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*"I know it's just a show. But the truth is, I'm not playing anymore. Every look, every smiles—it's all real for me now, and I can't pretend it isn't anymore."*

Ads-free >

Ryan glanced at his watch; the small hand resting on 6 drew a smile to his lips. It was time. It was time to see her. It had become a routine now, a part of his day he looked forward to with growing anticipation, though he never admitted it out loud,

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not even to himself. Ever since he started spending more time with Estelle, he has found himself thinking of her often. Too often, maybe. He found himself wondering how someone so sweet had been so wronged by people like Hunter and his mistress. And how could she still manage to have this undeniable sense of gentleness and compassion despite going through so much pain and deceit?

Ryan wasn't naive—he had his fair share of experiences with women—but Estelle was unlike any other woman he had encountered in these circles of wealth and power. The more he learned and thought about her, the more protective he became. He wasn't sure when it had shifted from business and games to something more, but there it was, a creeping attachment he couldn't quite shake off, even if he wanted to. Maybe that was why this bond between them had started to bother him. He knew it was a joke to her, one etched by her and fanned by himself to provoke Hunter, which worked because he could see Hunter's lingering stares at her.

His stomach clenched, and a sigh escaped his lips as he stood, adjusted his jacket, and walked out of his office with his bag in hand.

He had seen the look of regret and something close to longing that Hunter always wore whenever he looked at Estelle. Scratch that—he was always looking at Estelle every chance he got, which Ryan didn't think Estelle was aware of. Or if she was, she was very good at hiding it. After Hunter's little show of siding with Estelle instead of his mistress, he had noticed a slight change in Estelle. He wasn't sure if it was because of the mention of her baby, which had been managed effectively that night, or just lingering feelings about Hunter. A knot of frustration formed in his chest, but he pushed it aside. Not now, and hopefully, not anymore.

When he reached her door, he knocked softly before pushing it open. Estelle sat behind her desk, her face buried in her hands, fingers splayed across her cheeks. She didn't look up immediately, clearly unaware of his presence. Ryan leaned against the doorframe for a second, just watching her, etching her image in his mind like he always found himself doing. He had memorized how her button nose always scrunched slightly when her brain was reeling with a lot of information, making him wonder what was running through her mind.

Finally, she exhaled and dropped her hands, her tired eyes finally meeting his. "Ryan..." her voice

was softer than usual, pulling a frown to his brow.

He straightened and walked further into the room, slouching in one of the chairs opposite her desk with a loud sigh, settling in like it was a second home. Well, anywhere she was, felt like home. He winced at how sick he sounded and covered his silliness with a light question, "What's going on?"

She didn't respond right away. Instead, she stared at the surface of her desk for a moment before blurting out, "Is what happened at the event the reason for his dismissal?" Her voice had a tinge of desperation, a faint trace of concern.

Ryan frowned, confusion flickering across his face. "What are you talking about?"

She sighed again, her gaze dropping to her hands. "Hunter." Ryan's heart clenched at the way his name breezed past her lips. "Did the board decide to dismiss him because of what happened at the event with Carla? Is that the reason?"

The room felt colder suddenly, and Ryan's mood darkened. He hadn't expected the conversation to turn to Hunter so quickly, and the genuine concern in Estelle's voice made something inside him twist painfully. *Why does she care so much?* He had hoped, after everything, she would begin to let



Hunter go. But the look on her face told him otherwise.

He leaned back in his chair, forcing himself to relax even though his body had started to tighten with the tension creeping through him. "Is that what you're worried about? Hunter's dismissal?" he asked, his voice edged with frustration.

He understood it was okay for her to feel pity for the useless guy, since he was once a part of her life, but he still believed it was unnecessary. Yeah, the guy stood up for her against his mistress, which surprised even him, even though it shouldn't have, since he had noticed Hunter's lingering gaze on Estelle. But it was the concern in her eyes that made his anger boil and his stomach clench.

