



The Uninvited Guest

Lisa Hayes



Elena smoothed her floral dress over her eight-month pregnant belly, beaming as golden afternoon light filtered through the backyard party tent. Pastel balloons and fresh flowers decorated every corner while close friends laughed over sweet cupcakes and lemonade. Standing right beside her, her husband Julian smiled warmly, lovingly holding her hand.



Over the past few weeks, Julian had seemed slightly distracted, his mind occasionally lingering elsewhere during quiet evenings at home. Yet seeing him host their loved ones with such genuine joy erased any lingering doubts from Elena's mind. Today was a beautiful celebration of love and welcoming their upcoming baby into the world.



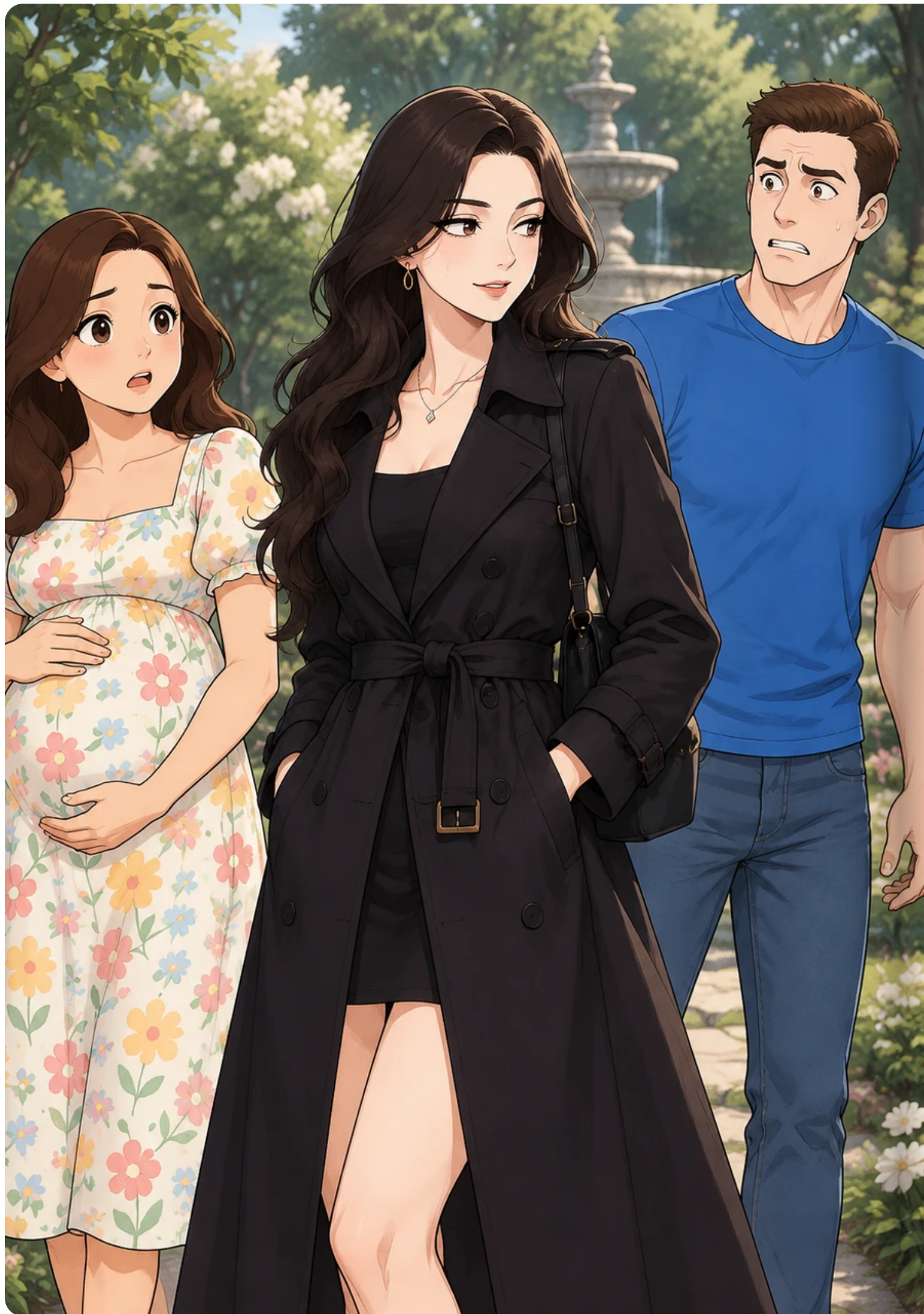
The cheerful chatter came to a sudden halt when the garden gate clicked open. A striking, elegant woman wearing a sleek dark trench coat strolled unhurriedly into the pastel-filled lawn. She carried a luxurious silver-ribboned gift box, her confident stance contrasting sharply with the gentle decor of the shower.



Julian turned toward the entrance, and the glass in his hand wobbled violently as his face drained of all color. His joyful smile evaporated in an instant, replaced by a look of sheer panic and shock. Elena felt his hand grow cold before he slowly let go of hers.



