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In the silence, suspicion spreads like a cold wind, once-unbreakable bonds now splinter under unseen weight. Eyes that once held trust now carry shadows. A flicker of doubt turned friends into ghosts.

Determined to uncover who wants Estelle dead—and why—Ryan couldn't shake his suspicion that Dave might be connected to Carla. He decided to clear his doubts by running a thorough background check on Dave. It felt disrespectful since he knew Dave, Hunter, and Estelle were childhood friends, but he couldn't ignore the nagging hunch. Sometimes, friends could turn into enemies; you just needed to find out why. The second people on his list of suspects were Paul and Hunter. He didn't need much reason to consider them, and he was sure he wasn't the only one who distrusted that family.

Ever since the shareholders had favored Estelle, she'd made enemies out of Paul and maybe Hunter too. That alone was enough to hold a grudge. Perhaps Hunter orchestrated the k*****g to teach her a lesson. After losing the

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family he thought he had, he might have been angry enough to want her hurt. It was a solid suspicion. However, Hunter was at the party and didn't leave his spot—but people like him didn't dirty their own hands. They hired others to do it. Still, Ryan wasn't sure if his suspicion was valid.

As for Paul, everyone knew the man's greed for money. That alone could have bred enough resentment toward Estelle. However, he knew little about the Grays or the history between Hunter's and Estelle's families. Dave was the real unknown.

He tapped his pen repeatedly, eyes fixed on an email alert from his trusted contact, thoughts racing. Opening the message could end in two ways: feeling guilty for suspecting an innocent man or uncovering something concrete that pointed to a motive.

After a moment, Ryan finally opened the message. His brows knitted as he read line by line, from Dave's childhood to the present. Dave's father had worked for the Grays and was Dave's only guardian. After his father's death which wasn't stated, Dave had been adopted by the Grays. Ryan found that slightly odd—he never would've imagined Paul to be that charitable. It was probably Paul's wife's decision. Poor woman. Ryan

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+5 Points

couldn't help but think how good people often ended up tied to the worst. *What a pity.*

He opened an attached folder, sitting up straight when he saw photos of Dave leaving a hotel. The suspicious part? Carla had been seen leaving earlier. He wasn't sure how his contact had acquired these pictures, but it was no coincidence. It only deepened his suspicion. If Dave were as clean as he seemed, Hunter would have known about it, which Ryan doubted. Still, beyond the photos, one part of Dave's history stood out.

Ryan abruptly stood, packing up his files. He quickly sent a response: "*Get me more on him, including his home address,*" and hit send. He knew it was risky—he wasn't a detective—but this was Estelle. He didn't want to put a name to what he felt for her, but he couldn't sit idly by, watching another person he cared about be in danger. He had to dig to the root of this even if he gets hurt at the end, before anything more dangerous happened.

Stepping out of his office, he paused briefly in front of Estelle's door. She had come to work even after the accident, which he found brave, but he still hadn't spoken to her. She wouldn't understand

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his intentions now, but he hoped she'd forgive him later. With a heavy heart, he moved past her office and out of the building, determined to resolve this, hoping his suspicions were wrong.

Meanwhile, Estelle stood by her office window, gazing distantly at the street below. She hadn't

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entirely shaken the fear from that night and should've been curled up in bed, but she reminded herself she'd faced worse. She wouldn't hide away just because of some faceless enemy. Despite her anxiety, she'd spent the night researching people with whom she or her family might have life

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threatening conflicts. Her findings pointed to none other than Carla; she had been her sworn enemy from day one even when she wasn't aware, however, Carla was gone, leaving her confused and restless. She prided herself on her restraint and avoidance of negativity, though she knew she wasn't perfect.

Still, she felt she might have missed something, and that was why she was there at her office instead of the comfort of her room. Her thoughts drifted to Paul when she saw him earlier that morning. His eyes had swept over her with a predatory gleam as he asked after her well-being. She couldn't tell if his concern was genuine or not.

Paul could certainly be the one; she had unintentionally stripped his son of his position and refused to reconcile with him. Estelle would be naive to think Paul's push for her union with Hunter was out of love; she knew it was about expanding his wealth. She and her family knew that, but she hadn't minded back then even when her family was against their union, however, she'd been blindly in love and pushed ahead stubbornly. But Paul's greed, combined with his son's fall from grace, was more than enough reason for him to resent her. Still, she scolded herself for suspecting him. Would he really go that far? And what would

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anyone gain from killing her?

As she stood by the window, abstracted by these dark thoughts, the urge to hire a private investigator tugged at her. Her fingers twitched to call her ex-kidnapper. It was dangerous, but it felt necessary. He could track her would-be killer, but she'd promised herself to steer clear of him, especially now that the police were involved. She didn't need any more stains on her already tottering image.

With a sigh, she was about to leave the window when something caught her eye. Ryan was rushing toward his car. She watched his driver open the door before they drove away.

Ryan Hayes.

Her body shuddered as she remembered the vulnerable moment she'd shared with him, asking him to stay. She'd felt safe in his arms. It was the first time someone other than her family had held her like that, and the memory made her heart race. But watching him rush off mid-workday felt suspicious. He had the freedom to come and go, but something didn't sit right with her. She had no solid reason to doubt him—he'd been nothing but supportive. But his sudden appearance in her life and his mysterious demeanor only fueled her

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+5 Points

suspicious.

She dialed her assistant. Almost immediately, her door swung open. Without turning from the window, she said, "Get me the contact of a private investigator."



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