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*What spell did she cast upon my heart, that I can't find the strength to tear it apart? Her name lingers like a song unsung, a haunting melody where pain and love are one. Every thought of her becomes a*

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*chain, binding my soul in sweet, aching pain. What power does she hold, so silent yet vast, to weave her shadow through my present and past? I fight, I fall, I try to let her go, but she's the fire that warms me in the cold.*

The hospital room was sterile and quiet, save for the occasional beep of the heart monitor. Ryan lay propped up against a soft pillow, his eyes fixed on the ceiling, though his mind was far from the cold, white walls surrounding him and the sharp tone of his friend's voice.

"Seriously, Ryan, what were you thinking?" Alex's voice cut through the silence like a blade. "

Throwing yourself into danger like that? For what? To play the hero? You could've died!"

Ryan didn't respond, his gaze unfocused. His friend, Alex, paced the small room, his expression a mix of anger and worry. The irritation in his voice was apparent, but Ryan barely registered it. He had long zoned out of his friend's ceaseless scolding.

Two days. He had been conscious for two days now, and though he had been assured that Estelle and Hunter were alive and safe -though Hunter was said to have sustained a gunshot wound and was still hospitalized - still, Ryan couldn't shake the gnawing feeling of emptiness that had taken root in his chest. She hadn't come to see him. Not even once. And that burned more than the pain in his ribs or the throbbing headache that refused to go. He clenched his teeth, anger simmering just

beneath his worry and longing.

"Are you even listening to me?" Alex snapped, his irritation evident in his words.

Ryan blinked, his gaze finally shifting to his friend.  
"What?"

"Of course, you weren't." Alex huffed. "Why did I think you were when all you've done since you regained consciousness is mope? Do you even know how worried I was? Do you even care how close you came to not making it? How lucky you are to be alive? Do you..."

Ryan's jaw tightened, and he closed his eyes, taking a slow, deep breath. Alex's words were meant to be a jolt back to reality. They were supposed to scare him, to make him grateful for a life he'd almost lost. But they only fueled the anger simmering in his heart. He had risked everything for Estelle, and though he hadn't done it for gratitude, her absence still stung.

"...and yet..."

A soft knock interrupted Alex's sentence.

Both men turned as the door creaked open, revealing Anna and Christian, Estelle's parents. Ryan's heart skipped a beat, surprise flickering



across his face, and instinctively, his eyes searched the space behind them, hoping to see Estelle.

But she wasn't there.

"Mr. Hayes," Anna greeted softly. She stepped further into the room, her husband trailing behind her. Both wore expressions of gratitude mixed with exhaustion.

Ryan pushed himself up slightly, wincing at the sharp pain that shot through his side.

"No, no, don't move," Anna said in panic. She hurried toward Ryan only after setting down the small bouquet she had brought for him gently on the bedside table.

Ryan nodded, relaxing back, while Alex couldn't help but roll his eyes before looking away from the scene unfolding before him.

"Thank you," Anna began, her voice warm but tight with emotion. "For what you did for our daughter. For Estelle. For putting yourself in harm's way like that... It couldn't have been easy."

Ryan shook his head slightly. "There's no need to thank me," he replied. "I did what anyone would've done."

"No," Anna interjected softly, her eyes glistening with tears. "You did more than anyone else would have. You... you saved her life, Ryan." Her voice broke slightly, and she cleared her throat, her composure returning. "We'll never be able to repay you."

Ryan shifted uncomfortably in his lying position, his gaze briefly shifting from Anna to Christian, who nodded solemnly but remained silent. The gratitude in their eyes should have felt reassuring, but all Ryan could focus on was the gnawing question clawing at his chest.

He hesitated before asking, "How is she?"

Anna and Christian exchanged a glance, and Ryan's heart sank at the brief silence that followed his question.

"She's... fine," Anna said at last, her voice careful, her eyes flickering with hesitation before she spoke again. "She left the country yesterday."

Ryan froze. The gravity of her words hit him like a punch to the gut. He tried to mask his reaction, but the sharp intake of breath betrayed him.

"She left?" he echoed, his voice barely above a whisper.



"Yes," Anna nodded, avoiding his gaze. "She came to the hospital after everything, but... she couldn't stay."

The ache in Ryan's chest deepened, but he forced himself to remain composed. "I see," he murmured, though the words tasted bitter.

Anna reached out as if to touch his hand but stopped herself, pulling back instead. "Thank you," she said quietly, her hands clasped in front of her, her heart heavy with guilt. "We're truly thankful for everything."

