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All he knew was that this couldn't be the final chapter. Not this way, not again. The echoes of what was lost still lingered, carving a hollow ache within his chest. Every moment they shared, every glance, every word, haunted him like a ghost. He had failed before, let the fractures widen until everything crumbled. But this time, the stakes were higher - the cost of letting go unbearable. The weight of regret had anchored him, and now it whispered, urging him to act. He couldn't bear to watch her walk away, her silhouette fading into silence. He would seize it with trembling hands if there was even a sliver of hope. Pride and fear be damned, he needed to try - needed to fight for what mattered because losing her forever would be the wound that he could never heal.

Ryan watched as Estelle walked out of the hotel lobby, her figure disappearing through the revolving glass doors. His face remained unreadable, but beneath the surface, his emotions churned.

Furious. Thrilled. Confused, all mixed together.

Seeing Estelle again after all these years had

stirred something he couldn't quite name. His hands clenched into fists at his sides as he fought to stay composed. Every fibre of his being screamed at him to stop her, to say something, anything, but he'd stood rooted to the spot like a coward, just as he had this afternoon.

He inhaled deeply, trying to quiet the storm within him. He had planned this himself, so why was he feeling this way? Seeing Estelle again after a year wasn't a coincidence. Well, it could be in a way because he had searched for her for years to no avail. Call it obsession, mere curiosity, or even anger at the fact she left without a goodbye, but her sudden departure from his life had left a void, one he hadn't known was there - and he hadn't been able to fill it, no matter how hard he tried. And now, just like that, she was standing in front of him again, and he couldn't help the anger he felt.

Ryan's jaw tightened as he replayed the moment Olivia had shown him the portfolio of the designer she wanted for her wedding dress. He hadn't been paying much attention - his mind was elsewhere, as usual, leaving Olivia to rant since it wasn't his business - until his eyes landed on that picture. Estelle's picture. Making it his every business.

At first, he'd thought it was a mistake. He'd stared at the image for so long that Olivia had waved her hand in front of his face, snapping him out of it.

"Is this the designer you want?" he'd asked, trying to sound casual.

"Yes," Olivia had replied. "But she's based out of the country, and Alex thinks it's too much trouble to go there for fittings." She puffed and pouted.

Everything inside Ryan froze, and he didn't realize what he said until it spilled out. "I'll go with you."

Olivia had looked surprised but delighted, oblivious to the real reason behind his sudden enthusiasm. Even Alex couldn't help but feel suspicious when he found out Ryan was escorting Olivia, but Ryan had used the excuse that he wanted to relax and get off work to convince Alex.

And now here he was, standing in the hotel lobby, feeling like a fool. He'd come here with the intention of confronting Estelle, of saying all the things he'd rehearsed in his mind over the years. He had a lot of mean, bitter words to throw at her - words fueled by anger and heartbreak. But the moment he saw her, all his carefully constructed walls had crumbled.

She looked different. Stronger. Happier. There was

a light in her eyes that hadn't been there before, and it had softened him in ways he hadn't expected.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Olivia's voice snapped him out of his thoughts.

Ryan turned to see her standing very close to him, her green eyes sparkling with excitement. She didn't wait for his response before setting off toward the hotel entrance, her bobbed hair bouncing with each step as she screamed, "Let's go!"

Ryan stood stunned for a moment, watching her bounce away. Was coming here with her a mistake? Now he understood why Alex chose work over coming here with his girlfriend. The woman was full of surprises and always had high energy.

With a frustrated sigh, Ryan took slow and deliberate strides toward Olivia.

Hours later, Ryan found himself in a dimly lit club, the bass of the music pounding through his skull. He wasn't much of a drinker, but tonight he needed something to dull the edge of his thoughts as well as serve as Olivia's protector.

The woman danced energetically, lost in the loud

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beats. Her petite frame seemed to disappear among the larger bodies around her as she twisted and shouted in excitement.

Ryan's gaze followed Olivia's every movement, though his mind was elsewhere. He couldn't stop

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comparing her to Estelle.

Where Olivia was loud and vibrant, Estelle was quiet and poised. Where Olivia sought attention, Estelle commanded it effortlessly.

He took a sip of his drink, the alcohol burning his throat. His mind wandered back to the moment

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he'd seen Estelle at her company. She had been shocked to see him, yes, but there had been something else in her expression. Discomfort? Annoyance? Indifference?

Ryan wasn't sure, but it had unsettled him. It was as if she didn't care that he was standing right there, as if his presence meant nothing to her as if he was the last person she would want to see.

And that enraged him.

He downed the rest of his drink and slammed the glass onto the bar. His burning gaze drifted back to Olivia, who was still dancing. He couldn't figure out what Alex saw in her. She was as wild as a goose. Perhaps it was her compassion, one quality Alex seemed to lack.

His thoughts returned to Estelle again. She had changed so much, yet she was still the same woman who had captured his heart all those years ago. She had grown into someone stronger, more self-assured. She didn't seem to need him or anyone anymore, and that realization hit him harder than he cared to admit.

How could she look at me like that and not say anything? he thought bitterly. *How could she act as if I didn't exist, like he was a stranger?*

He didn't blame her for leaving. No, he didn't blame her for not liking him back then. But seeing her now, so composed and indifferent, acting as if he was a stranger, felt like a slap in the face.

His grip tightened around the empty glass. He needed to see her again. He needed to talk to her, to say everything he hadn't been able to say before. He didn't know what he wanted from her. Closure? Apology? Something more? He didn't know what exactly. All he knew was that he couldn't let this be the end.

Not like that.

"Ryan!" Olivia called, her voice cutting through the noise. She waved at him from the dance floor, beckoning him to join her.

With a frustrated sigh, he pushed himself off the barstool and made his way toward her, only because he saw a man pouncing around her.

That's my friend's wife-to-be, blockhead.



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