90

She couldn't help but feel a spark of hope, fragile yet fierce, for the first time in a long time, her heart whispered what if? Maybe, just maybe, they could rewrite their shattered story, piecing together the jagged edges of their broken past. What if this time, the love they shared was unshakable, a foundation built on truth, not the weight of old scars? Her heart, weary from battles, dared to dream of peace, of hands reaching for each other, not pulling away. For once, the silence between them felt full, not hollow. Maybe, just maybe, they had a chance at something real.

Her words, though sincere and harmless, pierced his heart like a dagger; yet, he respected her request. He sat beside her, the silence between them heavy with unspoken emotions.

For the first time in years, Ryan felt powerless. And for yet another time in his life, he was terrified of losing someone who had come to mean everything to him. The last time he had felt something as strong as this was when his mother left him.

They sat in silence for what felt like hours until he

couldn't take it anymore - he needed to speak. He had to because the silence was slowly killing him. It was like the longer he spent stalling, the more she seemed to be slipping away.

"Estelle, please," he began, his voice low and strained. "You have to let me explain."

But she didn't look at him. Instead, her gaze remained fixed on the pool, her expression calm but distant.

"You don't need to explain anything, Ryan," she said softly, not even glancing at him, which made Ryan's heart clench painfully inside him.

"Yes, I do," he insisted, his frustration simmering beneath the surface. "What you saw—"

"Doesn't matter," she interrupted, finally turning to face him. Her eyes, glistening with unshed tears, held a steady but cold expression. "It doesn't matter because... there's nothing between us that needs an explanation. Nothing at all."

Ryan froze, her words slicing through him like a blade. He blinked, his jaw tightening as he tried to process what she'd just said.

"Nothing?" he repeated, his voice rising despite himself. "Is that how you see this? Is that how you

see us?"

Estelle flinched at the anger in his tone, her heart pounding in her chest. "Ryan, I didn't mean it like that—"

"But that's exactly what you said," he interrupted,

his frustration boiling over. He turned to face her fully, his eyes blazing with emotions he could no longer suppress.

"Do you have any idea what it's been like for me? All these years, Estelle, I've loved you for years. Years! And now, when I finally have you, you're

telling me it's nothing? That whatever we have is nothing?"

His voice cracked on the last word, the vein in his neck and forehead popped out and Estelle's breath hitched. She had never seen him like this before - so raw with emotions, so vulnerable that it made her chest tighten with something akin to guilt.

And did he just say he loved her?

"Ryan..." she whispered, but he didn't stop.

"I've waited for you," he continued, his voice thick with emotion. "I've waited for years, hoping, praying for a chance to be with you. And now, when I finally get it, you won't even give me the chance to explain myself? Do you think I'd ruin this thing between us over someone like Anastasia? Do you think that giving my time, my heart, and even my sanity for us means nothing?

Estelle's tears spilled over, and she shook her head, her voice trembling as she buried her face in her hands. "It's not about Anastasia, or you, Ryan. It's about me. I don't know if I can survive loving someone again, only to lose them. I don't know if I'm strong enough to go through that pain all over again."

Ryan's heart clenched at the sight of her breaking down. He reached out, gently prying her hands away from her face.

"What are you talking about?" he asked, his voice softer now.

She looked up at him, her eyes red and puffy. "I've lost too much already," she admitted. "I gave my heart to someone once, and he crushed it. I can't—" Her voice broke, and she inhaled shakily before continuing. "I can't risk going through that again. It's easier to walk away now, while I still can."

Her confession hit him like a punch in the gut, and for a moment, he was at a loss. Then, his resolve hardened.

"You think I'm like him?" he asked, his voice trembling with emotion. "You think I'd hurt you the way he did? Just how low do you think of me?"

She shook her head vehemently. "No, it's not that. It's just... I don't know if I can survive it again if it does happen."

Ryan exhaled deeply, running a hand through his hair. He understood her. Hell, he had caught a glimpse of her broken past, but he couldn't help feeling hurt that she would compare him to Hunter. "Estelle," he began, his voice steady now, "

I've made mistakes in my life - many of them. But you—" He reached out and brushed a tear from her cheek. "You're not one of them. You never were. And I would never intentionally hurt you."

She blinked up at him, her lips parting in surprise while her puffy eyes searched his for any hint of doubt.

"Anastasia means nothing to me," he said firmly. " Whatever we had was a mistake. A stupid, meaningless mistake from years ago. She doesn't matter, and she never has. No one has ever mattered to me the way you do, nor has anyone elicited an ounce of emotion from me apart from my mother."

Her tears fell freely now, and she clung to his words like a lifeline. She knew of his mother - he had told her during one of their talks - but that didn't mean what he said was true. Anastasia was an incredibly attractive woman, impossible to resist. Not that she wasn't attractive herself, but....

"But how can you be sure?" she whispered.

"Because I've never felt this way about anyone else," he replied, his voice breaking. "You make me feel alive, Estelle. Like I'm finally doing something right for once in my life. Like I can finally breathe

when you're around. And I don't want to lose that. I don't want to lose you."

Her resolve crumbled, and before she could stop herself, a sob escaped her lips. She buried her face in her hands, but Ryan could only sigh in pain. Without hesitation, he pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly as she cried against his chest while he buried his face in her hair, willing himself not to cry as well.

"I'm scared," she admitted through her tears, her voice muffled against his shirt.

"I know," he whispered, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "But we'll figure it out together. I promise."

They stayed like that for a long moment, clinging to each other until the weight of their emotions slowly lifted. When Estelle finally pulled back, her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were red and puffy, but there was a softness and shyness in her gaze that hadn't been there before that night.

Ryan cupped her face, his thumbs brushing away the remnants of her tears. "You're so beautiful," he murmured, his voice filled with awe.

Her breath hitched, and before she could respond, he leaned in, capturing her lips in a heated kiss.

The world around them faded as they poured every ounce of their love and longing into that single moment.

When they finally pulled apart, Ryan rested his forehead against hers, a small smile tugging at his lips. "Think we can continue this in the room?" he teased, his voice low and husky.

Estelle laughed, the sound like music to his ears. " Olivia and Alex will kill us if they notice we're missing," she said, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

Ryan groaned, making her laugh even harder.

"One last dance," she promised, her smile warm and sly. "Then we'll sneak away."

Ryan sighed dramatically, but the smile on his face betrayed his happiness. "Fine," he said, standing and offering her his hand. "One last dance and we'll leave."

Estelle took his hand with a light chuckle, her heart lighter than it had been hours ago. As they walked back into the party, she couldn't help but feel a spark of hope for the first time in a long time. Maybe, just maybe, they had a chance at something real.