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*Why keep fighting when, in truth, there was nothing left to save or reclaim? The bridges had long burned, the dreams shattered, and every piece of what once was had already slipped beyond reach. Everything worth holding onto had already been ruined, leaving only ashes in its place.*

"I always knew he was useless," Paul spat, his voice rising as Sarah stiffened. "But throwing himself into harm's way over a woman? That's both pathetic and unbelievable."

Sarah's face tightened, her expression caught between restraint and frustration at her husband's words. "Paul, this isn't the time for this." She muttered into her hands, her voice shaking. She then wiped her face, her red-rimmed eyes fixed on Hunter's pale face. "He's hurt, Paul—he's gone through—"

"Spare me the excuses, Sarah," Paul interrupted, dismissing her words with a sharp wave of his hand. "He's lying there because he made one foolish decision after another. He's an embarrassment." He spat, jabbing a finger

furiously toward Hunter, who lay motionless, one hand hooked up to an IV drip, the other heavily bandaged. "Risking his life and nearly dying—all because of some girl—dragging our family name through the mud? He deserves no pity, Sarah."

Sarah only shut her eyes, tears streaming down her closed lids, her chin resting on her hand while Paul continued regardless.

"Imagine if Dave hadn't found him in time! What would the world think of me then?"

"The world?" Sarah shot up from her position beside Hunter's bed, whirling around to face Paul. Having enough of her husband's cruel tantrums. "How could you be concerned about the world right now?" Her voice was low but shaken, disbelief breaking through each word.

"What else should I be concerned about?" Paul snapped back.

"You know what? I've had enough of this. Of your selfishness—of your obsession with reputation." Her voice rose. "Our son is lying here because of choices you both made. Can you, for once, stop being selfish?" Sarah's shout startled Paul, who looked taken aback for a moment before scoffing.

"Oh, now it's selfish to want the best for our son?"

To want the best for this family?" he shouted, his hot breath fanning Sarah's face.

Hunter stirred in his hospital bed, eyes fluttering open as their argument yanked him from sleep. A dull ache throbbed in his head, but his hand was worse—a stabbing, bone-wracking pain. He groaned, louder this time, and struggled to sit up, but when he tried to push himself up, pain flared in his bandaged hand, and he fell back on the bed with a loud grunt.

"Hunter," Sarah gasped, reaching for him, but at the same time, Paul barked, "Well, well, look who's finally up. Maybe now you can explain why you insist on humiliating us over some childish fling."

As Sarah helped him up, she mistakenly grabbed his injured hand. Hunter cried out in pain, and she recoiled, horrified. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry," she gasped.

"Pathetic," Paul hissed, watching with disgust. "Absolutely pathetic."

"Enough, Paul," Sarah's voice was sharp, though it trembled slightly as she looked at painful Hunter, her face softening with concern. "He doesn't need this right now. You're not here to throw accusations at him while he's still recovering."

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"Are you okay?" she asked, but Paul cut in before Hunter could respond.

"Oh, so now he needs coddling?" Paul sneered. "If he's man enough to nearly kill himself over that woman, he's man enough to hear a few hard truths about his choices."

"Paul..." Sarah warned, her voice low and tight. But Hunter's mind drifted; his body was there, but his thoughts were far away, the pain dulling everything else. He vaguely remembered being drunk, so drunk he'd lost track of the bottles he'd emptied. He recalled breaking a bottle out of frustration but hadn't thought it serious—he hadn't felt anything at the time, likely numb from the alcohol. He'd been in a haze, staggering for more wine, and then...nothing. His memory faded to black.

"Paul, stop," Sarah's voice broke through his daze, snapping him back. He shifted his gaze lazily to his parents, but the effort made his head pound, so he looked down at his bandaged hand instead. He was used to this. His parents' arguments had always been the same: his mother urging Paul to see reason, his father unmoved, stubborn as ever. Usually, he'd have walked away, leaving them to their bickering, but now, trapped on the bed, he was forced to endure it.

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"This isn't about you or your reputation," Sarah's voice wavered but was still steady, "it's about our son. The fact that you can't see past your own pride to care about his pain—it's disgusting. Is it so hard for you to understand?"

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Before Paul could throw back another retort, a knock sounded at the door, breaking the tension. Christian and Anna stepped in, and Hunter shifted uncomfortably on the bed. Christian's eyes landed on him, a smug smile ghosting over his lips, barely hidden behind a facade of sympathy.

"Well, Hunter," Christian greeted mockingly as he

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stepped further into the room. "Good to see you... resting."

Anna nudged Christian, forcing a smile as she glanced between them. "We just wanted to check on you, Hunter. How are you feeling?" Her tone was warm but cautious as she took in the tense scene.

Hunter nodded, giving them both a weary smile. "Thanks, Anna. I appreciate it." He felt a strange sense of relief; somehow, it was easier to accept concern from her than from Estelle.

Christian remained silent, his gaze darting to Paul and Hunter, that smug smile hidden perfectly under a frown behind as though he was quietly savoring their discomfort.

After a strained exchange of pleasantries, Anna guided Christian out, leaving the family alone once more. As the door clicked shut, Paul turned back to Hunter and Sarah, his expression darkening.

"Did you see that? Did you see the smug look on Christian's face?" he demanded. "That's only the beginning of the humiliation you've brought on me. Just wait until the world hears that my son almost committed suicide over his lowly mistress."

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"Paul..." Sarah began, but he cut her off.

"Do not say my name, woman," he roared, pointing a finger at her, his eyes blazing. He turned to Hunter. "None of this would've happened if you'd stayed with Estelle in the first place! Then, you went and ruined any chance of getting her back by nearly killing yourself over that girl. And you're coddling him with all that?" he demanded, turning back to Sarah.

"Do you think Christian—that smug bastard—will ever allow you two to reunite now? Am I still being selfish?"

Neither Hunter nor Sarah responded. Hunter's gaze dropped to his hands as his father's words stirred a storm of emotions he'd tried to suppress. Go back to Estelle? Their relationship had been doomed long ago since he humiliated her on their anniversary. He couldn't imagine where his father got the idea they'd reconcile after that, but Hunter knew he could never go back—not after everything he'd done to her, all the lies, the betrayals, the pains.

He had, at one point, harbored a fleeting thought of reconciliation. But now, after the truth about Mara and everything else, it was clear to him: he couldn't. Memories of the hurt he'd caused Estelle,

of the wounds he'd inflicted, gnawed at his conscience. He'd hurt her in ways he doubted she could ever fully heal from, and he'd never even apologized, not even after they lost their child. Tears gathered in his eyes. How could he ever face her again? How could he open his heart to love her if the opportunity arose, which he knew was impossible? But if it did, how could he, when all he felt was remorse and regret? Estelle deserved real love, not his regret.

After a long silence, he looked up, meeting his father's cold stare. "No," he said quietly, yet firmly, his voice breaking the tension.

Paul's face twisted in anger. "Excuse me?"

"No," Hunter repeated, his voice steadier now, despite the tightness in his chest. "I wasn't planning on going back to Estelle. I wouldn't, even if I had the chance. Not that she'd ever take me back anyway."

Paul's glare hardened, his jaw clenched with frustration. "So, you're willing to throw away everything for—"

"Enough, Paul," Sarah interjected, her voice steady, her gaze unflinching. "Hunter's been through enough. You've put him through enough."



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The argument carried on, but Hunter remained distant. What was there left to argue about? There was no point in fighting because, in truth, there was nothing left to throw away or go back to. Everything had already been ruined.



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