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*We need to talk, not because it's easy, but because silence has built walls between us. Everything we've buried, every hurt, every regret - it's time to let it out. It might shatter us further, or maybe it will mend what's broken. This isn't the perfect moment, but there's no such thing. Our hearts ache with the weight of unspoken truths; let's risk the pain to heal. Even if our words tremble, even if our voices c***k, we'll face this together. The scars we've ignored deserve acknowledgement, the wounds a chance to close. It might not end with forgiveness, but it will end with honesty. Let's unravel the chaos and find whatever pieces of us remain. Because staying silent means losing everything, and we can't let that happen.*

Ryan leaned back in his chair, swirling the wine in his glass, the corners of his lips twitching with amusement. Estelle's reaction earlier had been priceless. He couldn't stop replaying the look of disbelief and awkwardness on her face when she mistook him for the groom. But what really made his day was her shock - the way her brows furrowed and her lips parted - only to transform

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into a mix of confusion and disbelief when she realized Alex was Olivia's fiancé. It was a memory worth savoring.

Ryan chuckled under his breath. Alex, with his sharp words and irritable, overprotective demeanor, had made an unforgettable impression

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on Estelle during their brief hospital encounter while Ryan was unconscious. Watching the two of them at the fabrics store - with Alex scowling at Estelle, Estelle wrestling with her discomfort, and Olivia oblivious to the tension as she dragged Estelle through fabric samples - was a far more

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entertaining spectacle than he'd anticipated.

He sipped his wine, his gaze lazily drifting toward Alex and Olivia in the corner of the hotel garden. Their heated discussion had been simmering for minutes, and Ryan didn't need to hear every word to know it wasn't going well - and that it was about Estelle. Alex had always been skilled at managing his emotions, but Olivia, who was fiery and unfiltered, didn't hold back when she was upset. This allowed Ryan to catch snippets of Olivia's raised voice. "...you can't just decide things for me, Alex! I love her work, and I'm not changing my mind!"

Alex, on the other hand, was murmuring in a controlled tone, his words too low to catch.

Ryan's mind flickered back to their earlier conversation - the moment Alex had dragged him aside like an irate parent about to lecture their child.

Flashback

"Did you know she was the designer?" Alex demanded, his voice low but sharp as they stood near the edge of the grand hall.

Ryan tilted his head, his brow raised, feigning confusion. "Who? Estelle?"

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"Don't play dumb with me," Alex snapped, his hands clenched at his sides. "Is that why you agreed to come along? You knew she'd be here."

Ryan stared at Alex for a moment before shrugging. "No," he lied smoothly, keeping his tone casual. "I just needed a break, that's all."

It was a lie, of course. Ryan knew that Estelle was involved. He had seen the profile, and although he genuinely needed a vacation and some rest, the only reason he agreed to escort Olivia was because of Estelle. However, he wasn't about to explain himself to Alex.

Alex folded his arms, his eyes narrowing, skepticism etched into his features. "Well, you should stay away from her," he said finally.

Ryan's amusement evaporated, replaced by irritation, although he hid it well. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me," Alex said, his voice low but firm. "I'll convince Olivia to choose another designer if I have to. We don't need this complication."

Ryan felt his temper flicker but forced himself to stay calm. Alex's overprotective tendencies were nothing new, but this meddling was pushing it. He needed to stop.

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"You're overreacting," Ryan said with a forced chuckle. "Relax. I'm not here to cause trouble, so could you please mind your own business for once and focus on your bride?" He added with a teasing grin, giving Alex's shoulder a friendly pat. With that, Ryan turned on his heel before Alex could respond, leaving his friend standing there, fuming.

End Flashback

Ryan returned to reality as Olivia stormed off, her heels clicking angrily against the pavement. Alex remained where he stood, running a hand through his hair with a frustrated sigh before walking toward Ryan.

"Rough night?" Ryan asked, amusement lacing his tone.

Alex shot him a withering glare but said nothing as he took the seat opposite. He grabbed the wine bottle, poured himself a generous glass, and downed half of it in one go.

"I'm booking the next flight out for all of us," Alex said abruptly, his tone clipped.

Ryan stilled, lowering his glass, his brow raised. "Why?"