Without acknowledging the confused glances of the guests, the mysterious stranger walked straight past the food table toward the couple. She placed the silver gift box deliberately on the main display table right next to the baby gifts. Her calm, sharp gaze remained locked onto Julian.



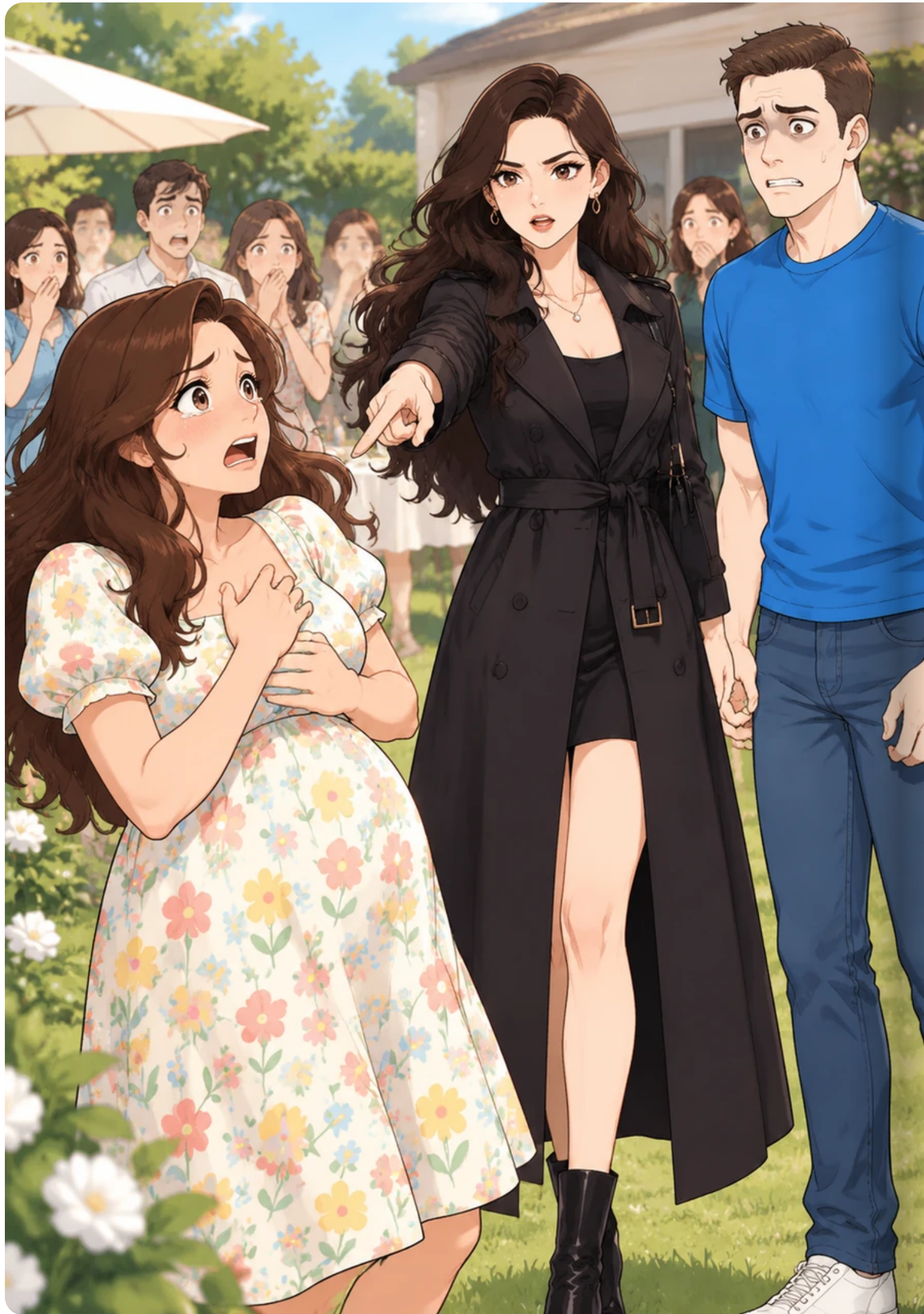
The woman broke the heavy silence with a smooth, clear voice that echoed across the quiet garden. She looked directly at Elena before turning her eyes back to Julian with a faint, unreadable smile. 'Congratulations, Julian,' she said softly. 'I didn't know you were having another baby.'



A collective gasp rippled through the gathered friends and family as the word echoed in the air. Elena's breath caught in her throat, her hand instinctively dropping to cover her stomach while her mind raced to understand. The joyful atmosphere instantly evaporated into suffocating tension.



Panicking, Julian stepped forward and tried to gently take the woman by the arm to usher her away from the staring crowd. She firmly pulled her arm back, refusing to move a single step. She held her head high, completely unfazed by his urgency.



'You should probably tell her before I do,' the woman announced clearly for the entire yard to hear. 'After all, Julian and I have been married for five years.' Elena felt the ground slip beneath her feet as gasps of disbelief broke out around them.



Before the shock could turn into complete chaos, Julian frantically pulled out his phone and tapped the screen with trembling hands. Holding up a digital document and a family photograph for everyone to see, he blurted out frantically, 'That's not my wife! That is my late brother's widow!'