes soured when Hunter stepped into her line of sight. She stifled a groan as he said, "Estelle, can I have a moment with you?"

Her eyes narrowed as she gauged his expressionless face and, for a brief second, she considered walking away, but that would make her seem weak, so she replied curtly, "Yeah, sure."

He led her into an empty room, closing the door behind them. The air between them was thick and suffocating, and the sudden quiet made the large room feel claustrophobic. Hunter tugged at the neck of his tie, clearly uncomfortable, but Estelle stood tall, arms crossed, waiting.

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"You called me here for?" she asked, her tone cold and impatient.

"Who is that Hayes to you?" Hunter blurted out, the question catching her off guard.

Estelle blinked, her head tilting slightly. *Is this what he brought me here for?*

Hunter waved a hand dismissively, feeling stupid at the expression she gave him. "Forget it. Doesn't matter."

Estelle rolled her eyes. *No, it doesn't matter,* she thought, irritated by his sudden jealousy.

"What I really need to know," Hunter continued, his voice hardening, "is why you went to the media. I didn't think you'd stoop so low. Do you realize what that stunt has done to my career? The board is setting up a meeting because of it." His voice rose with anger. "You wanted revenge? Fine. But why like that?"

Estelle's lips parted in disbelief. *He brought me here for this? To cry about his precious reputation?* Her shock quickly turned to anger, her chest tightening as she absorbed his words. "I can't believe this," she finally said, her voice filled with disbelief. "You brought me in here to whine about your reputation?"

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Hunter flinched, not expecting her sharp tone. "No, that's not—"

"Why do I owe you an explanation for anything I do?" Estelle snapped, cutting him off. "You expect

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me to check in with you before making a move when you didn't?"

"That's different!" Hunter snapped, his frustration growing. "I didn't plan for Carla, but you—you planned this media stunt. Did you even think about how it would affect my reputation?"

A cold laugh escaped Estelle's lips. She felt a

strange clarity, like seeing him for the first time for who he truly was. "Your reputation?" Her voice was laced with disbelief. "That's what this is about?" She took a step closer, her voice low and venomous. "What about *my* reputation? It's fine if mine is dragged through the mud as long as you come out clean?" Her voice rose with anger, then she scoffed bitterly. "I can't believe I wasted so many years loving a selfish man like you. What was I even thinking?" Her words pierced the air, causing Hunter's stoic expression to falter as shock flashed in his eyes for the first time.

His mouth opened, but no sound came out. He hadn't expected her to be this bold. This was not the Estelle he was used to, and he was stunned beyond words.

"You haven't even apologized," she continued, her voice shaking, "not for the humiliation, and certainly not for the loss of my child."

That got Hunter, and his heart shattered painfully at the statement. His face fell, and for a brief moment, genuine pain crossed his features. "Our child," he corrected, his voice softer. "That child was ours. I felt that loss just as much as you did." That was his deepest wound, the one he could never fully express.

Estelle's eyes widened in disbelief, her blood boiling with anger at his audacity. "You felt the loss just as much as I did?" she questioned, her voice rising with each word. She let out a bitter, mocking laugh, and Hunter could only regard her with a look of confusion.

"Est—"

"You understand nothing," Estelle shouted, her voice filled with anger. Her eyes sparkled with unshed tears, and Hunter took a step back, surprised by her intensity. "You didn't even know I was pregnant until I lost the baby. You weren't the one who felt the life growing inside of me, only to have it ripped away. You weren't the one lying on that hospital bed, waking up to find your stomach cut open and your child gone. You didn't lose both your child and your soul in the same breath."

Her voice cracked, but she refused to let the tears fall. Not now. Not in front of him. "You didn't lose anything. So don't you dare compare your pain to mine when you were off with your mistress and your child."

The room felt hot and suffocating like it was closing in on him. Hunter stood there, dumbfounded, unable to speak. He'd never seen Estelle like this—so raw and so pissed. Maybe he

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had once, at the hospital, but not this close. He thought he knew her, thought he could predict how she'd react, but he was wrong.

"Do you know what I regret the most?" Estelle whispered, her voice shaking but steady. Hunter couldn't meet her gaze, his heart beating rapidly as if wanting to flee. "I regret ever letting you dictate my life. I regret losing the most precious thing in my world because of you. And most of all, I regret ever loving you, even with all the pain you caused me." Her voice softened, but the words cut deep. "So no, Hunter. You will never understand my pain. Not in a million years. Not even at your death."

Hunter stood frozen, his mouth open, words caught in his throat. He hadn't anticipated this ferocity, this raw emotion, and this honest and bitter confession of hers, which made his heart clench painfully. He had come here expecting the same calm, composed Estelle he once knew, but this woman before him...she left him speechless.

"It seems we're done here," Estelle said, her voice regaining its calm as if nothing had happened. She turned toward the door, not waiting for a response. She paused for a moment, her back to him. "I don't have any ill intentions toward you or

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your family, Hunter. As long as you stay out of my way, we'll be fine."

With that, she walked out of the room, leaving Hunter standing there, dazed, and still trying to comprehend the whirlwind of emotions she had unleashed.

However, as Estelle walked out of the room, her legs felt wobbly beneath her, her body trembling from the intensity of their exchange as she rapidly blinked back tears. But there was a strange lightness inside her, as though a heavy weight had finally lifted from her shoulders. She had said everything she had held inside for so long, and even though her heart ached, she felt proud. She had stood up for herself—and could never be prouder than she was at that moment.

But as she made her way down the hall, her head bowed and lost in thought, she collided with something solid. A yelp escaped her lips as her body lurched backwards, ready to crash to the floor. *Great, she thought bitterly. A fall after a brave speech. Perfect.*

However, before she could hit the ground, a strong hand caught her by the waist, steadying her mid-fall. Her breath hitched, and she opened her eyes, dreading who it might be. But when her gaze

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lifted, she found herself staring into the familiar face of Ryan.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his brow furrowed with concern.

For a moment, all she could do was stare up at him, wide-eyed and silent. *Of course, it's him. It's always him*, she thought. *Always showing up at her worst moments.* And yet, she couldn't help but feel a small sense of relief that it wasn't Hunter standing before her.

Ryan pulled her back onto her feet, giving her some space to steady herself.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked again, his brow furrowing when he noticed her lips quivering. For a second, Ryan feared she was about to cry. Instead, she burst into laughter, catching him completely off guard.

"Sorry," she muttered between giggles, covering her mouth as she tried to compose herself. But it was futile as she continued laughing loudly into her hand. She wouldn't be able to make him understand, not that she understood the reason she was laughing, but she felt a lightness in her chest, which felt good and made her want to laugh for a long time.



