

## **“Ghosts Leave Tracks”**

Miss Shine Grayson met Terry on a Tuesday that should've been regular.

She was leaving the community center on the Southside of Chicago, hair in a puff, worn-out denim jacket, tote bag full of files thumping her hip. She'd just wrapped a late shift helping teens fill out job applications and FAFSA, mind fried and feet aching, when a car backfired down the block.

Three boys ducked. Somebody cursed. Shine flinched and kept walking like she didn't jump easily. Like her nerves weren't stretched thin already.

Then she saw him.

A tall, broad-shouldered man in a faded USMC hoodie sprawled flat on the sidewalk, cheek pressed to concrete, eyes wide open but not here. His chest heaved like he'd been sprinting. His fingers scraped the ground like they were searching for a weapon that wasn't there.

“—Yo, Terry, it's just a muffler, man!” a beat cop shouted from across the street, voice too loud, too casual. “Ain't nobody shootin'.”

Terry didn't blink.

Shine had seen that look before—in documentaries, old news footage, the kind of clips people watch with popcorn and distance. Never ten feet away. Never on a living, breathing man who looked like he could carry a refrigerator under one arm.

She didn't think. She just walked over and crouched down beside him, low enough to be in his line of sight without hovering like a threat.

“Hey,” she said, soft and steady. “You with me?”

His eyes snapped to hers. Storm-dark. Unsettled. Like a whole battlefield lived behind them.

He blinked once. Twice. His breathing stuttered—then slowed.

“I'm good,” he muttered, more to himself than her. “I'm good, I'm good...”

Shine stayed planted. “You sure? 'Cause the concrete look like it disagree.”

Something like a laugh broke out of him, rough around the edges. A sound he seemed surprised to hear come out of his own throat.

“You a comedian?” he rasped.

“Only part-time.” She held out her hand. “Come on, big dog. Street dirty.”

He hesitated, then took it. His palm swallowed hers—callused, warm, and a small but noticeable trembling. He rose in one smooth motion like muscle memory did the work before pride could argue.

“I’m okay,” he said again, voice tight with embarrassment.

“Mm-hmm.” Shine glanced at the cop across the street and then back at him with a curious head tilt. “My name’s Shine...You Terry, right? Every cop in a ten-mile radius been sayin’ that name since the city did that ‘hometown hero’ thing for you.”

Terry’s jaw flexed. He looked away like the words irritated him.

“Somethin’ like that,” he said.

Shine tilted her head with a wide and bright smile to follow. “Okay, Mr. Somethin’ Like That. Don’t fall out in front of my building no more. You scared my babies.”

The teens by the door pretended not to stare. They were staring anyway.

Terry’s gaze flicked toward them. His posture shifted—protective without trying. Like the instinct lived in his bones.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said. Then, softer: “Ms. Shine.”

The way he said her name did something stupid to her chest.

And that was it.

That’s where it started.

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It didn’t feel like a love story at first.

It felt like proximity.

He started “just happenin’” to be on the sidewalk when she got off late. At first she thought he was posted up for the cops—half security, half neighborhood legend. The elders nodded at him. The teenagers threw him daps like he was a celebrity. Officers treated him like a peer even when he didn’t wear a badge.

But his eyes always found her.

“You walkin’ home?” he’d ask, falling into step like it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Sometimes,” she’d say. “Sometimes I Uber. Depends on if my back hurt.”

“You shouldn’t be walkin’ alone this late.”

“That why you been checkin’ for me? Community patrol?”

“...Somethin’ like that.” he said, eyes assessing the streets ahead.

He didn’t push. Didn’t ask for her number. Didn’t try to impress her. He just walked her to her car, her bus stop, her porch. He’d keep the conversation light—music, memes, why the Bulls kept stressing the whole city out. Then, sometimes, he’d go quiet mid-sentence, gaze distant for a beat, jaw tightening like he was hearing something she couldn’t.

Then he’d come back.

“Sorry,” he’d mutter, rubbing his forehead.

“I know,” Shine would say. “You got ghosts.”

He studied her the first time she said that, like he expected pity or fear.

“No pity,” she added. “Just facts.”

A long pause.

Then he nodded once, like he respected that.

He ended up telling her anyway.

Not all at once. Little pieces—dropped like stones in a lake.

A convoy blown apart.

Dust and screaming.

Names he said under his breath like prayers.

One man he carried until his knees gave out.

