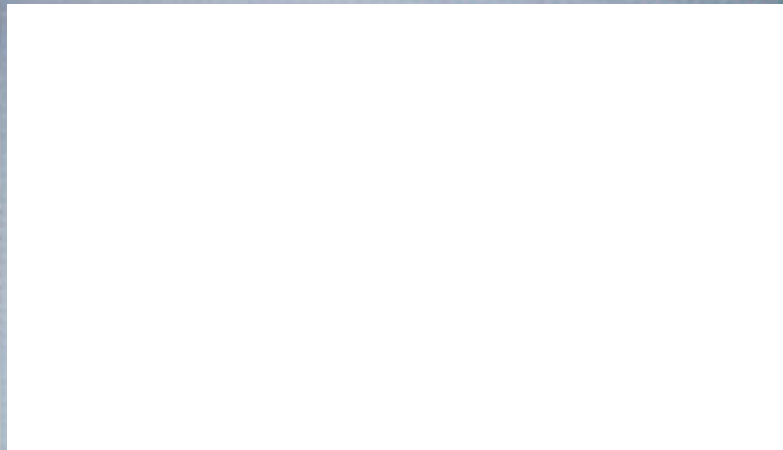


37.

37.

Ryan had spent years trying to avoid becoming like the other rich elites—heartless, greedy, and manipulative. It was one of the reasons he despised the wealthy, and another reason he



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couldn't just sit back and watch Estelle be slandered. How could they slander someone they had known for so long without checking the facts, all because of wealth and reputation? That's all that mattered to them. And the only person who

37.

could've stood up for her had sat through it all as if it were none of his concern. That had pissed Ryan off, making him act like a child—well, an annoying child.

Anger burned inside him again as his car came to a halt at the company. That was why he couldn't hold himself back. But right now, seeing Estelle step out of her car, his chest tightened in regret. Maybe he should have asked for her permission first before acting, but he was so upset he couldn't wait. Moreover, he saw what she did at the interview—she was courageous, and he felt proud. It was one step closer to breaking free from the past, and he marvelled at her courage.

His stride came to a halt just as he saw Estelle and Hunter disappear into a room. Instinctively, he moved toward them, but he noticed there was no force in how Estelle walked—it was intentional. His heart raced, despite knowing that. Would she be alright?

His memory flashed back to a time when his mother had come to visit him at his office. He had been so upset and acted rudely towards her, but she hadn't left. It wasn't even 30 minutes later when her husband came to pick her up. She had hesitated, given him a look, but he ignored it—too

37.

angry to care. When he saw her a few days later, she had an injury. Still, with his anger brewing inside him, he had acted nonchalant about it. Now, his chest tightened in regret.

But Estelle was different. Her stride wasn't hesitant, and Hunter wouldn't do anything in a company like this. Even if he tried—Ryan wanted to believe he wouldn't—but if he did, Ryan wouldn't be able to hold back his anger long enough to stop himself from breaking every big bone in Hunter's body.

The door to the room Ryan had been glaring at swung open, and he rearranged his expression just as he saw Estelle. She didn't see him at first, her head bowed. He could have slipped away unnoticed, but his feet remained glued to the floor. Curiosity spread through him as his eyes roved over her, searching for any sign of mishandling. He was so focused on looking for signs on her body that he didn't realize he was moving toward her until she slammed into his hard chest.

He immediately reached out to grab her waist just as a yelp escaped her lips, and for a moment, they stood in that awkward position, his heart racing. He knew she was beautiful, but this close—with her warm body pressed into his, and her

37.

intoxicating scent—he couldn't think. He was hypnotized. He wanted more, to hold her tighter, to dip his head into the crook of her neck and breathe in her scent, and... He quickly detached himself from her, freeing himself from the burning desire. Although his hands still rested on her shoulders, he managed to ask, "Are you okay?" His voice came out hoarse with concern as he noticed her face turning red, her lips quivering as if she wanted to cry. Oh no! His eyes darted around, searching for other people.

Suddenly, she burst into laughter, and he jerked back in shock. What the hell? She kept laughing, not just any laugh but the kind that transformed her whole face, mesmerizing and captivating at the same time. For a long moment, Ryan was confused, but only for a short while. His confusion and worry shifted to amusement, and before he knew it, he was laughing along with her.

"Rough day?" he asked with a half-smile.

"You have no idea," Estelle replied, shaking her head and wiping away the stray tears that had begun to fall.

Across the hall, in an office, Hunter sat behind his desk, seething with anger and jealousy. She was laughing. After everything they'd said. After

37.

everything, she could still stand there, smiling like none of it mattered—and with no one else but Ryan. A sharp pang of jealousy shot through him, settling in his chest like hot coals. His hand tightened around the pen in his grip until it snapped under his clenched fist.

What was going on between them? He could have sworn Estelle had no friends, yet earlier, he had seen them laughing together. Had they known each other before or after their marriage?

But.... how could a laugh make someone look so different, so... beautiful? He didn't think he'd ever seen Estelle laugh this hard before. He should have remembered if he had, right? But he didn't, which meant she hadn't. He could understand that things hadn't been perfect between them, but surely there would have been a time when she laughed like that. So why hadn't she? Why was she here, instead, laughing with that strange guy?

