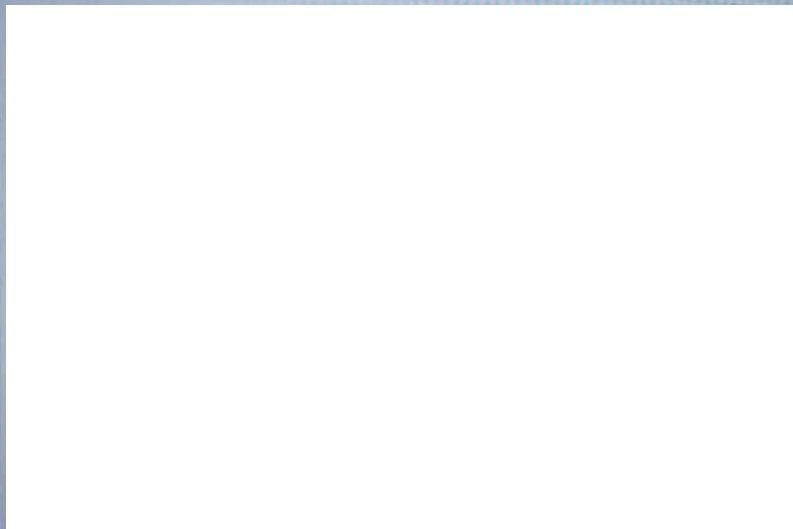


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She sowed the seeds of her own ruin, and I wasn't about to carry guilt or pity for those who once tried to break me. Not anymore. I owed myself the strength to let go, unburdened and unbroken.



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"Not to be insistent, but I still don't understand why you don't want to press charges and find out who sent someone to kidnap you," Ethan shifted on his position on Estelle's dresser, facing her squarely. "It's like you're not scared for your life,

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which I find totally absurd.”

Estelle hid her smirk under a sigh as she brushed her brown hair, her gaze fixed on her reflection.

How would she explain to her brother and her parents that she'd already handled things, without them judging her? They might not actually judge her for what she did to Carla, but she couldn't imagine their reaction if they discovered she had paid off her kidnapper to find a mafia man, her way to punish Carla. The thought alone made her heartbeat quicken. Her mother would be shocked and disappointed, while her father, well, he might be upset for her safety but not necessarily for Carla. They might even force her to describe the kidnapper and track him down. But she had made a promise to let the kidnapper go by hiring him. It was illegal in its own way, and a stain on their reputation, but she did what needed to be done. She needed to save herself at that moment as well as punish Carla for coming for her life. And she didn't regret it.

Looking for the mafia boss had been the best option. Estelle didn't know the exact dealings between him and Carla, only that Carla had scammed him, and he was hunting her down. What made it all more interesting was that Carla

had used a different name. Estelle had once wondered if she'd gone too far, considering this man was in the mafia. What if he hurt her? But that thought had crossed her mind only once, quickly banished. This was Carla's doing. She got what she planted, and Estelle wasn't about to feel guilt or pity for anyone who hurt her—not anymore. That's why she made sure there were no ties to the mafia man and no information about Carla's fate. She simply wanted Carla to disappear from her life and thoughts, as if she had vanished into thin air.

She sighed. "I told you already, I just don't want to pursue it. I don't want the media in my face again."

"Yeah, I understand, but..."

"No buts, Ethan." Estelle cut him off, eyeing his parted lips through the mirror, then sighed. "I know you're just worried, but I have the bodyguards you all insisted on."

Ethan laughed, and Estelle couldn't help but smile.

"That's for your safety. We don't know where the threat is from, so we've got to be extra careful."

Estelle doubted there would be any more threats since she'd taken care of the only one there was. But to avoid suspicion, she agreed to the security.

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They were silent for a while, and Estelle was beginning to enjoy her newfound solace as she focused on untangling her hair. But then Ethan spoke again, his words stirring something heavy in her heart.

"Is there something going on between you and Ryan?"

Estelle's hand froze, and Ethan quickly added, "I mean, I wasn't going to ask since no one wanted to talk about the kiss." Estelle's cheeks turned red. "But we're siblings, and I don't want what happened with Hunter to happen twice."

