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*Anger burns like a wildfire, consuming all in its path, a shield for the fear that trembles beneath. Fear whispers lies, crafting shadows in the heart, a constant reminder of the fragility of peace. Guilt anchors the soul, pulling it to the depths, its weight a testament to wounds left unhealed. Hurt bleeds silently, carving scars unseen, each cut a memory, each tear a truth. Yet in the chaos, a voice pleads to be heard, a fragile hope fighting to mend what's broken.*

"I miss her." The thought, though absurd, had consumed Ryan since the moment Estelle left his arms that morning, despite his efforts to suppress it. Every detail of their time together lingered in his mind - from the melodic sound of her laughter to her soft gasps, to the heat of her touch, and the way her body moulded perfectly to his. Their night together was etched into his memory, a music replaying over and over, leaving him restless.

Even now, as he stood on the event hall rooftop, the cold breeze brushing against his skin did little to calm the fire burning within him. His thoughts wandered to the moments they had shared - the

feel of her soft lips on his, the vulnerability and desire in her gaze when she let him in. It was maddening, this craving to see her again, hold her again, be with her again.

His body stirred, and Ryan swore under his breath.

The elevator chimed, snapping his attention to the present. Instinctively, a smile tugged at the corners of Ryan's lips, his pulse quickening with excitement. She was here. God knows how long he had been waiting to have her in his arms again. He turned, expecting her delicate frame to emerge from the elevator, but his smile faded as the doors slid open to reveal a different figure entirely.

"I'm guessing that smile wasn't reserved for me," Anastasia purred, stepping out with a sway that Ryan supposed was meant to be alluring. Instead, it only filled him with irritation.

Ryan's jaw tightened as she sauntered closer, her stilettos clicking against the tiled floor. "What are you doing here?" he asked, his voice sharp with annoyance. The last person he wanted to see right now was her.

She tilted her head, her lips curving into a smirk. "At the party or here with you?"

"Both," he bit out, glancing at the elevator display



above the doors, noting the numbers showed it had stopped at their floor, meaning no one else was coming up - yet. He silently prayed that Estelle hadn't seen the message, for he didn't want her anywhere near the likes of Anastasia.

"Expecting someone?" Anastasia's honeyed voice broke through his thoughts.

Ryan exhaled sharply, his patience thinning and his irritation evident. "State your business, Anastasia. I don't have time for games."

"Games?" She pouted, placing a perfectly manicured finger against her lips. "You wound me, Ryan," she mused, stepping closer.

"You know, you used to enjoy my company. Have you forgotten?"

Ryan almost laughed. Enjoyed her company? It was more like enduring. But he didn't have the time to say that or anything to her. "I'm not interested in revisiting the past," he said, his voice firm as he stepped back a little. But being an annoying fly as usual, she stepped even closer to him.

He clenched his fists, holding back a groan as she trailed her fingers across his chest. "But I am," she whispered, her hand lingering on the opening of

his shirt. "I miss you, Ryan. We were good together. Don't you remember?"

Ryan grabbed her hand, his grip firm but not harsh, and removed it from his chest. "Whatever we had ended a long time ago," he said coldly. "Don't make the mistake of thinking it meant anything more than it did."

Anastasia's smile faltered, but she quickly recovered, her gaze burning. "We were more than just a fling, Ryan. Don't pretend otherwise."

Ryan suppressed a scoff at her statement and turned away, his eyes scanning the rooftop for any sign of Estelle. Frustration mounted within him when he realized she wasn't there, even though a part of him was relieved she didn't have to witness this scene. His relationship with Anastasia was not something worth discussing.

"This conversation is over," he said, striding toward the elevator.

"Let's get married," Anastasia said, stopping him in his tracks.

He turned slowly, disbelief etched on his face. "What did you just say?"

"I said we should get married," she repeated,

stepping closer. "We're perfect together. You know it, Ryan. We had something special."

*Is she...*

His temper flared, and before he could stop himself, he had her pinned against the wall, his

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hands braced on either side of her. "Special?" he hissed. "There was nothing special about us, Anastasia. It was nothing more than convenience, and you know it. So don't you dare repeat that ever again."

For a moment, her confidence wavered, but then



she squared her shoulders and pressed on as if his words were nothing but dust. "You don't mean that, because..." she slurred, her hands rising to curl around his neck.

Ryan froze and moved to step away, but she tightened her hands around him, making their bodies seem closer, even though he made sure that didn't happen. "I remember our nights together, Ryan." she continued. "You felt something; you can't deny that."

For a long moment, Ryan stared at her, torn between the desire to lash out and the need to end this conversation. Finally, he spoke, his voice low and mean. "It was just s\*x. That's all it was, and that's all it ever meant to me. The same for you, I'm sure, if you'd only stop being greedy."

Her eyes widened, the weight of his words sinking in. Ryan didn't wait for her response as he brushed past her, his mind now consumed with pure anger. He pressed the elevator button, stepping inside the moment the doors opened.

Why wouldn't she stop making that one night a big deal when she knew damn well it was nothing but pure lust and a terrible mistake on his part? They never even dated, but she made it seem like they did, even making Alex root for them. He knew

women like Anastasia like the back of his hand; they were the type of elites who would do anything to get what they wanted, not caring about hurting people along the way. And that was exactly why he could never love her, but she didn't seem to get it. He blamed his unusual and one-time lack of self-control for that, not her.

As the elevator descended, a heavy feeling of realization settled in his chest.

Estelle!

Christ, he had messaged her to meet him on the rooftop.

What if she had come to the rooftop and seen him with Anastasia? Oh God. The thought made his stomach churn. He pulled out his phone and quickly typed a message:

*"Where are you?"*

He waited, but there was no reply. Panic began to set in. He called her, but the phone rang out, going straight to voicemail.

Ryan pushed through the crowd at the party, scanning the room for her familiar figure with his phone pressed against his ear as he dialled her number over and over with no response. His heart



raced as he tried to appear composed, not wanting to draw attention, but the gnawing fear in his chest was impossible to ignore.

He darted out of the building, still dialling her phone until finally, he heard the faint sound of a phone ringing. He followed it, almost running until he reached a secluded area of the property and there she was.

Estelle sat motionless, her eyes fixed on the shimmering pool before her. Her expression was unreadable, but her posture spoke volumes. She had seen them; it was evident. Ryan's chest tightened at the thought of that.

"Estelle," he called softly, his voice laced with regret.

She turned her head, her eyes meeting his with a calmness that rattled him to the core. Then she smiled - a small, tiny curve of her lips that deepened his guilt and left him confused. "Hi," she said, her voice steady but distant.

Ryan took a step closer, his hands itching to reach out and pull her into his arms, but he hesitated. "I... I was looking for you," he said, his voice uncertain.

Estelle's gaze returned to the pool, her silence feeling him with unease. Ryan swallowed hard, the



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guilt weighing heavily on him.

"I can explain," he began, but she shook her head, stopping him.


"Don't," she said softly, her voice trembling. "You don't owe me an explanation."



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