PTSD. Night sweats. Survivor's guilt. Therapy three times a week on the VA's schedule. The rest he patched together with routine—gym at six, church on Sundays, checking doors for neighbors, sitting in the same diner booth, always facing the exit.

“Still gotta live,” he said once, staring into his coffee instead of at her. “Even when your head don't want you to.”

Shine didn't have a fix.

She had presence.

“I get it,” was all she said. “Trauma just... pick different uniforms for everybody.”

He looked at her then. Really looked.

That was the first night he walked her all the way to her front door.

And waited until she got inside before he turned around.

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They weren't official.

Not at first.

It was slow—the kind of slow that sneaks up on you. One minute he's "that dude from the Marines," and the next he knows how you take your coffee, what days your knee acts up, and which kid at the center stresses you out the most.

He showed up with little things.

Hot wings when she worked late.

An extra hoodie when she left her jacket inside. "Put this on. You shiverin'."

A new deadbolt on her front door one Saturday, installed before she even woke up.

"Terry," Shine said, standing there in her sleep shirt, hair a mess, blinking at him like he'd lost his mind. "I didn't ask for that."

"I know," he said, tightening the last screw. "I wanted it."

"Why?"

"Cause the old one was trash."

"You breakin' in my house to fix my door is crazy."

He smirked. “You sayin’ you don’t like it?”

She rolled her eyes—but she slept easier that night.

He didn’t ask to spend the night the first time.

He just stayed too long.

They were on her couch, TV low, some random movie playing while she half-worked on lesson plans. His shoulder was warm against hers, his thigh a solid line next to her leg. He smelled like soap and that cologne she was starting to think of as him—smoke and cedar and something clean underneath.

She noticed his breathing shift before she realized he’d drifted off.

His head tilted back. His hand twitched. His eyes moved beneath his lids like he was running in there. His jaw clenched.

“Terry?” she whispered.

He jerked awake with a quiet, awful sound—half a choke, half a shout he strangled before it escaped. His eyes were wide, wild, scanning the room like it might turn on him.

Shine didn’t move fast. Didn’t touch him suddenly.

She spoke first—low, clear, grounded.

“Hey,” she said. “You home. You on my ugly couch. You good.”

His gaze snapped to her. Locked. Anchored.

His heartbeat thundered under his T-shirt. She could see it in his throat.

Slowly, slowly, he came back.

“You okay?” she asked.

“I’m fine.” The lie was automatic.

Shine didn’t call him a liar.

She just slid closer and put her hand on his chest, palm flat, pressure gentle. Then she traced slow circles until his breathing matched hers.

He swallowed hard. His eyes softened like he hated needing comfort and loved it at the same time.

He slept on her couch that night.

Then the next.

Then the bed.

It wasn’t fast in days.

But it was fast in depth.

One day she realized he had a drawer in her dresser.

The next, he was brushing his teeth in her bathroom like he'd always been there.

He never said, "You're my girlfriend."

He just lived like the decision had already been made.

He fell first.

Hard, silently, completely.

She felt it hanging in the air between them—heavy and unspoken.

The way he watched her when she talked.

The way he said "be careful" like a prayer.

The way his hand found her waist in every crowd, tugging her closer like his body didn't trust the world to keep her safe.

It was flattering. It was intoxicating.

It was also... a little scary.

Because Terry's love didn't feel casual.

It felt like an oath.

The first time he said "I love you," it didn't sound romantic.

It sounded like confession.

They were standing in her kitchen, sun barely up, mug half-full in her hand. She was ranting about work—budget cuts, a busted AC, kids coming to class hungry. Terry leaned against the counter, arms folded, listening like it was the news.

“You care too much,” he said quietly when she finally stopped.

“Somebody gotta,” she shot back, because if she didn’t, she’d cry.

He stared at her for a long beat, like he was wrestling himself.

Then he exhaled through his nose, like he’d lost whatever fight was happening inside.

“I love you,” he said.

Shine froze, coffee halfway to her mouth.

“Terry...”

“You don’t gotta say it back,” he added quick, almost defensive. “I just... needed you to know.”

His eyes were steady. Not begging. Not dramatic.

Just all in.

That was the problem.

It felt like he'd thrown his whole life at her feet without warning, without padding, without giving her time to brace herself.

She said it back a week later, half-whispered in the dark, when he was half-asleep and honest in the way he only got when his guard slipped.

It felt true leaving her mouth.