"Sir." Hunter's head snapped up at the voice. "Your pen," his secretary muttered in a shaky voice, pointing to the broken pen in his hand, which was now dripping ink onto a very important document.

"s**t," he muttered. He needed to sign that as soon as possible. "What were you doing, staring?" he shouted, directing his anger at the poor woman

37.

whose eyes widened in fear.

"No, I—"

"Get out!" he bellowed, cutting her off as she jumped, clearly confused.

"I said get out and get me a freshly typed document. Now!" He threw the stained papers at her, and she quickly dashed out.

Before the door could fully close behind her, it flew open again. His father stormed in, his face flushed with anger.

"What the hell have you done, Hunter?" Paul spat.

Hunter's jaw clenched as he glared across the table. "What do you want?"

Paul let out a cold chuckle. "Is that pride I'm hearing? From a man who's about to lose everything?" he mocked, smirking at Hunter's glare.

Hunter's heart flipped, and his jaw tightened, but he said nothing. What could he say? The truth was, he knew the board would soon vote against him—maybe even now—and no amount of money could save him this time, not unless he turned to his father, a path he swore he'd never take.

"You've lost control of everything," Paul continued,

37.

pacing. "The shareholders heard everything. That little lover's spat you had with Estelle? They heard it all." Paul stopped, smirking. "And oh, they're eating it up."

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Hunter's heart sank with fear. There was no way that could be true... unless—the adjoining speaker. He remembered slamming his hand on something while talking to Estelle. Could that have been the console? s**t!

"They feel sorry for her now. Can you believe that?" Paul sneered. "You've made her more of a victim. And as if that wasn't bad enough..." He slid his

37.

tablet across the desk. "This will bury you."

Hunter stared down at the screen, his pulse quickening. It was Carla—pictured in the arms of different men, each photo showing her in compromising positions. Each one is worse than the last. His blood ran cold, the words stuck in his throat. He might've dismissed the photos as doctored, but those blue eyes and lips... they were unmistakable.

Paul's voice was cold and mocking. "Surprised? Imagine what the media will do when they get a hold of it."

Hunter's head snapped up in shock. "The media doesn't have this?"

"Not yet." Paul smiled cruelly. "But if you don't act fast, they will. And when they do, my reputation—the empire I built—will be tarnished forever."

"Where did you get these?" Hunter's voice was tight, a mixture of fear and rage, his eyes returning to the tablet. He couldn't believe his eyes. "How did you even—"

Paul waved off the question. "Irrelevant. What matters is stopping these images before they go public and dragging everything I've worked for into the mud." His voice rose as he jabbed a finger

37.

toward himself. "So here's what's going to happen. You end things with her immediately, fix this mess, and go back to Estelle. Or—"

"Or what?" Hunter snapped, cutting him off. His patience is long gone. "What else can you do, huh? Besides the same threats you've always made?" His voice rose, venom creeping in. "All you care about is your reputation. Your precious image. Do you think I wanted any of this? You pushed me into this mess. You pushed me toward Estelle, knowing damn well I never loved her. And you drove Carla out of my life because she doesn't fit into your perfect picture."

Paul opened his mouth to speak, but Hunter wasn't finished. Years of suppressed anger surged forward like an explosion.

"You manipulated everything! You made me doubt who I even wanted! You ruined everything—all because of your greed, your obsession with control." Hunter's chest heaved, his anger radiating through him like fire. "So, don't you dare blame me for the mess you created!"

Paul's eyes narrowed, anger replacing the smirk on his face. A long, tense silence stretched between them before he finally spoke, his voice dangerously low. "That greed you despise so

37.

much? It fed you. That bullshit you rant about? It gave you everything you have.”

Hunter shot back, his voice hoarse. “I never asked for any of it! I never wanted any of this! If that’s your excuse—”

“Excuse?” Paul bellowed. “You’ve lived off my success your entire life! Without me, you’d be nothing! A nobody.”

Hunter’s heart pounded in his chest. “Maybe I would’ve been better off as a nobody than whatever it is I am now—a puppet in your sick game of greed and control.”

Paul’s eyes narrowed, and his mouth opened and closed for a few seconds, a little stunned by Hunter’s outburst. It wasn’t the first time Hunter had rebelled against him. In fact, their relationship had always been like this for as long as he could remember. But he hadn’t expected Hunter to snap back at him at this desperate moment when he needed him the most. Hunter certainly inherited his stubbornness, and Paul didn’t know if he should be proud or furious.

“You’ll do exactly what I say, or watch yourself go down,” Paul finally said. With that, he stormed out of the office.

37.

Hunter stood frozen for a moment, fists clenched at his sides, seething with rage. His entire body trembled, from both fear and an overwhelming flood of anger coursing through him.

Would he be a bad son if he admitted that he detested his father? That he had hated Paul for years, for being a manipulative control freak, for treating him like a puppet his entire life? Did he even have the right to feel that way anymore, now that his father had already won?

A harsh and throaty grunt filled with anger escaped him, and he swiped his arm across the desk, sending everything crashing to the floor. Papers, pens, files—all of it scattered and smashed hard on the ground. But the destruction did nothing to calm the fire inside him. If anything, it only burned hotter.



19

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66

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