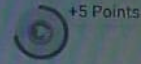


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*She couldn't think of a single soul she'd wronged,
yet here she stood, bound by shadows unseen.
Caught in the cruel grip of someone else's hatred
and haunted by the silence of her own innocence.
Wondering how peace had turned into a war she
never started.*

Darkness

The first thing Estelle noticed was the thick, suffocating darkness. She blinked, hoping the darkness would clear, but it was pointless—nothing changed. Soon, she realized the thick, smothering blanket was clothes wrapped around her head.

Where am I?

A wave of terror surged through her. She had no idea where she was, who had taken her, or how long she had been unconscious. All she remembered was being attacked at the entrance of the company, and then... everything went dark.

Her head throbbed with a dull, pounding ache, and her heart raced with panic. She willed herself to breathe steadily, trying to focus on her

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surroundings. But all she could deduce was the faint sound of something clanking in the distance and the musty scent that filled her nostrils, making her want to gag every time she inhaled. From the damp smell and faint echo, she guessed the room was large—probably an abandoned warehouse or basement.

And she was alone.

She needed to get out of there before her abductors returned.

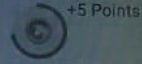
Shifting her weight, she attempted to stand and remove the clothes that had blinded her, but that's when she felt it—the tight pressure binding her wrists behind her back. Her fingers tingled, almost numb from the coarse ropes digging into her skin.

I'm tied up.

Her pulse quickened, and she wiggled her fingers furiously, but the rope only tightened with each movement. Her legs were also bound to the chair she sat on, and when she shifted her weight, the chair creaked alarmingly beneath her, making her feel even more trapped.

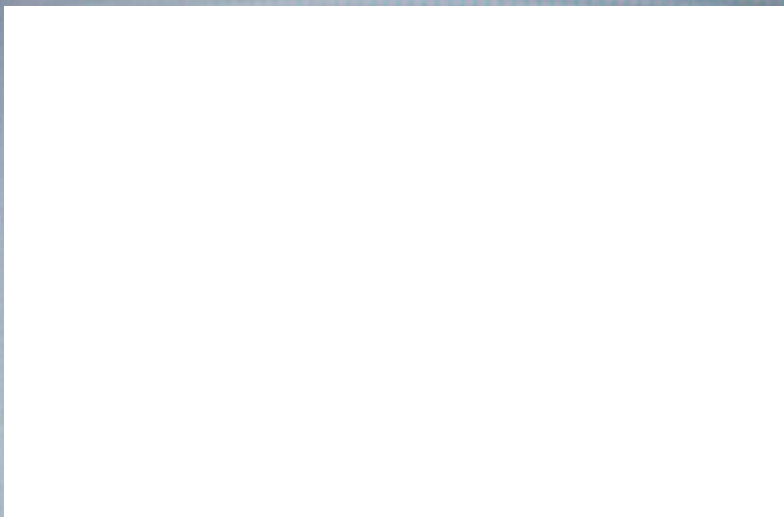
No... no, no, no!

Her breathing grew ragged as she struggled, panic



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spreading through her body like fire. She needs to get out of there before her abductors are alarmed by her actions. However, with each attempt she made to free herself, the louder the chair squeaked, but the ropes were too tight, cutting



Ads-free >

deeper into her skin, making her hiss in pain. She was helpless—tied to a chair in a room she couldn't even see.

Who is more unlucky than she?

Just then, a voice broke through the thick silence
"Ahh... you're awake."

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Estelle froze. Her breath hitched in her throat, and her blood turned cold at the sound. She hadn't heard anyone enter, nor could she see the person, but she could feel his looming presence, which sent a shiver down her spine. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end as she swallowed hard, her throat dry.

"I was beginning to wonder how long it would take you to wake up," the man continued, his tone lazy, almost amused like he was enjoying her discomfort.

Her blood ran colder as she heard his footsteps draw nearer. He was big; she could tell from how sturdy and heavy his steps sounded. That meant he was someone she could never overpower physically. She wanted to scream, to shout for help, but fear had stolen her voice.