It also felt dangerously heavy.

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It didn't blow up over cheating.

It didn't blow up over lies.

It blew up over a sound.

A regular, everyday sound that should've meant nothing.

Shine had a long day. Long week. Long month. Burned out, stretched thin, mind buzzing. She got home and found Terry in her bedroom sitting on the edge of the bed in a white T-shirt, staring at nothing. Arms braced on his thighs. Hands clasped like he was praying.

"T," she said softly. "You good?"

"Yeah."

“You don’t look ‘yeah.’”

“I’m fine, Shine.” His tone came out sharper than he meant. He huffed. “Sorry. Just tired.”

She sat beside him. “You wanna talk about it?”

“No.”

The bluntness stung more than it should’ve.

“You know it’s okay to let me in, right?” she asked carefully. “I’m not gonna break.”

He dragged a hand down his face. “Everything’s just... loud right now.”

“Then let me be quiet with you,” she insisted. “That’s part of this. We in this together, remember?”

His jaw clenched. “You say that like it’s easy.”

“I didn’t say it’s easy,” she said. “I said it’s what we chose.”

He flinched.

Shine didn’t miss it.

“You don’t gotta fix everything at once,” she added, softer. “You can just—”

Click.

A car door popped shut outside. Just the neighbor. Just life.

Terry's whole body jerked like the sound punched him.

His muscles coiled.

His eyes went unfocused.

Shine watched it happen in real time—the man she knew slipping behind the soldier he'd once had to be.

"Terry," she said, voice low. "You're home. It's just—"

"Get down."

Before she could respond, he was on his feet moving to the window like he expected gunfire. His chest rose and fell too fast. Fingers curled like they missed a rifle.

"Terry, it's my neighbor," she tried again, standing slowly. "We're not in—"

"Shine, get down," he snapped, louder now.

Something in her snapped back.

"Don't talk to me like I'm one of your recruits," she shot.

"This is my house. My room."

He whipped around, eyes glassy and wild. For a split second, she wasn't sure he was seeing her.

"Do you not hear that?!" he demanded. "We need to—"

“It’s a Toyota and a tired single mom,” Shine snapped.  
“Not an ambush.”

“Don’t joke about that,” he growled.

“I’m not joking,” she said, chest tight. “I’m trying to bring you back here.”

“I am here!” he barked, vein popping in his neck.

The volume hit her like a slap.

She stared at him.

He realized too late.

“Shine, I didn’t—”

“I can’t do this,” she blurted.

The words were out before she could catch them.

Terry froze. “What?”

“This,” she said, gesturing at him, at her, at the air in the room. “I can’t sit here waiting for what version of you I’m gonna get day by day. I can’t feel like I gotta manage your triggers and your moods and my safety at the same time. I love you, but this is... too much.”

His face went blank.

That scared her more than the shouting.

“So what you sayin’?” he asked quietly.

Shine swallowed. "I'm saying... I think we're on different paths."

Silence swallowed the room.

She heard the neighbor's footsteps on the stairs.

The soft creak of pipes in the wall.

Her own heartbeat.

Terry's breathing slowed. Too slow. Too measured.

"Different paths," he repeated.

"Terry—"

"After everything I told you," he said, voice dangerously calm, "after everything I showed you... you gon' say we on different paths now?"

His eyes glossed over. Not with tears. With something older.

Abandonment.

That ugly, familiar kind.

"I'm not saying I don't care about you," Shine whispered. "I just... I can't carry this. It happened too soon, too fast, too intense. And that last moment—your past bleeding into our future—made me want space."

He stared at her. No blink. No twitch.

“Say you don’t love me,” he said.

Shine flinched. “Terry—”

“Look me in my face,” he insisted, voice dropping. “And say you don’t love me.”

She opened her mouth.

Nothing came out.

His throat bobbed.

“Yeah,” he murmured. “That’s what I thought.”

Anger cracked through the calm like lightning. He turned away, chest heaving, hands flexing like he was holding back something violent that had nothing to do with her and everything to do with his ghosts.

“Get out,” Shine whispered. “Please. Before you say something you can’t take back. Before I do.”

He shook his head, like he was trying to knock loose a sound only he could hear.

“I tried,” he muttered. “I did everything right. Therapy. Meds. Walks. I gave you every soft part of me I had left and you still—”

His fist hit the bedroom door before either of them realized what was happening.

