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"Every smile and every gesture from her was a knife to his heart, each one cutting deeper than the last, yet no matter how much it hurt, he couldn't tear his eyes away."

The car hummed softly as it glided through the city streets, but inside, the atmosphere was anything but smooth. Hunter gripped the car seat with an intensity that matched his growing frustration. To his right, after Mara, sat Carla slouched against the headrest, dark sunglasses hiding the bags under her eyes. Her brow was knitted as she cradled her head with one hand—hangover, again.

Hunter's jaw clenched as he glanced at her, disgust simmering inside him. She hadn't made it home until near dawn, dead drunk, leaving Mara with the caretaker, who was about to leave. What kind of mother leaves her child alone like that? The image of Carla stumbling through the door last night burned in his mind, fanning the flames of his anger.

He shouldn't have been surprised by her irresponsibility, especially after seeing those

photos that had poisoned his thoughts. Those pictures—of Carla, carefree and filthy—were still etched in his memory, even though she didn't know he had seen them. He didn't want to think about them, but they were impossible to ignore, just like Carla herself.

Estelle would never... The thought crept in before he could stop it, and he clenched his fist beside him. It wasn't just the disappointment of what his life had become with Carla—it was the constant comparisons that haunted him. Lately, every argument, every misstep, made him think of Estelle, of how things used to be before everything fell apart. He hated that his mind kept drifting back to her, but it did—over and over again. Even though he had been cold to her and never wished to spend quality time with her, he had felt comfortable in his own home. But now...

"Aren't we there yet?" Carla's voice was hoarse, breaking through his thoughts. She shifted in her seat, groaning softly from the headache she was clearly battling. Hunter gritted his teeth but didn't acknowledge her, even as the driver replied.

"Five more minutes, ma'am."

Today's event was a bonding program for the company's shareholders and their children—a way

to build connections and foster relationships, both business and personal. Hunter glanced at Mara, who was quietly playing with her doll beside him. Her innocent face, completely unaware of the tension between her parents, was the only thing keeping him grounded.

Carla shifted again, her irritation palpable as she mumbled and cursed under her breath.

Hunter's jaw clenched, but he didn't respond or acknowledge her. He kept his eyes forward, determined not to let Carla's words rile him up. There was no point in picking a fight now, especially not with Mara present between them. The house had become unbearable since Carla was pelted with flour and eggs, then broke her arm after tripping on the floor. He had tried to control his anger despite the disgust he felt for her after seeing the pictures, but for Mara's sake, he had kept it all in. However, it had become harder to hold back when Carla saw Estelle's interview, and he eventually exploded, comparing Carla to Estelle during one of their arguments. That slip had broken the final bonds between them, leaving a distasteful hollow gap. Not that he cared. But now, as they sat in the moving car, with Mara oblivious to the tension, he just hoped Carla would act civil when they arrived—for their sake.

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The car rolled to a stop in front of a towering, sleek, and modern building as several other shareholders and their families filed inside. Hunter unbuckled his seatbelt, already dreading the social pleasantries ahead. Carla, however, slipped out of the car without a word, her attitude cold and detached as usual, not even bothering to take Mara with her. Hunter sighed, finishing unbuckling himself before turning to Mara.

"Come on, sweetheart," he said softly, lifting his daughter from the car. Mara smiled up at him, her innocence palpable.

They walked side by side into the large event hall, and almost immediately, Hunter's eyes began searching for Estelle. He couldn't help it. It had become a reflex—one that only deepened his sense of guilt and regret. He blamed it on Estelle and Ryan, the gigolo with the long hair. It disgusted him to see a grown man fawn over a woman like Ryan did with Estelle. It made him want to puke every time he saw them together. They seemed so close that everyone had started matchmaking them, which he found that he hated. One reason was that he still found Ryan suspicious, and the other was that they had almost cost him his seat.

