## 43.

*"Her heart raced, breath tangled in her throat, as the world spun out of control. She wasn't prepared —caught off guard, panic rising like a tide, drowning her in a fear she didn't see coming."*

For a moment, the world seemed to stop. The air was charged with electricity. Estelle didn't pull away, but she didn't move either as his lips moved hungrily against her, firm and demanding. She just stood frozen, her eyes wide with shock and her mind blank, unable to process what was happening. Then, he pulled away just as quickly as he had kissed her, his breathing laboured, as though he had run a marathon. His wide eyes roved over her face, and then he shook his head, running a hand over his face as he muttered,

"Damn it." He cursed, stepping away from her as if she burned him. But Estelle didn't speak or look at him; she couldn't bear to meet his eyes, fearing what she might see in them. He didn't say anything else either, he just muttered a few more curses, and with that, he was gone, leaving her standing alone in the middle of her office. Her lips still tingled from the unexpected contact, and her

heart raced with confusion, shock paralyzing her thoughts.

*What had just happened?*

*Ryan kissed me!*

Of all the things she had expected, that hadn't even been a fleeting thought. Ryan—charming and playful Ryan had kissed her. And not just any kiss, but one filled with a raw intensity she didn't expect, which left her disoriented.

How had she missed it? She'd spent countless moments with him—laughing, sharing thoughts, building what she thought was an easygoing friendship. But now—her mind wandered back to the kiss, and she inhaled sharply. Her body trembled, making her legs feel like they were going to give out at any moment, so she placed her hands on the desk, trying to steady herself as she slowly took a seat.

How was she supposed to face Ryan after this? How could she pretend that nothing had happened when their friendship now seemed... different? Would he even want to see her after the way he stormed out? Her stomach tightened at the thought. Ryan had been a source of stability in these chaotic months, and the last thing she

wanted was to lose him.

But now......she wasn't so certain about that.

She groaned and palmed her face. What would she do? How could she face him now, knowing he had crossed that line? How could she go back to being friends when he clearly wanted more? She wasn't sure if she was ready for that. Or if she ever would be.

She shut her eyes and groaned again against her pounding heart. Just then, her phone buzzed on the desk, snapping her out of her daze. She glanced down at the screen and saw her mother's name flashing.

With a sigh, she picked it up. "Hello, Mom."

"Estelle, dear, are you on your way home? It's getting late" her mother asked, her tone laced with concern.

Estelle glanced at the clock. She hadn't realized how late it had gotten. "I'm... I'm leaving now. I'll be home soon."

"Is everything alright?" came her mother's worried voice

Estelle hesitated, glancing around her office. *Is everything alright?* She wasn't sure anymore. "

Yeah, I'll be home soon. Just finishing up here."

There was a brief silence on the other end, and then her mother spoke again, this time more hesitantly. "Okay, sweetheart. Just... be careful, alright?"

"I will," Estelle responded, forcing a smile that didn't reach her eyes. Her mother's worry was another thing she couldn't deal with right now. "I'll see you soon."

After hanging up, Estelle grabbed her things—her bag, her coat—but her mind was still spinning. She

kept thinking about the kiss, about Ryan, about what had led to this moment. *Hunter.*

It wasn't that she was still attached to Hunter as Ryan believed. It was more complicated than that. She wasn't hoping for Hunter's downfall. That wasn't what she wanted. Although she wanted to make him see her move on using Ryan, which seemed silly now that she thought about it, but she didn't want to be the reason his career and life spiralled out of control.

That was why she asked. She wanted to know if the event had triggered his dismissal, not because she cared for him the way Ryan thought because she didn't, rather, it was because she didn't want to carry the weight of being the sole reason for his downfall. She didn't need Hunter's destruction to be another scar in her life.

As she stepped out of the building, her thoughts were still racing. The cold night air hit her, and she froze, startled by how dark it was. The sky was an inky black, with the streetlights casting shadows across the pavement.

The familiar feeling of unease crept up her spine and she stiffened. It wasn't as bad as it used to be, but the lingering fear of the dark always returned, as if reminding her of its presence.

43.

Her breath hitched as her eyes darted across the nearly deserted parking lot. And then it hit her: *She had to drive home.*

Her chest tightened at the thought. She hadn't driven at night since the accident. It wasn't something she did anymore, not after the accident.

Normally, her driver would take care of this, but tonight... her heart beat faster. Ryan had offered to drive her home earlier, so she had let her driver go.

*Dammit.*

Her hands trembled slightly as she reached into her bag, hastily searching for her phone to call her driver back. But the more she fumbled through her bag, the more her anxiety grew. Her pulse quickened, her breath shortened, and her fingers trembled. She cursed under her breath, trying to calm herself, but her nerves were in overdrive, and her mind was racing too fast to catch up.

She was so focused on finding her phone and hurrying back into the building where she could feel safe that she didn't see the person walking toward her until she slammed into them. Her phone slipped from her grasp, clattering to the ground as she let out a startled gasp.

"Oh, I'm so sor—" Estelle began, but the words died in her throat the moment something cold and rough covered her face.

Her hands instinctively shot up in defence, clawing at whatever was smothering her. Panic exploded in her chest, and she tried to scream, but the sound was muffled. Everything around her began to blur as her head spun in panic. Her body tensed, but she didn't stop fighting back against the restraint. However, it was no use for whoever had her in a hold was stronger, and with a sharp hit to the side of her neck—

Everything went dark.

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