The crack of wood splintering echoed off the walls.

Shine jumped.

Silence.

His hand stayed buried in the door, knuckles raw, breath ragged. He stared at the hole like it betrayed him.

“Shit,” he whispered. “Shine, I—”

She stepped back. One, two, three paces.

“Get out,” she said again, voice shaking.

He pulled his hand free, fingers trembling. Guilt carved his face into something ruined.

“I would never hurt you,” he rasped.

“I know,” she said. And she did. That somehow made it worse. “But you’re hurting me anyway.”

He swallowed hard. Started toward her.

Her body flinched before her brain could stop it.

He saw that.

Something in his eyes went quiet.

Dead quiet.

“Okay,” he said hoarsely. “Okay. I’ll go.”

He walked past her, out of the bedroom. Each step felt like a chapter closing. The front door opened. Closed.

Shine stared at the hole in the door until her vision blurred.

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She tried to do it the right way.

Called her landlord. Gave notice. Moved to a smaller place on the other side of the city. Switched her phone number. Stopped posting her location. Got the early shift at center and switched her off days. Dyed her hair from black to a warm auburn that almost made her feel like someone else. Almost.

Blocked him.

Deleted old messages, old selfies, old voice notes where he said “come home safe” like a ritual.

She told herself it was done.

She still caught herself turning every time a big shadow crossed her peripheral vision.

Still heard his footsteps in her dreams.

Still woke up reaching for a chest that wasn't there.

Weeks stretched. Then months.

Nothing happened.

No texts.

No calls from blocked numbers.

No “accidental” run-ins.

She saw his name once on a flyer for a veteran panel at City Hall: Staff Sergeant Terrence Richmond (Ret.). She held her breath until the nausea passed.

Maybe he took it as a sign, she told herself.

Maybe he went back to therapy.

Maybe he realized she was right.

Maybe he let her go.

She almost believed it.

Until the night she put her key in her new apartment door and felt eyes on her back.

Not the vague, maybe-I’m-tripping kind.

The solid, you-are-being-watched kind that makes the hairs on your arms rise up like alarm bells.

Shine turned slowly.

Terry was leaning against the far hallway wall like he’d been waiting an hour and could wait ten more.

He looked different.

Rougher. Beard thicker. The softness in his shoulders gone. Replaced by controlled tension that felt like a loaded weapon set to safety.

Black hoodie. Hands in his pockets. Posture relaxed in that deceptive way she recognized—he was paying attention to everything. Hazel eyes locked on her.

Her keys clinked against the lock.

“Terry,” she breathed.

“Hey, Shine.”

His voice was the same. That scared her more than if he’d yelled.

“How did you—”

He nodded toward her door. “New place is nice. Safer building. Cameras actually work.”

Her stomach dropped. “You been—”

“Watching?” he asked, like it was the most normal word in the world. “Making sure you okay.”

Anger flared, trying to push past fear. “You don’t get to watch over me, Terry. We broke up.”

“You broke,” he corrected softly. “I didn’t agree.”

“This isn’t funny.”

“I’m not laughin’.”

The hallway felt too small. Too quiet. Too intimate. Somewhere down the corridor, a TV murmured. A dog barked. Life went on like her world hadn’t just tightened into a fist.

“You need to leave,” Shine said. “Right now.”

Terry pushed off the wall and straightened—but didn’t close the distance.

“You changed your number,” he said. “Your schedule. Your route. Your hair.”

“Yeah,” she snapped. “To get away from you.”

“How that workin’ out?”

Her throat tightened. “Excuse me?”

“How’s it feel,” he asked calmly, “being away from me?”

Shine glared. “I was starting to breathe again.”

Terry watched her face. Watched the micro-flinch. The lie that didn’t land.

“Try that again,” he said. “But tell the truth this time.”

“You don’t get to interrogate me.”

“I’m not interrogatin’,” he said, voice lower. “I’m askin’ because I need to know if there’s anything left to save.”

“There’s not,” she lied.

Terry held her gaze until the lie got tired.

“You think I don’t remember?” he asked hoarsely. “You think I don’t see that door every night?”

“Good,” she said, voice cracking. “You should. They took that shit out of my security deposit—”

“I do,” he said. And the guilt didn’t soften him. It sharpened him. “That’s why I’m here. Not to fight. Not to blow up your spot. To fix what I broke.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It is to me.”

He took one step closer.

Shine’s shoulders rose instinctively. He noticed.