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He had been so engrossed in staring at them one night that he had forgotten about Mr. Ace, a large investor he had managed to convince to meet with him. When the conversation was going well, and he was beginning to win Ace's favour, Estelle and Ryan showed up. They had kissed right there in the restaurant, where they could have been photographed. Mr. Ace had left in anger after noticing Hunter's divided attention, almost causing him to lose his chance at redemption. Hunter had hated Ryan even more after that and thought Estelle was too foolish not to see he was playing her. Yet, his thoughts still drifted back to her—just like his eyes were doing now. And then he saw her.

Estelle was standing near one of the tables, her back turned to him at first. But when she turned slightly, his inside froze when he caught a glimpse of her face. She looked... happy, and beside her stood Ryan, of course, leaning in close, clearly engaged in whatever conversation they were having.

Hunter's chest tightened painfully. It wasn't just from the sight of her—it was the way she laughed. It wasn't the kind of laugh she used to force at public events for his sake; it was genuine. The same one she wore whenever she was with Ryan,

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and never with him. That laugh churned his heart with feelings he should never feel.

For a moment, the room's noise faded, and all he could see was Estelle. It was like an invisible force

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pulling him to her—one he couldn't fight, even if he wanted to. Although he tried to pretend it was not there, it became stronger when he thought he was going to lose her completely to that suspicious man, and it clawed its way back to the surface every time he laid eyes on her.

But his silent longing didn't go unnoticed.

Carla's eyes narrowed as she saw where his attention had landed, and her grip on Mara's hand tightened. She watched the way Hunter's gaze never left Estelle, the way his entire demeanour shifted when he saw her. Rage bubbled inside her, but she swallowed it, for now.

Still gripping Mara's hand tightly, Carla bent down and whispered harshly to the little girl, "Don't talk to anyone here, especially that woman." She nodded toward Estelle. "They're bad people."

Hunter heard the words, and anger bubbled inside him, but he said nothing. He was too focused on trying to compose himself and maintain the perfect family image and confronting Carla now would only worsen things. He needed to keep calm, for his and Mara's sake.

So instead, he made their presence known. Soon enough, the ceremony began, and the room buzzed with conversation. People mingled with each other, trying to get their kids to talk to the kids of the top shareholders. Hunter stood with Mara at his side as she played with other kids, while he conversed and smiled at parents who obviously thought he might be of benefit in the future. But even as he did, his eyes drifted toward Estelle again and again. He couldn't help it. He

watched her talk with people, play with kids, then returned to talking with Ryan, laughing, unaware—or perhaps very aware—of his presence. Every smile and every gesture felt like a stab to his chest, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't look away.

At the corner of the room, Carla sat nursing her headache, her eyes shooting daggers at Estelle, then at the back of Hunter's head. She barely cared about the couple he was talking to. Her eyes were fixed on Estelle. How could she smile after everything she did to her? After turning her into a villain? And now she dared to laugh, like nothing had happened?

From the corner of Hunter's eye, he saw Mara break away from the kid she had been playing with and make a beeline for Estelle, who was still deep in conversation with Ryan, her body leaning toward him as he whispered something in her ear. Hunter's heart skipped a beat, but before he could react, Mara was already standing in front of Estelle, her innocent eyes wide with curiosity as she tugged on Estelle's emerald dress.

"s**t!"

"Mara?" Estelle gasped in surprise, her eyes flickering from Mara to the rest of the room in a

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mix of shock and nervousness. "What are you doing here, sweetie?" she whispered, still searching for her parents and not wanting Carla's trouble.

"Are you a bad person?" the little girl asked with all innocence, her eyes wide, her lips coated with sweet slime pouted.


Estelle froze, her smile faltering as she looked down at the little girl, completely caught off guard. For a moment, she didn't know how to respond. She glanced up, locking eyes with Ryan, who was watching the child with a furrowed brow, then looked across the room, searching for answers.


"Who told you that?" Estelle asked gently, kneeling at Mara's level.

Before Mara could answer, Carla stormed over, her face twisted with fury.

"Get away from her!"

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