

77

*Seeing him again was like reopening a wound she'd long forgotten, the ache surged through her, raw and unrelenting. Feelings she'd buried clawed their way to the surface, raw and aching, as if they'd never left at all. Her heart trembled, a delicate balance between longing and despair. The walls she'd built around her soul crumbled in his presence. His eyes, familiar yet distant, ignited a spark she'd fought to extinguish, and she realized the truth she couldn't escape - Some emotions aren't buried; they're just waiting, silently, for the moment they can remind you they never truly left.*

Estelle stood by the window of her modest studio apartment, her hands wrapped around a warm cup of tea. The morning sun poured in through the sheer white curtains, bathing the room in a soft golden glow. She smiled to herself, feeling a rare sense of peace.

The world she had left behind felt like a distant memory. The chaos, the heartbreak, and the endless cycle of fear and pain no longer had a hold on her. Here, in this quiet coastal town, she

had rebuilt herself piece by piece.

Her days were now filled with the kind of joy she never thought she'd find again. She had started a small boutique specializing in custom designs for women, focusing on outfits for special occasions. But what surprised her most was how much she



[Ads-free >](#)

loved working with children. Their innocence and laughter had become her greatest solace. Perhaps it was because of the child she had once lost; regardless of the reason, she realized she loved how their eyes sparkled at her creations.

"Miss Estelle, do you think it should have more



sparkles?" a little girl asked, her wide brown eyes full of wonder.

Estelle knelt beside her, holding up a sketchpad. On it was a design for a matching mother-daughter dress set for a family anniversary.

"I think that's a great idea, Chloe," Estelle replied, tapping her pencil against her chin. "How about we add some sparkle to the hemline? That way, it's not too much but still shines when you twirl."

Chloe giggled, spinning in an imaginary dress. "Like a princess?"

"Yes, like a princess!" Estelle confirmed, and the little girl yelped with happiness.

Her mother, seated on the couch nearby, smiled warmly. "You have a way with her, Estelle. She's usually so shy, but you bring her out of her shell."

Estelle shrugged modestly, but the compliment warmed her heart. "Kids have a way of reminding us what's important," she said, tweaking the design.

The session went on, filled with laughter and ideas. By the time it ended, Chloe was practically bouncing with excitement.

"Thank you, Miss Estelle!" Chloe chirped as they left, clutching her mother's hand.

Estelle waved goodbye, her heart full. She loved her new life - the simplicity of it, the creativity, and the connections she was building. When she left her home country, she had been broken and uncertain about what to do. But then she had found purpose and solace in sketching beautiful dresses, and that unexpected talent had blossomed into something more profound. She not only designed dresses but also worked with clients, especially brides, right up until their wedding events were over.

It was stressful work at times, depending on how extravagant the occasion was and her clients' personalities. Regardless, she loved and enjoyed her work and couldn't be more at peace with it.

The quiet hum of her sewing machine filled the room as Estelle worked on another design. Her fingers moved deftly over the fabric, the rhythm of the needle hitting the machine plate and the sound of the pedals soothing. She had just finished pinning the last piece when the doorbell rang.

"Coming!" she called, wiping her hands on a nearby cloth. With her assistant, Para, out



77

collecting fabric, she was alone in the shop. Pushing aside the curtain separating her workspace from the storefront, she moved toward the door.

The moment she opened it, her breath caught in her throat.

Standing there before her was Ryan. Her eyes widened as she took him in, dressed sharply in a tailored blazer and dark jeans. His hair, usually longer, was cut short and slightly tousled, as though he'd been running his fingers through it. His expression was blank and unreadable unlike hers which were rounded with surprise.

"Ryan?" she whispered, her voice tinged with disbelief. For a moment, they simply stared at each other. Estelle's mind raced. Why is he here? Is he... getting married? Most of her clients came for wedding or birthday outfits, but Ryan didn't seem like someone who'd need either.

Just as she began to process the surreal sight of him, a voice - bubbly and vibrant snapped her out of her daze.

"Hello!"

Estelle's attention shifted to a petite woman with a bob haircut, standing beside him. She was

stunning, with bright eyes and a carefree smile that lit up the doorway. She practically bounced on her toes, radiating excitement.

