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*"This wasn't the plan. None of this was supposed to happen..."*

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Anna asked for what felt like the millionth time, her concerned eyes flickering between Estelle's reflection in the mirror and the hair she was weaving.

Estelle rolled her eyes and shook her head at her mother's uncertainty, prompting Anna to firmly hold her head still, sending her a stern look through the mirror. Estelle burst into laughter.

"I told you, it's nothing serious. Just a friendly dinner to show appreciation," Estelle replied.

Earlier today, after that laughing spree with Ryan—which had turned her cheeks red with embarrassment—they'd separated as soon as some workers interrupted. It had saved her from further awkwardness because she had no explanation for her sudden laughter. If the workers hadn't shown up, she wouldn't have known what to say, and it would've been mortifying. Even now, her cheeks reddened at the memory.

But for tonight, a different kind of guilt made her

heart race. She'd overheard Hunter's conversation with one of the major shareholders, and they'd mentioned meeting at a particular restaurant. At the time, she hadn't known what had come over her, but it had seemed like the perfect opportunity to get under Hunter's skin. He'd been sticking his nose in her business recently, and a part of her wanted to see his reaction when he saw her with Ryan. That's why she had done something impulsive. She'd asked Ryan to dinner—not as a date, but as a way to thank him for his help. Her face heated up again as she recalled Ryan's expression when she had blurted out that excuse. He had looked at her like he could see right through her, making her feel awkward and guilty for using him in her childish scheme.

"Hmmm, I wouldn't mind if it was more than just a 'thank you' dinner," Anna teased.

"Mom!" Estelle whined, turning to face her, only to find Anna smiling mischievously.

"Don't blame me for wanting you to move on. After all, I'd seen the guy's picture, and I even had a brief moment where I wished I could marry him myself. He's that handsome."

"Mom!" Estelle repeated, her face flushing with a mix of amusement and embarrassment.

"Okay, okay," Anna said with a laugh. "It was just a brief thought."

They shared a few light moments of laughter before the mood shifted as Anna sighed. "But, sweetie, that doesn't mean you should rush into anything just to get over Hunter. Take your time, okay?"

Estelle's heart clenched at her mother's words, which unknowingly sounded like her mother was aware of her childish game, which she wasn't. She merely nodded, saying nothing in return.

Later, as Estelle stepped out of her car, her heart hammered in her chest. It wasn't the grand size of the restaurant that intimidated her, but rather the guilt of using Ryan to provoke Hunter. She knew she didn't need to go this far; her presence alone already seemed to get under his skin. But there was that childish part of her—the one that wanted to see Hunter's reaction when he saw her with someone else. The thought alone was enough to send her nerves into overdrive.

After a long, hesitant breath, she squared her shoulders and walked inside. The restaurant was luxurious, made for the elite. It was mostly empty, the few patrons scattered among the large, spacious tables under grand chandeliers. The soft

and warm lighting made the caramel walls and dark wood furnishings glow with an inviting elegance. Her eyes landed on Ryan almost instantly.

Her heart did an unexpected flip when she noticed he was already looking at her, his silver eyes lazily roaming over her, burning a trail along her skin. His hair was tied back tightly as usual, revealing his sharp jawline, the straight bridge of his nose, and his rosy lips. However, his mesmerizing silver eyes stood out—cool yet intense.

"The hair," she blurted out as soon as she reached him, cringing the moment the words left her mouth. "Why are you growing it?" Her cheeks turned pink with embarrassment. Trust her to say something weird in an attempt to cover her awkwardness.

Ryan let out a deep, hearty laugh, the kind that softened his face and made his silver eyes crinkle. His smile revealed a perfect set of teeth, with a slight gap she hadn't noticed before. What a beauty to behold.

"You're... different," Ryan said, still chuckling, his voice warm and amused.

Estelle blinked out of her daze, her face turning an

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even darker shade of red when his words sank in. "How different?" she muttered, trying to keep the conversation going now that she had stepped on the gas.

"In a surprising way," Ryan said, his silver eyes

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sparkling with playfulness. "I'm not usually a fan of surprises, but you always manage to stun me."

Her blush deepened. Just then, her eyes flickered to the back of the restaurant, where she looked at the obvious silhouette of Hunter. She would recognize him anywhere. A jolt of panic ran through her, and she quickly looked away, feeling

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the heat crawl up her neck as her pulse quickened.

"Are you okay?" Ryan's voice broke through her thoughts. His brows furrowed with concern as he studied her.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said, forcing a smile, and lifting a glass of wine to her lips. "You still haven't answered my question about the hair, though."

"I just like it, long. No deep reason," Ryan said with a lazy shrug, his eyes still assessing her.

