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Why would he stoop so low, weaving my heart into his cruel games? For what small satisfaction, what hollow victory, does he seek to claim? Is it to see me falter, to unearth the wounds I've worked so hard to mend? Does he find joy in unraveling the peace I've built piece by piece again? To taunt me with what once was, and what will never be? To cast shadows of pain where light once fought to set me free? I cannot fathom the pettiness that drives his cold, calculated scheme. Yet here I stand, caught between his mockery and a shattered dream. If this is his triumph, it speaks more of his emptiness than of me. I won't be the pawn in a game that only deepens his misery.

Estelle's hand lingered on the doorknob long after Ryan and Olivia had walked away. She tried to steady her breathing, but her chest felt like it was being squeezed and yanked repeatedly. She barely registered the sound of footsteps approaching until the door was yanked open from the other side.

The sudden force sent Estelle stumbling backwards onto her butt.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Estelle!" Para, Estelle's elderly assistant, exclaimed, trying to clutch her nylons to spill to the floor, however, some did regardless. "What are you doing just standing there like a statue? You almost gave me a heart attack."

"I..." Estelle stammered, her voice barely above a whisper as she scrambled to her feet.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, yes, I'm fine. I just didn't hear you coming."

Para eyed her suspiciously, clearly unconvinced. She stepped into the room, juggling the nylons in her hands. "And who were those people I saw leaving? New clients?" she asked, making her way further into the space.

Estelle bent down to retrieve the scattered items that had fallen during their collision. At times like this, it felt like Para was her boss and not the other way around. That was why she employed her. The elderly woman carried herself with so much grace and power that she commanded the room. With her experience in fabrics, coupled with Estelle's aversion to working with people younger than herself, she knew Para was the one.

"Yes," Estelle replied, her voice tightening as she

followed Para to the workspace. "A new client."

Para placed the bags on the table with a loud thud and turned to face Estelle, hands on her hips. "A new client, and you're not bouncing with excitement? That's not like you at all, dear."

Estelle avoided her gaze, busying herself with organizing the spilt nylons. "I just... wasn't prepared," she said quickly with a shrug. "There's... there's a lot of unfinished work to catch up on, and I__"

Para raised an eyebrow, cutting her off mid-sentence with a pointed look. "Since when do you make excuses for a new project, Estelle?" Her sharp tone accusing, making her wince. "You're always overly excited whenever you get a new project, regardless of pending work. So what changed? I think," she stepped closer, arms akimbo, "that something is bothering you, and it's clouding that bright spark you wear when it's work-related."

Estelle looked away, uncomfortable under Para's gaze. She couldn't bring herself to confide in her assistant or anyone. That was one thing she found she couldn't do, even after all these years. How would she even say it? She couldn't work with the new clients because she once had a tiny bit of

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feeling for the man who was getting married, and it didn't sit well with her to design his wife-to-be's dress. That sounded lame even to her. "I'm fine, really," she said, forcing a weak smile. "Just a little overwhelmed."

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Para gave her a long, knowing look before nodding, then proceeded to pat Estelle's shoulder with a soft sigh. "Whatever's eating at you, let it go. Don't let personal feelings get in the way of what you love. You're better than that. Now let's get to work. We have lots to do, don't we?"

Estelle nodded, grateful when Para turned her

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attention to unpacking the materials she had brought. Together, they dove into their work. Hours passed as they worked in comfortable silence, each focused on their task. The only sounds in the room were the hum of the sewing machine and the rustle of fabric. Eventually, Para left for the day, leaving Estelle to finish the gown that needed to be delivered that day.

However, Estelle became so engrossed in finishing the dress that when she finally glanced at the clock, she cursed under her breath. It was late, well past the delivery worker's hours. Grabbing her phone, she called her usual delivery company, but as she expected, no one was available.

With no other choice, she decided to deliver the dress herself. She carefully packed the gown into her branded tote bag, grabbed her car keys, and set off for the client's hotel.

The hotel lobby was bustling with activity when she arrived. Estelle approached the receptionist, handed over the dress, and provided the client's details along with a polite message. Just as she turned to leave, a familiar sound stopped her in her tracks.

Laughter.

The kind she oddly knew so well. How could not especially since she had endured it for what felt like an eternity earlier in the day. Her heart clenched as she turned toward the source, and there they were: Olivia, radiant and carefree, with Ryan following closely behind.

Olivia spotted her first, her eyes lighting up as she waved enthusiastically. She bounded over, leaving Ryan to trail behind. His expression was as unreadable as it had been earlier, but Estelle swore she saw a flicker of something in his eyes. Recognition? Or maybe she was just assuming.

"Estelle!" Olivia smiled brightly as she stopped in front of Estelle, her bob bouncing behind her head. "What a coincidence! Are you staying here too?"

Estelle couldn't help but stare at Olivia. She was beautiful and full of life, unlike herself. She guessed that was why Ryan loved her. Who wouldn't want a bubble of happiness in their home?

Estelle shook her head, feeling her throat go dry, but she managed to smile politely. "No, I was just delivering a client's dress," she said, her voice steady despite the storm brewing inside her.

"Oh, how lovely!" Olivia gushed. "Your work must

be stunning. Ryan and I were just talking about how talented you are, weren't we, Ryan?" She turned to him, but Ryan's only response was a subtle nod, his expression remaining frustratingly indifferent as if they hadn't shared a meaningful moment in the past - as if they were nothing but strangers.

Estelle's heart hammered in her chest, and the constriction in her throat threatened to choke her. But then, how could she expect him to act like he knew her when he was marrying Olivia? The lady next to him. However, she couldn't help but wonder. *Had he deliberately chosen her to design the wedding dress? For what? To torment her? Could he be that petty?*

Anger flared in her, overtaking the pain that had been simmering beneath the surface all day. She glared at Ryan, but he didn't flinch. His stoic demeanour only fueled her frustration.

"Actually," Olivia continued, oblivious to the tension, "I've been thinking about another design. Something a bit more daring. What do you think?" She clapped her hands together in excitement.

Estelle forced a polite smile. "That sounds interesting. We can schedule another booking to discuss it in detail."

"Oh, of course!" Olivia beamed. "I'll call your office tomorrow. Well, we won't keep you any longer. Have a good evening, Estelle."

Estelle nodded stiffly, her eyes flicking to Ryan one last time. His gaze met hers briefly before he turned away, offering nothing but silence.

Her heart constricted with storms of emotions, and her mind raced with different questions as she walked out of the hotel, but one question echoed in her mind, drowning out all others:

Did he come back just to taunt me? And why? Why would he do that? Why would he come all the way here to make me design his bride's wedding dress? For what petty reason?

Her grip tightened on her car keys as she climbed into the driver's seat, her emotions churning from hurt to anger to confusion. Whatever game Ryan was playing, she wasn't going to let him win. Not now, when she had already built a safe and happy place for herself.



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