“I would never put my hands on you,” he said, low and fierce. “You know that. I would drag my own brain out my head before I ever let it make me touch you wrong.”

“That doesn’t change what I felt,” she whispered. “When you hit that door. I saw your hand go through solid wood like it was nothing. What happens if you have a

worse day? A louder noise? A bigger trigger? What if I say the wrong thing? I can't live on a tightrope like that."

Silence.

Terry's throat worked. His jaw flexed.

"Then why you look like you about to cry seein' me right now?" he asked softly. "That fear? Or somethin' else?"

Her lip wobbled. "Partially. Yes."

"And the rest?"

Shine hated him for being right. Hated herself more.

"The rest is," she admitted, voice small, "I missed you so bad I started talkin' to your hoodie like a crazy person when I pulled it out the dryer."

A laugh punched out of him—half-choked, disbelieving, bright and pained at the same time.

"Shi," he breathed. "You can't say shit like that to a man who spent months thinkin' he lost the only good thing he ever had by bein' exactly what the world made him."

She swallowed hard. "You don't own me, Terry."

"I know."

"You can't control me."

"I know that too."

“Then what are you doing?”

Terry’s gaze locked on hers. “Comin’ to get what’s mine.”

Her eyes flared. “You just said—”

“Not like property,” he cut in. “Like... assignment. Like purpose. I don’t get to keep many things. But you?” His voice roughened. “You feel like the one thing I’m supposed to protect. Love. Build around.”

Shine’s chest ached. Tears slid down, hot and quiet.

“You’re not a monster,” she whispered. “But you scare me. And when I tried to leave... part of me knew you’d never really take that okay.”

Terry flinched like the words hit bone.

Then he did something that stunned her.

He stepped back.

Hands open at his sides, like he was showing her he wasn’t a threat.

“Tell me to go,” he said quietly.

Shine blinked. “What?”

“Tell me,” he repeated, voice cracking. “Tell me to go, and I’ll go.”

The hall got louder in her ears. Her heartbeat, the hum of the lights, the faint bass of somebody's music through the wall.

She opened her mouth.

Nothing came out.

Terry's eyes held hers, steady and tired.

"If you love me," he said, "tell me the truth. Even if it cuts."

Shine inhaled shakily. "I hate you," she whispered. "I hate that you found me. I hate that you know me like this. I hate that part of me feels safer with you standin' in this hallway than with anybody else in this building."

His jaw flexed. His eyes glistened.

"And I hate," she continued, voice breaking, "that if you walk away right now... I'll wonder every day if that was the moment I threw my whole life away because I was scared."

Silence.

Somewhere a microwave beeped. A door closed. A baby fussed.

Terry turned his head slightly, like he was thinking hard, steadying himself.

Then he nodded once.

“Okay,” he said.

He didn’t reach for her.

He turned toward her door instead and stopped at the threshold.

“Open it,” he said. Not a command. A test.

Shine didn’t turn the key. Not yet.

She gripped the cold metal tight until it bit into her skin. She didn’t turn around, but she could feel him behind her. Close. Solid.

"I moved three neighborhoods over," she whispered, staring at the wood grain of her door. "Changed my number. Deleted my socials. I was a ghost."

"Ghosts leave tracks," Terry said. His voice was right at her ear now. Low. Unbothered.

Shine closed her eyes. "So tell me something, Terry. Before I even think about turning this key... how long have you been watching me?"

The silence stretched tight in the hallway. She waited for a lie. She waited for him to say *I just got here* or *I just found you*.

"Three weeks," he said.

Shine's breath hitched.

The number hit her like a physical blow. She felt the blood drain from her face, then rush back in, hot and suffocating. Three weeks of him in the shadows, three weeks of her thinking she was finally invisible. It was a violation that should have made her scream, but instead, the realization made her knees weak. It was stalking—yes—but it was also a devotion so thick it felt like a tether. The air in the hallway turned thin, and she had to grip the doorframe just to keep from folding

"Three weeks?" she whispered.

"You take the 7:15 bus, not the 7:30, cause you don't like the crowd," he recited, the words flat and factual. "You started drinking tea instead of coffee cause your stomach acting up again. And you check this peephole three times before you go to sleep every night."

He paused. She could feel the heat of his chest near her back, terrifying and familiar.

"I been watching, Shine. Making sure you were good. If I wanted to hurt you, I would've done it three weeks ago."

