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She was done running from shadows and hiding her wounds. If facing her enemy was the price of peace, she'd pay it, no matter the cost, no matter the scars she'd wear. If it took everything she had, if it left her standing alone, then so be it. She'd meet her enemy, eye to eye, heart bared. After all, true strength lies in facing the fear that others would flee from, yet she chose to confront.

Ryan's mind raced, a storm of anger and frustration churning beneath his calm façade. He clenched his jaw as he stood among the crowd, trying to focus on something other than the red haze clouding his vision. The event buzzed with chatter, but all he could think about was Estelle, how she'd been attacked right here, under everyone's noses, and the way she'd broken down in his arms. He'd been so close to catching whoever had done it, yet he had nothing—just a flash of a figure, a brush of dark clothing, and then ... nothing in his memory.

Flashback

Ryan's heart skipped a beat, his stomach churning when he realized it was Estelle. He immediately

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knelt beside her, his hands hovering awkwardly before gently resting on her shoulder.

"Estelle..." he whispered, his voice thick with confusion. "Are you okay? What happened?"

She didn't respond at first, her sobs choking her, and Ryan's chest tightened with the weight of her pain. All of his carefully constructed walls crumbled in that moment; all he wanted to do was hold her, comfort her, but he didn't know how and what exactly happened in there.

Finally, Estelle lifted her head, her eyes red and puffy, her lips trembling. Ryan's breath hitched at the sight. "... I was scared" She gasped and Ryan's brow furrowed. "...and I couldn't see his face," she whispered, her voice barely audible, and his memory snapped into focus.

The almost-fall

He had bumped into someone earlier. His eyes roved over her features, and then he saw the faint red mark forming around her neck. His vision turned red, and he hissed in anger. He abruptly stood, intent on chasing the perpetrator, but Estelle's hand stopped him.

He glanced down at her, and she shook her head, tears streaming from her swollen eyes. "Please

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stay." His heart twisted at how vulnerable she looked in that moment, and he had no choice but to reach for her, his arms wrapping around her without hesitation, pulling her close as she wept into his shoulder.

End of Flashback

"I can't seem to stop thinking she's an attention seeker," someone nearby whispered, pulling Ryan out of his thoughts. "Always drawing attention. First, that messy divorce, and now this dramatic attack."

"Beats me," another voice responded, "Makes me wonder what she gets out of it. Is she that desperate?"

Ryan's glare darted to the source: two women giggling as if Estelle's attack was nothing but gossip. The urge to confront them, to separate their heads from their necks for daring to speak like that, twisted in his gut, but before he could act, he noticed someone—a man he hadn't seen in the room earlier.

It was Dave, standing casually with a drink in hand, but something felt off. A memory resurfaced, sharp and sudden. He'd once overheard Dave on the phone, his tone tense, dropping a name that

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filled Ryan with suspicion: Carla. Could it be the same Carla who'd already caused so much chaos for Estelle? Or was he just seeing connections where there were none? He must be shaken and disoriented to be suspecting everyone around him. Still, the idea stuck, nagging at the back of his mind like a thorn.

He shook his head, trying to shake off the suspicions and recall anything that could lead him to the perpetrator. But he remembered nothing. He'd been too focused on finding the source of the scream to notice the person. He groaned, his gaze flickering to the door, the one Estelle had been led through by her family, shaken and disoriented. His chest tightened, ready to combust from anger. If only she hadn't been so stubborn about ending the case. Maybe this wouldn't have happened. He shut his eyes, trying to banish the memory of her in the restroom. He was right—someone was truly out to get her, and he was determined to find them.

Estelle's hands trembled as she sat in her room, trying to steady her breathing, unconsciously tuning out her father's angry voice seeping through the walls. Every time she closed her eyes,

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+5 Points

she was back there again, alone in the ladies' room, the quiet hum of the party music, the dull echo of the dripping sink. She'd been in a strange state of peace after her emotional shock that crumbled her belief that she was finally ready to face her past, scars, and mistakes, with her head



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held high. But then the door had creaked, and everything had shattered.

She could still feel the cold ceramic sink pressing against her cheek, the strong grip around her neck, squeezing tighter and tighter until her lungs screamed for air. In those frantic moments, she'd

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fought, clawing at her attacker, but he was too strong. She could only make out fragments—a shadowed face, rough hands, the scent of lead.

The fear she'd felt was unlike anything she'd ever known, and she couldn't shake it. But beneath the terror, something else had been simmering, rising slowly. She felt it now, raw and consuming like fire licking at her veins.

Anger.

After everything—after clawing her way through heartbreak, betrayal, and loss—she had nearly lost her life, again. And for what? For a reason, she couldn't understand. She took pride in herself and her family for being considerate and honest in all their dealings. She couldn't think of anyone they'd wronged. That's why she'd dismissed Carla's threat when she left, convincing herself that her troubles were finally behind her. But someone was still out there, and they wanted her gone. This wasn't just petty jealousy or revenge. No, it was something darker, deeper. And it consumed her with both fear and anger.

The door slammed open, and she jumped, startled. Her father, Christian, stormed in, his face red with fury, tagging along was the rest of the family.

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"I've had enough of this," he roared. "Whether you want it or not, I will reopen this case and find out who's after my daughter's life. And I promise to make them pay—tenfold—for what they put you and all of us through."

Estelle didn't say anything. Not that she could have formed words even if she'd tried. Seeing her family so distressed and angry—all because of her—brought a fresh wave of pain to her heart and tears to her eyes. It had always been her, always her fault. If finding this person was what it would take to end these endless threats, then so be it. She needed to meet her enemy face-to-face, after all.



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