Estelle hadn't thought they'd seen the kiss. They'd mentioned the CCTV footage but not the kiss itself, and she hadn't even considered they might have. Now, Ethan bringing it up so casually made her feel embarrassed, her cheeks hot and flushed as her heart raced back to that moment.

Ryan.

The one man she'd been trying not to think about—not because he'd hurt her or because she felt anything special for him, but because every time she thought about him, she lost control of her body's responses. Her heart betrayed her, as it was now, with all her other emotions jumbled, and

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afterwards, she felt anger. So much anger that he hadn't come to say anything when she was kidnapped. She wasn't sure what she'd expected him to say, but anything would have sufficed—anything to show he cared. But he'd just stood in the corner, brooding, and then left without a word. Who does that? She had taken their friendship seriously, even though she tried to deny it. She'd enjoyed his company. He'd shielded her from her reality, maybe even more than that. She'd known the kiss would change things, which she'd been ready to address, but his cold behaviour had been expected yet unexpected in such a situation.

"Huh," Ethan started, hands raised in surrender, and only then did Estelle realize she was scowling, looking truly irritated.

"I didn't know that would piss you off. I'm sorry."

"No, I..."

"I'd better go. I have some things to do." And he was out the door already.

Estelle sighed, her gaze returning to her reflection in the mirror.

What had just happened? Did she really react like that because of Ryan? When had it started to matter? Anger boiled in her at her own behaviour.

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She felt like she was betraying herself, breaking her vow never to let another man—except her father and brother, of course, get any reaction from her. Yet here she was, getting upset because Ryan didn't show he cared, as if their friendship as been nothing.

She shut her eyes and clenched her fists. *Get your head straight, Estelle. Remember the pain, the scars, the loss. Remember them every day, every minute, and every second. Let them etch into your memory and soul, and never let anyone else in.*

"Estelle," her mother's voice snapped her out of her thoughts. She whirled around in her chair to see her mother hurrying toward her.

"Ma?" Estelle asked in confusion, standing up.

Her mother reached her, grabbing Estelle's hands. Her eyes were wet with tears, her breath short as if she'd run up the stairs.

"What happened, Ma?" Estelle asked confused.

"Hunter," she gasped, and Estelle's spine straightened, her body tense. Had something happened to Hunter?

"They found him in his room... covered in his own blood."

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Estelle's heart dropped, and her hands slipped from her mother's. *No!* That couldn't be her fault, right? It couldn't be because of her actions. Her mind reeled, her heart pounding with fear. It couldn't have been the mafia man, right?

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"Oh, Anna," Christian said, entering the room. "The bastard did it to himself. Stop making it sound like he was attacked."

"That doesn't change the fact that he is hurt. He could have died if no one had found him sooner."

"How?" Estelle asked, not in the mood for her

parents' bantering.

"Well, I heard he tore his hand open by smashing a bottle." Christian shrugged. "And his friend, or whoever the guy is, found him unconscious. Makes me wonder what made the fool do something that shifts my mood from happiness to pity."

Anger quickly replaced Estelle's fear as she realized the situation. Her plan must have worked. Carla must have left him, and now he was resorting to self-harm over her? How absurd. She'd been such a fool, loving a man like him all her life.

"So why are we discussing this?" Estelle asked, gathering her things.

For the first time, her parents seemed at a loss for words. Christian and Anna glanced at each other before Christian cleared his throat, his usual cockiness returning. "Well, since we heard the news, I thought we could go see the i***t, after all."

"Christian!" Anna scolded with a tut, but he only shrugged, smiling as if he'd won the lottery.

"That's nice. I wish him a quick recovery," Estelle muttered.

"What?" Anna gasped. "You're not going to visit

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him?"

Estelle shrugged. "Do I need to? You both can go. That should be enough, right?"

"Yes, Anna," Christian said. "She doesn't need to grace the i***t with her presence. I don't want any more rumours around Estelle."

Anna nodded, understanding, and Estelle exhaled a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. That went smoothly.



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