Ryan only nodded stiffly, his gaze dropping to the blanket covering him. He didn't trust himself to speak.

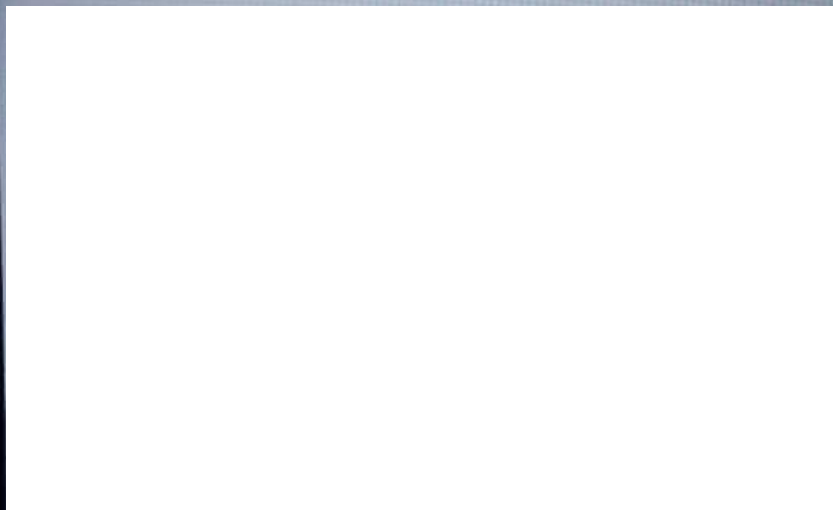
With that, Anna and Christian turned to leave, murmuring another round of thanks.

Ryan sat there, frozen, unable to process what he had just heard. But just as they reached the door, Anna paused and glanced back, her eyes meeting Ryan's with a motherly compassion. Her gaze flickered briefly to Alex, who stood in the corner with his arms crossed, his irritation practically radiating off him, before returning to Ryan again.

"I don't know why Estelle decided to leave so soon," she began, her voice barely above a

75.

whisper. "None of us do. But I know this: she was... reluctant. I don't think she wanted to leave just like that because she came here. She sat by your bedside when you were unconscious. She stayed for hours. She..." Anna exhaled, her voice breaking



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slightly.

Ryan's chest tightened, shock flashing across his face.

"She's been through so much, and I think... I think she felt like she didn't deserve to see you after everything."

Ryan swallowed hard, his jaw clenching.

"So, please, don't hate her for it because she cares. More than you know. She's... she's just trying to find her way again."

And with that, Anna turned and left the room, the door clicking shut behind her.

Ryan stared at the shut door, his mind racing. The silence that followed was heavy, broken only by the rhythmic beeping of the heart monitor.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Ryan's voice cut through the silence like a knife.

Alex blinked, startled. "Tell you what?"

"That she came," Ryan snapped, his frustration boiling over. "That she was here when I was unconscious."

Alex shrugged nonchalantly, leaning off the wall to take a seat in the available chair near the window. "Didn't think it was important."

Ryan's eyes narrowed, his anger boiling dangerously close to the surface. "Not important? Are you serious right now?"

"Yeah, I'm serious," Alex shot back, crossing his arms. "She left, didn't she? Doesn't matter if she stopped by for a few hours while you were out



cold. What matters is she's gone."

Ryan's fists clenched, the ache in his ribs forgotten as anger surged through him. "You had no right to decide that for me," he growled. "I needed to know\_\_"

"To know what?" Alex interrupted, his voice rising. "That the woman you're obsessing over couldn't even stick around to see if you'd wake up? What good does that do to you, huh? Because all I see about her is trouble."

Ryan stared at him, disbelief and anger flashing on his face. "You don't understand," he said, his voice low but trembling with emotion.

"You're right. I don't," Alex retorted, standing up. "I don't understand what she's done to get you all tangled up like this to the extent you almost get yourself killed for her, but you need to stop this nonsense. You nearly died for her, Ryan. And for what?"

"That's not what happened," Ryan countered, his fist clenching tightly beside him.

"That is exactly what happened!" Alex barked, then sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Look, I'm just trying to protect you, man. You've been through enough. And if keeping that woman away

75.

from you is the only thing that'll get your sense back, then so be it. That is exactly what I'll do."

With that said, he grabbed his jacket and left the room.

As the door clicked shut behind him, Ryan closed his eyes, the room once again fell into silence. But this time, the silence felt heavier, the weight of his friend's harsh but honest words pressing on him. Yet, even with that, he couldn't let go of the one name of the woman who had somehow crawled into his heart in a way he could never understand or describe.

Estelle.



17

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