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She wanted nothing from that past anymore, nothing but peace, yet life hurled another sour lemon her way, whispering, surprise. How many times had she rebuilt herself from ashes, only to find the ground crumbling again beneath her feet?

All she craved was a new dawn untouched by old shadows, but life had a way of prying open closed chapters, pouring salt into wounds she'd long tried to heal. She wore scars like armor, hoping to be strong enough, but even warriors grow weary of unending battles. In the end, all she asked was for the pain to stay behind.

Estelle felt as if she had been moving in a dream. Her days were filled with the motions of work, while her nights were haunted by memories. Yet she had become an expert at concealing the turmoil within, wearing her strength like a shield. She had started by facing her fears, which was why she was at the office alone that night when Hunter showed up unexpectedly. She wouldn't deny that his presence hadn't stirred feelings - a mix of anger and old wounds she'd spent countless days and nights trying to bury, but

miraculously, she managed to keep them under control, buried deep in her past. She wanted nothing from that past anymore, and that resolve brought her to tonight's party, dressed to the nines and smiling at Hunter and his family.

They looked perplexed, as though she was acting out of character. It reminded her of the look Hunter had that night when she asked him to send a signed copy of their divorce to her lawyer. Seeing them all uncomfortable brought her a quiet satisfaction, though Paul's expression remained stoic and unreadable. Sarah, Hunter's mother, fidgeted with her pearl necklace, her smile stiff.

"That necklace suits you, Sarah," Estelle said smoothly, her smile warm.

Sarah blinked, her fingers faltering on the pearls. "Oh... thank you, Estelle," she replied, her voice almost soft. She tried to cover her hesitation, but Estelle could sense her discomfort. She supposed Sarah must feel ashamed—her son's fall from grace, the true parentage of the child he had abandoned Estelle for, and Paul's public berating of Hunter all had to weigh on her. Estelle wasn't sure if she should pity Sarah or save her further embarrassment by excusing herself. Yet she couldn't bring herself to care about their

discomfort. As long as she remained unbothered, the rest didn't matter.

Her eyes flicked to Paul, who stood beside Hunter, watching her intently with that familiar, predatory gaze. He always had a knack for hiding his emotions—something Hunter had inherited but now seemed to be losing. Every emotion was written across his face. Estelle offered a sweet smile, but before she could continue her polite conversation with Sarah, a voice reached her ears—a voice she hadn't expected to hear.

She froze. Her body stiffened involuntarily, her smile vanishing. Slowly, as if in a trance, she turned to face him, her heart hammering. There, standing in front of her, was the man who had left without a word, the man she had once confided in, even when she didn't want to believe it. *Ryan*. The man whose kiss had changed everything—and who then disappeared. She hadn't expected to see him again.

"Ryan," she greeted him, her tone colder than intended, but she couldn't bring herself to care. Call her childish but, he had left, and he didn't deserve any warmth from her now. She nodded curtly, then turned back to Sarah, her smile politely fixed.

"Excuse me, please." Without waiting for a response, she walked away, her steps measured yet quick, her pulse loud in her ears. She could feel his eyes on her, the weight of his gaze, but she refused to look back. She had buried the past, and that's where it belonged.

The rest of the evening blurred. Estelle floated through the crowd, smiling as needed, though her eyes darted to the exit, silently willing the night to end. Yet the party continued in full swing. After some time, she decided to escape to the restroom to gather her thoughts.

Just as she made her way there, a voice cut through the hum of the crowd. She didn't need to turn around to know who it was.

"Estelle," Ryan called softly but insistently.

She stopped, her chest tightening. She didn't want to face him, but he was already there, standing too close, his presence impossible to ignore.

With a frustrated sigh, she turned to him, offering none of her usual warmth. "I didn't expect to see you here," she said evenly, her voice betraying nothing.

"I know... and I'm sorry," Ryan replied, his voice filled with regret. "I didn't mean to leave so

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abruptly. It wasn't planned. My company needed me, and I thought I could put my emotions aside. I know it sounds like an excuse but it's the truth, Estelle. I never meant to hurt you."

His sincerity stirred something painful in her.

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While she had long convinced herself that she didn't care if he left without a plan to return, deep down, a part of her had hoped he might reach out, might prove that he wouldn't walk away like everyone else. She believed he would be her one true friend, even though she recognized it was selfish of her. She had discovered he had

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developed feelings for her, yet she hadn't taken the time to understand whether she reciprocated those feelings. Perhaps she was simply afraid to explore the emotions she might have been harboring.

She forced a dismissive smile. "There's no need to apologize, Ryan," she replied, her tone tighter than she intended. and she forced her smile to widen. "It's in the past. I'm not upset."

Yet as the words left her lips, she felt a small c***k in her carefully maintained facade. She didn't want to feel this—didn't want to feel anything at all. It must be due to the fear she had been unable to overcome, but then, who cares?

Ryan's brow furrowed as if he wanted to press further, but Estelle wasn't about to let him in.

"I need to go," she said abruptly, turning her back to him. She could feel his gaze as she walked away, the weight of his eyes adding to the tightness in her chest. She couldn't let him see her falter. Not now, when she had fought so hard to bury her past.

Ryan stood still, watching her, his chest tightening as he took in her graceful retreat. Her words had been dismissive, but he sensed the ache in her

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refusal, an ache that mirrored his own. He'd missed her more than he'd realized, but her coldness was the consequence he had to bear. After all, he not only left her, but he neglected his role as her friend. He had chosen to prioritize his own emotions and hid behind the excuse that he was needed at his other company. While it wasn't a complete lie—he truly was needed—he left because he couldn't handle his emotions. He felt confused and disoriented, and he needed time to understand his feelings. As a result of his actions, he had to endure her coldness for a while.

Just as he turned to leave, a piercing scream shattered the air.

The sound jolted him, filling him with dread, and a single name blazed in his mind. Without a second thought, he bolted toward the noise, his heart racing with fear. *Could it be Estelle?*

He rounded the corner, only to collide with someone rushing past. A sharp pain shot through his shoulder as the person's shoulder bumped into his chest, but he barely noticed the pain or the stranger who'd bumped into him. All he could focus on was the scream echoing through his head, his instincts urging him forward.

He hurried into the women's restroom, his mind

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spinning with worry. When he pushed the door open, he froze.

There, crumpled on the floor, was a woman with hair wet and tangled, clinging to her tear-streaked face. She was hunched over, her hands pressed to her face, her sobs filling the silent room.

Ryan's heart shattered at the sight.

"Estelle?"



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