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"You know why," Alex said bluntly. "I don't want you anywhere near Estelle. This entire thing..."

"Stop right there," Ryan interrupted, setting his glass down with a clink. His voice was quiet but held a dangerous edge. "You don't get to dictate my life, Alex. I'm not a child."

"Well, you're acting like one," Alex snapped, his voice rising. "Do you think I've forgotten what happened? You almost lost your life because of her!"

Ryan's eyes darkened as his anger surged. "I didn't almost lose my life because of Estelle. I made my choices, Alex. And even if I did, I'd still make the same choice for you or Olivia without a second thought. So stop blaming her for something that wasn't her fault. Just drop it!"

The words hung heavy in the air, silencing Alex. For a moment, they glared at each other, their chests heaving with anger.

Ryan exhaled sharply, his voice steady yet sharp. "You're my friend, Alex, and I understand that you're concerned. However, you need to recognize the boundaries. You don't have the right to control my life. So please, never bring this up again. Just stay out of it completely."

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Without waiting for a response, Ryan stood, grabbed his coat, and walked away, his steps brisk as he tried to outrun the anger bubbling in his chest.

A few minutes later, Ryan found himself parked outside a very familiar building. He hadn't intended to end up at Estelle's shop, but his restlessness had led him there regardless. Sitting in his car in front of the closed shop, he felt a mix of confusion and anger. What was he doing here? He had no plan and no words prepared - only an overwhelming desire to see her.

The building was dark, the lights were off, and the "closed" sign hung in the window. Ryan sighed and raked a hand through his hair. He didn't even know what he would say to her if she were available.

As he turned to leave, a car pulled up in front of the building. His breath caught when he saw Estelle step out, her figure illuminated by the streetlights. She wore a flowy dress that clung to her in the night breeze, her hair tousled as if she'd rushed out of bed.

What was she doing there at such a late hour?

Ryan wondered.

He watched her hurry toward the building,

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fumbling with her keys. Ryan hesitated for a moment before stepping out of his car and crossing the road to follow her.

"Estelle," he called, his voice low but firm.

She didn't hear him as she was too focused on

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unlocking the door. As she pushed the door open and stepped inside, Ryan quickened his pace. Before she could close the door, he reached out, placing his hand against it.

The sudden resistance startled Estelle. With a burst of strength, she shoved the door back with

all her might, slamming it into Ryan's face.

"Damn it, Estelle!" Ryan hissed, stumbling back and clutching his nose as pain shot through him.

The sound of his voice made her freeze. She flipped the light on, then swung the door open, her wide eyes meeting his.

"Ryan?"

"Yeah, Ryan," he grumbled sarcastically, lowering his hand to reveal his slightly reddened face. "Was it really necessary to slam the door on me?"

"I—I thought you were a burglar!" she stammered, her voice tinged with both guilt and confusion.

"A burglar? At this hour?" Ryan raised a brow, stepping inside without waiting for an invitation.

Estelle's cheeks flushed with embarrassment as she turned around. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing," he shot back, his tone sharp but not unkind.

"That's none of your business," she snapped back, crossing her arms defensively, the action pushing her t**s up and revealing more skin than intended.

"Maybe not," he admitted, his tone softening. "But I don't think you should be out here alone,

especially dressed like..." He gestured vaguely at her gown, his voice trailing off.

Estelle flushed, tugging the fabric closer around her body. "I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself," she snapped. She hadn't planned on being out this late, especially in her nightdress. It was an impromptu decision when she realized she hadn't brought her sketchbook and other necessary documents needed to work overnight.

"Clearly," he said dryly, gesturing to his face.

Her face flushed red with embarrassment and guilt at the sight of his red nose. Serves him right for sneaking up on her at such a late hour. "Why are you even here?" she demanded.

"Because we need to talk," was his response.

Estelle hesitated, her fingers tightening around the edge of her dress. "About what?"

"About everything," he said simply, his gaze unwavering.

For a moment, Estelle felt very uncomfortable under his intense gaze. It was like he could see every layer of her being.

"I don't think that's a good idea," she said finally, reverting her eyes from his.

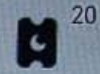
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"Probably not," Ryan agreed, stepping closer. "But we're doing it anyway."



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