Estelle looked up at him, her expression softening but still filled with concern. "I'm just trying to understand. He... he made his own choices, but..." She trailed off, clearly unsure how to explain the tangled mess of emotions she was feeling. How does she explain it so that he'll understand?

Ryan scoffed, feeling something snap inside him, but he kept his cool, even as irritation bubbled to the surface. He had to ask. "Why do you care, Estelle? After everything he's done, after everything you've been through, why does it

matter if he gets kicked out? It's not like he ever put you first."

He wished he could understand women's thinking, because he would never care for someone like Hunter if it were him. The man deserved not an ounce of her attention, but Ryan wanted to understand Estelle. God, he really wished he could.

Estelle's lips parted, but no words came out. She was taken aback by his sudden change in tone and question. "I don't... it's not that simple, Ryan. I..." She shook her head slowly as if confused by what she was about to say.

"No, it is," he shot back, his voice rising slightly. "He's ruined so much for you, and yet here you are, still thinking about him." He pushed himself out of his slouch, his posture straightening as he leaned forward slightly, leveling Estelle with a glare.

Estelle blinked, clearly surprised by his tone. "Ryan, it's not like that. I'm just..."

"Hunter made his choices," he interrupted. "He's not your responsibility anymore. If anything, he deserves whatever is coming to him."

Estelle sighed, her fingers rubbing her temples as if trying to chase away the headache threatening

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to bloom. "It's not about deserving it, Ryan. I'm just ... I'm trying to make sense of things." Her gaze softened, and her shoulders sagged with resolve. "I don't want it to be because of me, because of the silly act I came up with."

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Ads-free >

That did it. Ryan felt a sharp pang in his chest, and his jaw clenched painfully. *Silly act?*

She noticed Ryan's brow furrow, so she quickly added, shakily explaining, "You know, the whole 'let's make Hunter jealous' thing." But that only infuriated Ryan the more.

Sure, that's exactly what it was. An act to provoke Hunter, to get under his skin, and he hadn't forgotten that he had fanned the flame himself. But somewhere along the line, it had stopped being an act or a game. He didn't know when—maybe during his denial period—but it had stopped being a joke. Every smile, every shared glance and memory had started to feel real. And hearing her call it an "act" right to his face stung in a way he hadn't anticipated. It felt like a wake-up call, but with a sting. A painful one at that, and he couldn't help the bitterness that seeped into his voice when he scoffed and muttered, "A silly act. Is that what this is to you?"

Estelle frowned, confused by his reaction. "Yeah..." she muttered, then added in confusion when she saw him wince, "I thought you were okay with helping me make him jealous."

"Yes, I was," he interrupted, his voice tight now, almost a growl, and Estelle went still. He pushed up from the chair, a "f\*\*k!" escaping his lips as he paced the room, as if that would dissipate the overwhelming anger and foreign emotions he was feeling. He ran a hand through his hair, frustrated and confused. "You don't get it, do you? This isn't about Hunter or a game anymore. At least, not for me."



Estelle stood up slowly as well, confusion etched across her face as she muttered in a shaky voice, "Ryan... what are you talking about?"

He stopped pacing and faced her sharply, his chest heaving with emotion. He should have kept his mouth shut. Christ, he should have reined in his emotions, but the words spilled out before he could stop them. "You think this is just about making him jealous? You think I'm still playing along because of him? I've been there for you because I wanted to be, not because of some stupid scheme."

Estelle opened and closed her mouth, too stunned to even form words, but before she could try, he closed the distance between them in a few swift steps, his cologne, misty and intoxicating, trapping her in place.

"Ryan, I..." she started, finally finding her voice, but he grabbed her shoulders, pulling her slightly toward him, his gaze boring into hers. She swallowed forcefully, her heart beating ferociously as if it wanted to escape.

"I know it was just for show. But..." He leaned closer, his voice low and rough. "I'm not playing anymore."

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And before she could respond, or before he could stop himself, Ryan's lips were on hers with so much force that left them both breathless.



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