Suddenly, the fabric over her face was yanked away. She gasped, instinctively leaning back in the chair, her eyes squeezed shut against the sudden dim light filtering into the room through a tiny window—so small she wondered how there was even oxygen in the room. And then, she saw him.

Her captor stood in front of her, too close for comfort. Estelle's heart hammered in her chest as she instinctively leaned away, but there was

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nowhere to go. His face was rough and scarred, like someone who fought for a living. His skin was oily, covered in sweat, and his dark eyes glittered with something unsettling and dangerous. A jagged scar ran across his cheek, disappearing into his scraggly beard, and his teeth, when he grinned, were yellowed and rotting.

"Well, aren't you a sight," he said, his voice dripping with mock admiration.

"Who... who are you?" Estelle managed, her voice shaking despite her attempt to stay composed.

He chuckled—a low, dangerous sound that made her stomach twist. "You'd think I'd be tired of hearing that question by now. Seems like all my captives ask the same thing."

Her heart skipped a beat. *All his captives?* He'd done this before. *How many people had he done this to?*

Before she could process that chilling thought, he leaned closer—so close that she could smell the stale cigarette smoke clinging to his breath. "But coming from your pretty little mouth," he murmured, his gaze dropping to her lips, "it sounds almost... sexy."

Estelle's skin crawled under his gaze and her heart

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hammered in fear and disgust as bile bubbled up inside her. His eyes roamed her body hungrily, making her feel sick.

"What do you want from me?" she asked, forcing her voice to stay steady, though her hands trembled in their restraints. She was terrified, but she wouldn't let him see it. She couldn't think of anyone she had made an enemy of who would pay to have her kidnapped, so the man standing right in front of her was her only hope of finding out why she was here, tied to a damn chair.

The man didn't answer. It didn't even seem like he heard her. His gaze was fixed on her lips as if they held all the answers he needed. Slowly, his rough, cold fingers brushed against her cheek, trailing down her neck as if savouring the feel of her skin. Estelle recoiled at his touch, pulling away as much as her bonds allowed, but it only seemed to amuse him further.

His fingers stopped at her lips, parting them slightly as his eyes darkened with lust. "You know," he murmured, his voice a sickening purr, "you look even better in person. Tempting, with everything a man could want." His gaze drifted back up to meet hers. "Such a shame your husband didn't want you. But lucky me, huh?" He grinned

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The bile rose in Estelle's throat. Her stomach churned, and for a moment, she thought she might vomit. She glared up at him, her heart pounding with both fear and anger. "Get your hands off me," she hissed, her voice sharper than she felt.

The man's grin widened, but there was a flicker of annoyance in his eyes. "Feisty. I like that." He leaned even closer, his lips inches from hers. "But you'll learn. They all do."

Estelle's heart pounded in her chest, but she held his gaze, refusing to show weakness. She needed to buy time, needed to think of a way out, even though it seemed hopeless. *But a girl has to try, she thought. Maybe distraction could work?*

"You a coward?" she snapped. He arched an amused brow at her. "k*****g a woman? How brave of you. Why didn't you kidnap a man instead, if you're so tough?"

His eyes darkened, the cruel amusement faltering. "I might find you sexy, but you better watch your mouth, or I'll shut it for you."

Estelle felt the room close in on her, her throat tightening with fear. She knew she was playing a dangerous game, but she couldn't stop herself. Every second she kept him talking was another

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second to think of an escape.

"Is that what you get off on?" she asked, her voice laced with defiance. "Hurting women because you can't handle a man like you? Shame on you." She spat.

His hand shot out, grabbing her chin, forcing her to look at him. His fingers dug into her skin painfully, but Estelle refused to flinch. Even as his face twisted into a snarl, all amusement gone.

"You really don't know when to shut up, do you?" he growled. "Then I'll teach you."

Before she could react, his hand flew across her face with a sickening c***k, snapping her head to the side. Pain exploded in her cheek, radiating through her skull. For a moment, all she saw were stars dancing in her vision. She blinked, dazed, trying to stay conscious, but the edges of her vision darkened.

"Arrgh!" The man grunted in annoyance. "Why is it always the pretty ones?"

Her eyes fluttered shut, her head falling forward. The last thing she heard was his voice, grumbling to himself as her consciousness faded completely.

