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*Look into my eyes and tell me this fire doesn't still burn within you. Say these trembling hands mean nothing, that my touch doesn't echo in your soul. Deny the way your breath hitches, how your heart races when we're this close. Tell me the ache in your chest is just a passing breeze, not a storm I've stirred. Lie to me, say the memories of us don't haunt you when the world quiets. Whisper that you feel nothing, though your silence screams the truth. Convince me this gravity between us is an illusion, not fate's cruel pull. Tell me you've forgotten, even as your tears betray the words you won't speak. Pretend I'm no longer yours, and I'll pretend you're no longer mine. But know, deep down, the truth will still bind us—unspoken, but unbroken.*

The shop was quiet, the kind of silence that pressed down heavily, the tension thick enough to cut with a knife. Ryan leaned against the counter, his arms folded tightly across his chest, his eyes dark and piercing. Estelle, standing just a few feet away, fidgeted with the edge of her dress, avoiding his gaze.

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"You left," Ryan began, his voice low but sharp, the kind of tone that made her flinch. "You left without a word, Estelle. Do you have any idea what that felt like?"

Estelle's breath hitched, guilt flickering across her face. Even though she knew a day like this would come and had been anticipating it, she found her tongue tied, her lips parted, but no words came out. The guilt that had lingered for months began clawing its way to the surface.

Ryan took a step closer, his jaw clenched. "I woke up in that hospital bed, barely able to breathe, and you were gone. No note, no explanation - nothing." His voice cracked, but he didn't stop. "Do you know what that did to me?"

"Ryan, I—" she tried, her voice barely above a whisper.

"No, let me finish," he snapped, his eyes blazing with an emotion she couldn't quite place making her flinch. "Do you know how it feels to almost lose your life for someone? To put everything on the line for them, only to wake up and realize they couldn't even wait for you to open your eyes?"

His words hit her like a slap, each one piercing through her carefully constructed walls of guilt.

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Tears pricked at her eyes, his words cutting through her like a knife. She wanted to explain herself, to tell him the truth, but the lump in her throat was too thick.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," she whispered. "I thought—"

"You thought what? That it wouldn't matter? That I wouldn't care?" His voice was sharp, but beneath the anger lay something deeper, something wounded which tugged at her heart painfully.

"I thought we had something, Estelle," Ryan continued, his voice dropping to a raw, guttural tone. "I thought you cared. But you left. You walked away like I didn't matter."

Her hands clenched at her sides, her voice breaking as she willed herself not to break down. "I thought I was doing the right thing! You almost died because of me, Ryan. I couldn't stay. I thought leaving would make it easier for you. I didn't know what else to do," Estelle finally said, her voice trembling.

"Easier?" Ryan let out a bitter laugh, running a hand through his hair. "So, leaving was your solution? Running away was easier than facing me? Do you have any idea how hard it was on me

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since you thought leaving was the easier option? I spent months wondering what I did wrong and why you didn't stay. I kept asking myself if I was just being foolish, and I almost lost my life for nothing."

Tears welled up in her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. "You don't understand—"

"Then make me understand," he interrupted, his voice rising. "Because right now, all I see is someone who gave up when things got hard."

"I was scared!" she shouted, her voice cracking as she tried to hold herself together. "I didn't know how to face you after everything that happened. I thought leaving was the only way to protect myself - and to protect you."

"Protect me?" he scoffed, clearly in disbelief. "From what exactly, Estelle? Because you didn't protect me. You broke me."

Her heart tightened at his words, and for a moment, neither of them spoke. The only sounds were the ticking of the clock on the wall and her frequent sniffs.

"I thought I was doing the right thing," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

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Ryan closed his eyes, his chest rising and falling as he struggled to control his emotions. "That word again, that damn word," he groaned angrily. "What do you think is the right thing?" he demanded, his voice filled with anguish. "The right thing would have been to stay, to talk to me, to let

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me decide if I wanted you there or not."

"I'm sorry," Estelle said, her voice breaking. "I was selfish. I was weak. I didn't know how to handle it, and I hurt you in the process. I'm so sorry, Ryan, but I just couldn't stay." She admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "You almost died, Ryan. I

couldn't bear the thought of staying and risking it all again."

He stared at her, his chest rising and falling as he tried to process her words. The raw vulnerability and sincerity in her voice chipped away at his anger, leaving his heart aching and the urge to pull her into his arms.

"I didn't need you to protect me," he said quietly, stepping closer. "I needed you to stay. I needed to know you were safe."

"I didn't know," she admitted, her voice cracking. "I was scared, Ryan. Scared of losing you. Scared of hurting you and everyone around me more."

Ryan stared at her, his gaze searching hers as if trying to find the truth in her words. Slowly, he closed the distance between them, his steps deliberate, his eyes never leaving hers.

"You did hurt me," he said, his voice trembling. "But I never stopped caring about you. Not for a second. Despite being upset with you, I still couldn't help but think about you every day, wondering where you were and if you were okay."

They were close now, so close that she could feel the heat radiating from his body and smell the faint scent of his cologne. Her eyes met his, and

her heart pounded in her chest as their breaths mingled in the charged air between them. Ryan lifted his hand, hesitating for a moment before brushing a strand of hair from her face. His touch was gentle, almost reverent, and it made her shiver.

"Ryan..." she breathed, her voice barely audible, her lips so close to his now that she could feel the warmth of his breath against her skin.

"I knew you didn't have the same feelings for me back then. I understood that you were focused on healing, but please tell me you don't feel this," he murmured, gently cupping her face with his hand. "Tell me this doesn't still mean anything to you."

Her breath hitched, her hands trembling as they came up to rest against his chest. "I can't," she whispered, her voice breaking. But even with that, she found her body leaning into his. That betraying body of hers.

His thumb brushed against her cheek, wiping away a stray tear. "Then tell me to stop," he murmured, his eyes searching hers, his voice caressing. "If you don't want this, tell me now."

But she didn't. She couldn't.

Instead, she leaned in slightly, her lips parting, her

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eyes fluttering shut.

How could she deny the pull she was feeling? How could she deny the warmth between her legs just at the feel of his hard body pressed against her soft one? How could she stop when her heart raced every time she met his gaze? She knew deep down she had long been attracted to him, but she hadn't wanted to acknowledge the feeling. Now, it was like all the pent-up emotion burst open at just the slightest graze of his skin on hers. Absurd, but it was the truth.

Ryan closed the remaining distance, his breath warm against her skin. For a moment, the world seemed to stop, their proximity drowning out everything else. Their lips were so close, a whisper away, and then, just as their lips were about to meet, she pulled back, her breath shaky.

"I'm scared, Ryan," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

Moments like that made her feel like a child, and that embarrassed her.

Ryan let out a soft sigh, his hand falling away, yet his gaze remained steady. "So am I," he said. "But luckily, I'm a man of patience, and I thrive on taking risks," he teased.



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Despite herself, Estelle couldn't help but let out a small laugh, easing the tension between them slightly. However, when their eyes met again, the weight of unsaid and untamed feelings settled over them once more, promising to break free soon.



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