"Hmm, interesting," she replied, her attention wavering as she snuck another glance in Hunter's direction while pretending to sip her wine. Her heart pounded harder. Although she couldn't see his eyes, she could feel his gaze on her from across the room, or maybe she thought she did, but she felt a mix of satisfaction and nerves dancing inside her, regardless.

The conversation with Ryan flowed easily enough, but her mind kept wandering, and her eyes kept flickering Hunter's way. Every time Hunter's silhouette shifted in his seat, her stomach tightened. It was totally silly of her, and she knew she was playing a dangerous game. Yet—

"You seem a little distracted."

Estelle blinked, her eyes instantly meeting Ryan's as he assessed her as if he could see right through her. She forced a smile, trying to keep her voice steady. "Just enjoying the view, that's all. I never really spent much time outside, so pardon my drifting and all."

Ryan watched her for a beat longer, then nodded as if he understood more than she let on. "Where do you spend your time, then?"

"Indoors, of course," she replied with a scoff. "I had to manage the house, the laundry, and Hunter's meals. He prefers freshly cooked food, so I always..."

She froze, realizing she had rambled about her marriage routine to Ryan, who was now giving her a completely blank look. Her cheeks turned molten with embarrassment. She had been too distracted to realize she was rambling.

Ryan leaned back in his chair, studying her with that same blank expression. "Do you always plan thank-you dinners with an ulterior motive?" Ryan's voice was low, almost cutting, yet calm.

Estelle blinked, then swallowed, clearly taken aback. "What... what do you mean?"

Ryan's eyes darkened as he leaned forward, his

elbows resting on the table. "You know exactly what I mean, Estelle." He inched closer across the small table, his presence suddenly overwhelming. "You're not here to thank me, are you? It's because of Hunter."

Estelle stiffened, her pulse quickening and her grip tightening on her glass. Was she that obvious? But she kept her face impassive, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing her flustered.

"Hunter doesn't have anything to do with this. And what is that supposed to mean, by the way?" She tried to look upset, but Ryan wasn't buying that.

Ryan chuckled a low and dangerous sound that sent Estelle's stomach into a whirlpool of emotions. "Don't insult me, Estelle. I knew the moment you entered, with your eyes searching the room, that it was because of Hunter. You know, I arrived here right after Hunter and Mr. Ace. I thought it was just one of those coincidences, but you made it obvious the moment your gaze drifted past my face multiple times every minute."

Estelle swallowed hard, her heart racing as she felt the weight of his gaze on her, even though she wasn't meeting his eyes. For a moment, she considered denying it again, but the truth was written all over her face. Ryan knew exactly what



this was about, so there was no point in denying it any further. *Damn the man and his sharp observation.*

"Why don't we drop the pretense?" Ryan's voice dropped lower, almost a whisper, as he rose slightly from his seat and leaned across the table. His presence enveloped her, his face just inches from hers. "You're not here to thank me... You're here to provoke him." His smile turned wolfish.

Estelle turned molten red, her wide eyes locked onto Ryan's silver ones, which seemed darker in the dimly lit room. Her heart raced from both the shock and the sudden proximity, leaving her momentarily unable to think. She started to pull back, ready to deny it again, but before she could, Ryan rose completely from his seat, his body closing the gap between them.

"Don't..." he warned, and she froze.

"...don't pull away," he said softly, his voice low but firm. His face was just inches from hers, eyes locked onto her wide ones, enjoying how her cheeks darkened even in the dim light. "If you really want to make him jealous..." His lips quirked into a mischievous smile, knowing he had her full attention. "Stay still. Let me help you play the game perfectly."

Estelle's shock rendered her motionless, her wide eyes fixed on his smiling ones while her heart pounded in her chest as Ryan's words sank in. Nothing had prepared her for this—nothing could have—and she still found herself in disbelief. Her wide eyes roved over his, coated with mischief, trying to detect any deeper emotion. *He couldn't be serious, right?* But as she searched deeper, she saw nothing but mischief.

*Burb!* She hiccupped, her face turning red, and without thinking, she dashed out of her seat toward the direction of the restroom.

Reaching the bathroom door, she pushed it open and immediately leaned against the sink, gripping the edges tightly while her reflection stared back at her, flushed and bewildered.

*What was that?* She thought to herself.

She hiccupped again, the awkward sound cutting through the silence of the bathroom. She slapped a hand over her mouth, embarrassed, even though she was alone.

*"Stay still. Let me help you play the game perfectly."* Ryan's words played in her mind on repeat.

He couldn't have been serious... could he? But his

tone, his eyes—the way he had looked at her—playful, but serious at the same time—unnerved her. What had she been thinking, trying to provoke

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Hunter like that? And worse, dragging Ryan into it?

She groaned loudly, splashing some cold water on her face. This wasn't the plan. None of this was supposed to happen, and now she was stuck in a situation she didn't know how to handle.

*Perfect!*