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*Memories are the echoes of a love that once burned bright, each whisper carrying unresolved feelings through the night. They linger like ghosts, refusing to let go, haunting my heart with a past I'll always know. Your laughter, your touch, still lingers in the air, a bittersweet reminder that you're no longer there. I try to forget, but the pain always stays, a prisoner to the memories that won't fade away. In the shadows of my heart, you will forever reside, a love unfinished, lost, yet impossible to hide.*

The hum of the car engine filled the silence between Ryan and Olivia as they drove through the quiet city streets. Ryan's eyes were fixed on the road, but his mind was elsewhere. Estelle's voice echoed in his head. "Isn't it too late for that?" The guilt in her eyes, the strain in her voice, he recognized it all too well. But it wasn't just guilt; it was anger and resentment. She was upset with him, and that infuriated him even more.

Ryan clenched his jaw. *How dare she?* After all these years of leaving without a goodbye when he'd risked his life for her, well, maybe she didn't

ask for it - but still, she dared to act as if he was in the wrong.

His knuckles whitened as he tightened his grip on the wheel. He was frustrated, not just at her response but also at the flood of emotions simmering beneath his anger. He couldn't help but feel remorseful at her pained look. That moment when their gazes met, he wanted nothing more than to pull her into his arms, just as he did that night years ago. *How could he feel this way when he was supposed to be angry with her?*

"Ryan!"

Olivia's voice cut through his thoughts, jolting him back to the present. He blinked, glancing sideways at her before looking back at the road. "What?"

"You should smile more," she said with a teasing voice, resting her chin on her hand as she studied him.

Ryan's brow furrowed. "Why do I need to?"

"Because," Olivia said, her tone playful but firm, "you're making my designer uncomfortable. You were practically glaring at her!"

Ryan scoffed, turning his eyes back to the road. *If only you knew why she was uncomfortable,* he

thought but kept the words to himself. Of course, Olivia was oblivious. She'd met Alex a few months after the fallout with Estelle, and by then, Ryan had buried the past so deeply that neither he nor Alex ever spoke of it.

He remembered the fight with Alex, Olivia's fiancé and his closest friend when Alex found out Estelle had visited and had been rude to her. That had been years ago, but it had created an unspoken wedge between them. They'd never discussed Estelle again, and Ryan had kept it that way. It was easier to let the past lie dormant - or so he'd thought.

"I didn't glare at her and how is me not smiling making her uncomfortable?" Ryan asked, his voice tinged with sarcasm.

Olivia shrugged, chuckling. "I don't know, but she is. You're not exactly a warm-and-fuzzy kind of guy, you know. At least try to be friendly. Though, honestly, I know that's not your thing," she added with a teasing smirk.

Her words stung more than Ryan cared to admit. He stayed silent, his eyes on the road, refusing to let the hurt show. *Friendly?* He wanted to laugh bitterly. Olivia had no idea. No one did. He'd been more open and friendly with Estelle than with

anyone else in his life. But that was a lifetime ago.

"Sure," he muttered finally, keeping his face neutral.

Olivia didn't press further, thankfully, and the rest of the ride passed in silence.

They pulled into the hotel parking lot a few minutes later. Ryan parked the car, and the two of them walked inside, exchanging a few pleasantries about the day. But his mind remained elsewhere, and the weight of Olivia's comment lingered heavily in his heart.

"Goodnight, Ryan," Olivia said as she reached her door, giving him a small wave.

"Night," he replied, unlocking his own door.

Just as he was about to shut it behind him, a piercing scream cut through the air. His heart jumped. *Olivia.*

Without thinking, he bolted out of his room, slamming his shoulder against her door to force it open.

"Olivia!" he shouted, panic lacing his voice.

And then, he froze, his breath catching as he took in the scene before him. Olivia was wrapped in Alex's arms, laughing as she turned to face Ryan.

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Ryan stared at the couple, his chest heaving as his adrenaline began to subside. "Seriously?" he muttered. "You nearly gave me a heart attack for this?"

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Alex grinned, holding Olivia closer. "Sorry, mate. We didn't mean to scare you. Olivia was just surprised to see me" he said, his tone light and teasing.

Ryan rolled his eyes, raking a hand through his hair. "Yeah, sure, but you two nearly did."

Olivia giggled, still in Alex's embrace. "Sorry, but

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we're fine. You can go back to brooding now."

Ryan groaned, waving a dismissive hand. "Have all the moments you want; just don't scream like someone's being murdered." He pointed at the two of them.

The couple's laughter followed him as he walked back to his room. He shut the door behind him and leaned against it, letting out a deep breath. But instead of calming down, the image of Olivia and Alex, so blissfully in love, refused to leave his mind. He groaned, running a hand through his hair as he sank into the couch, his head leaning on the arm.

Not that he was jealous of his friend's love life, nor was he keen about marriage and all but... the image shifted to Estelle. He pictured her in his arms, just like years ago in her office where they kissed for the first time. *What would it feel like to hold her again? To feel her warmth, her presence?* The memory of her lips against his, her touch, the feeling of her soft body pressed to his hard one swamped him, and he groaned, running a hand over his face.

It was ridiculous, really. Years had passed. He should've moved on. He had moved on - or at least he thought he had. But seeing her again had

torn open every wound, every unresolved feeling he had buried.

He closed his eyes, letting out a frustrated sigh. It wasn't just the memory of her; it was the possibility that swamped his mind like bees. The idea that maybe, just maybe, there was still something between them.

But then reality hit him like a hot slap. Estelle had left him without a word. Yes, she said it was for the betterment of both of them. He understood her - he'd done almost the same thing after he kissed her followed by her kidnap, even though he had used his work as an excuse. So she didn't owe him anything. And judging by her behavior, she certainly didn't want anything from him either.

Still, the questions lingered in his mind. *Was she seeing someone? Was she happy? Yes, obviously, she was. But does she have someone in her life?*

His gaze flicked to her hands in his memory. He had checked for a sign of a ring, but there was none. No wedding band. But that didn't mean she wasn't involved with someone.

The thought gnawed at him, his mind taunting him with possibilities. *What if she was happy with someone else? What if he had no place in her life*

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*anymore?*

Ryan groaned, pushing himself off the couch. He couldn't keep thinking like this. It was maddening. He needed a distraction, something to drown out the thoughts that wouldn't leave him alone.

Grabbing his jacket, he headed for the hotel bar. A drink. Just one. That would help.

Or at least, he hoped it would.



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