Estelle blinked, struggling to compose herself. "Oh, hi. Pardon my rudeness. Please, come in." She stepped aside, gesturing for them to enter, even as her spine stiffened and her mind whirled with questions.

As they walked past her, the faint scent of Ryan's cologne drifted by, stirring an ache she hadn't felt in months. She closed the door and turned around, her heart racing and her emotions in a tangled mess. She hadn't seen him since she left a year ago, since she stood by his hospital bed, her guilt and anguish consuming her, and walked away while he lay unconscious. And now he's here? With a woman who could be his bride? How would she deal with that when her heart was in such disarray?

She led them into the consultation area, her steps measured despite the tremor in her legs. "Please, have a seat," she said, gesturing toward the small table. The woman - Olivia, she later learned, immediately began chatting animatedly, complimenting Estelle's space. Ryan, meanwhile, sat silently, his presence heavy in the room.



Estelle forced herself to focus on Oliva, nodding and giving polite responses to her compliments. But no matter how much she tried, her attention kept straying to Ryan. He was quiet, his eyes fixed on her with an intensity that made her chest tighten. She couldn't tell if he was angry, indifferent, or something else entirely, and the vagueness unsettled her.

"I'm getting married!" Olivia announced suddenly, her excitement spilling over.

"What?" The word slipped out before Estelle could stop it, her voice a mix of shock and disbelief.

Olivia paused, her hand frozen mid-gesture. She tilted her head, eyebrows raised.

"I mean, congratulations!" Estelle rushed to recover, plastering a smile on her face. "That's wonderful news."

Her cheeks burned with embarrassment, and she avoided looking at Ryan, whose expression remained frustratingly blank. Inside, her emotions churned violently. Ryan was getting married? To Oliva? Why did the thought feel like a punch to the gut? Why does she feel disheartened at the realization that he is getting married? They were never together, and he had the right to marry

77

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whoever he wanted, so why did it hurt?

Swallowing hard, she shifted her attention back to Olivia, who chatted animatedly about her upcoming engagement, describing her vision for the perfect engagement dress and then

[Ads-free >](#)

discussing fabric options with unabashed enthusiasm. Estelle nodded along, jotting down notes and making suggestions. For a brief moment, the conversation distracted her, allowing her to slip into the comforting familiarity of her work.

But then she glanced up and noticed Ryan's chair

8/11



was empty.

Her gaze darted around the room until she spotted him by the window, his back to them. He stood with his hands in his pockets, his posture rigid, and his large frame shielding the afternoon light from fully streaming through the room. Estelle's breath caught as she studied him from afar. His broad shoulders seemed weighed down, his stance far more rigid than she remembered. The Ryan she once knew had always exuded quiet strength and confidence. Now, there was an air of complete seriousness about him, one she couldn't quite place. Maybe she was the only one reading it like that due to their past.

Her heart twisted painfully, but she quickly tore her eyes away, forcing herself to focus on Olivia's chatter. She reminded herself that Ryan's life was no longer her concern. Whatever connection they once had was severed the moment she left.

When the consultation finally ended, Olivia stood with a bright smile. "I should expect a draft next week, then?"

"Of course," Estelle replied, escorting her to the door. Ryan joined Olivia midway, placing a hand on the small of her back in a gesture so casual yet intimate that it sent a sharp pang through Estelle's

chest.

As Oliva stepped outside, Ryan lingered for a moment, turning back to meet Estelle's gaze. His eyes locked onto hers, and for the first time that afternoon, his expression softened. The intensity in his stare was almost unbearable, as though he was searching for something unspoken between them.

"It's good to see you, Estelle," he said quietly, his voice low and deliberate.

Before she could respond, he turned and walked out, leaving her standing frozen in the doorway.

For a long moment, Estelle stood frozen, her heart pounding furiously. Her fingers clenched the edge of the doorframe as she replayed his words in her mind. Her emotions were a jumbled mix of confusion, regret, and an ache she didn't want to acknowledge.

When she finally moved, it was to press a trembling hand to her chest, trying to steady her breathing. But the rhythm of her heart refused to slow.

Seeing Ryan again had shaken her in a way she wasn't prepared for, waking up the feelings she thought she'd buried.