A shiver went down Shine's spine—part fear, part thrill. It was invasive. It was obsessed. And God help her, it was exactly the kind of protection she had been missing.

Shine's hand moved before her brain could approve it.

The deadbolt slid back with a sharp clack.

She pushed the door open, but she didn't move out of the way. Not yet.

Terry's eyes dropped to the opening, then lifted back to her face. Heavy. Possessive. Burning slow.

"Terry," she warned, one hand gripping the doorframe to steady herself. "This is a talk. You understand me?"

"I understand."

He didn't step in.

That was the first thing that made her chest hurt.

He stayed on the other side of the threshold, big hands loose at his sides, a mountain of a man holding himself back because she had drawn a line and he knew better than to cross it.

For a moment, neither of them moved.

Then Shine stepped back.

Not enough to invite him all the way in.

Just enough to prove she was still choosing.

Terry looked at that little bit of space like it cost him something.

“This not gonna be easy,” he said quietly. “I’m not gonna wake up tomorrow cured. I’m still gon’ have nights where I hear things that ain’t there. Days where I go quiet. You still gon’ feel like it’s too much sometimes.”

“I know,” she whispered.

“But I will never, ever put my hands on you,” he said. “If I feel myself even near that line, I will take my ass outside. To a doc. To a cop. To a church. To the damn river if I have to—until I can be near you without shakin’.”

Shine’s chest tightened. “And if you can’t?”

His eyes didn’t flinch.

“Then I leave,” he said. “Because I meant it when I said I’d never hurt you.”

Relief hit her first.

Then guilt.

Then something darker, because the truth was, she wasn’t sure relief was what she wanted most.

Terry's voice dropped even lower. "But understand somethin'. You say no and I'll go. But you still gon' feel me baby. This not one-way. You can lie to me. You cannot lie to yourself."

He was right.

That was the worst part.

Shine had tried to picture life without him.

Quiet. Safe on paper. Clean.

And empty in places she didn't want to admit were his.

She exhaled, shaking. "You can't just do this shit, T. You think it's fair to me? It's not. You fucking tracked me. You watched me. You have scared me. And now you're standing here talking about love like that fixes everything."

She stopped. The hallway fell into a heavy, suffocating silence. She expected him to interrupt, to defend, to flare up again. Instead, he just stood there, jaw set, letting the weight of her accusation settle on his shoulders. He didn't offer an excuse. He let the silence stretch until the raw edge of her anger began to dull, leaving only the exhaustion beneath it.

Finally, Terry exhaled, a long, ragged sound, and the tension in his posture shifted from fighting to listening.

Terry's jaw tightened. He didn't look away.

"If we do this at all," she said, voice steadier now, "something has to change."

Terry nodded once. Slow. Careful.

"No secret side missions," she said. "No keeping tabs on me. No weird location tracking shit. No protection I didn't ask for. You have to let me breathe. You have to let me live without making your fear my cage."

The words hung in the hallway, suspended. Terry swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing. He didn't rush. He chose each word like he was laying bricks.

"No watching," he said, his voice stripped of everything but the truth. "No tracking."

He paused, holding her gaze as if memorizing the lines on her face.

"No showing up unless you ask me to."

Another deliberate pause.

"No protection without permission."

“And if you can’t do that?”

“Then I leave before I make loving me feel like surviving me.”

Shine closed her eyes.

Damn it.

Don't you dare cry.

She opened them again and found him still standing there. Still waiting. Still not touching the door, not touching her, not taking the space just because she'd cracked it open.

He shifted forward half a step.

Shine lifted one hand.

Terry stopped instantly.

That restraint spoke more than anything he'd said.

“You okay?” he asked quietly.

Shine almost nodded.

Then she stopped herself.

“I don't know yet.”

He accepted that answer. Didn't argue. Didn't promise.  
Didn't try to twist her uncertainty into forgiveness.

They stood there a moment—too close to pretend they  
were safe, too far apart to pretend they were done.

This wasn't a fairytale.

It wasn't clean.

It wasn't guaranteed.

It was a choice made with open eyes and a heart that  
knew better—but went forward anyway.

Shine exhaled slowly, grounding herself in the feel of  
the floor beneath her feet, the hum of the building  
around them, the simple fact that right now, in this  
moment, she was still standing.

Still choosing.

And still listening—to love, yes—but also to the quiet  
voice inside her that hadn't stopped watching the door.