

62.

You can throw money at every hollow promise, every loyal mask, but respect — real respect — slips through the tightest grip. It isn't bought with fear or forced submission; it lives in the heart, in places you never bothered to reach. What you wanted, what you demanded — that's the one thing you never earned.

The clattering sound of spoons against plates echoed loudly in the tense room. Hunter stared down, focusing on taking small bites, trying to ignore the tension simmering in the air. He had dreaded coming to his parents' house tonight. His mother had insisted on a family dinner to celebrate her birthday, and despite his reluctance, he hadn't been able to turn her down. But the thought of sitting at the same table as his father, breathing the same air in such proximity, made his skin crawl. It wasn't fear that unsettled him but something much darker and bitter. Every time they were in a room together, it was only a matter of time before Paul's harsh words and manipulations would dig into him, bringing out the worst. Although Hunter had finally escaped his father's control and was building his own career from

scratch - a path he surprisingly found peace with - being near Paul still affected him more than he cared to admit.

Across the table, his mother, Sarah, was chattering about her latest garden renovation project, her face lit up with a serene smile as she spoke, an obvious attempt to lighten the mood, though no one was listening.

Dave, whose role in the family was often overlooked, sat quietly beside Hunter, looking uncomfortable as he swallowed his food. The tension in the room seemed to wrap around his throat, making each bite hard to swallow. He couldn't decide which was worse - enduring the obvious tension between the father and son or Sarah's chatter that zipped past everyone's ears. Dave often felt pity for Sarah; he could usually escape when Paul and Hunter's arguments began, but tonight, he was trapped.

Paul, on the other hand, was silent, absentmindedly munching on his food. It was only a matter of time before he found something hurtful to say to Hunter, triggering the familiar chaos. Dave knew this routine all too well. And as if on cue, Paul glanced at Hunter and finally spoke.

"It's a good thing you're done with that whole

62.

Estelle mess," he said, his voice laced with disdain. "Imagine if she had stayed tied to this family. I don't know how I'd stomach wasting money on someone as melodramatic as her. She stirs up drama wherever she goes."

Sarah's chatter stopped abruptly, her mouth open in shock as her eyes darted from Paul to Hunter. Dave's hand froze on his fork, unwilling to look up, as if bracing for the inevitable.

Hunter's fork halted mid-air, his jaw clenching as he fought to control the anger surging through him. He took a deep breath, resisting the urge to respond. Paul's disdain for Estelle was nothing new, though he rarely expressed it directly. If you looked closely, you could see the disgust lurking behind his eyes whenever her name was mentioned. Paul had once seen Estelle as an asset to be exploited, but when she didn't turn out as he'd hoped, his hidden contempt emerged. Yet, hearing him speak so coldly about her recent attack struck a nerve.

"She's always drawn to trouble, that one," Paul continued, his tone almost casual, as if he were discussing a minor inconvenience rather than someone's life. "If you ask me, she's not as innocent as she wants people to believe. I always

62.

knew but I had thought she'd be useful."

Hunter set his fork down slowly, his hands gripping the edge of the table. He tried to focus on the polished wood beneath his fingers, anything to stay grounded, but Paul's words pressed into him like a broken glass. Estelle had been attacked, yet



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his father spoke of her as if she were nothing more than a nuisance.

"Maybe you should hold your opinions on things you don't understand," Hunter said quietly, his voice controlled but steely. He knew it was a mistake and a waste of time to engage, but he

62.

couldn't let Paul's bitterness go unchecked.

Paul raised an eyebrow, amused. "Oh, is that supposed to be a defense, Hunter? Or are you upset because I'm telling the truth?" He scoffed. "That girl brought nothing but scandal to this family. It's a relief she's out of our lives. You're the one who cut the ties, after all, and I'm glad you didn't listen to me for once."

Hunter's jaw clenched, his mind flashing back to the night of the attack. He remembered Estelle's pale face, the faint bruises on her neck. The memory stirred something protective and resentful within him, a twist of anger - that shouldn't be there, at the thought of someone daring to hurt her—and now, a bitter suspicion began creeping in about who might have been responsible.

For a while, he had fixated on Ryan. It wasn't purely jealousy—though that was partly true—but because Ryan had appeared just when Estelle needed someone. Men usually avoided women with pasts like Estelle's, but Ryan was always around, always staring, a presence that felt too convenient. Hunter was even sure they had a relationship at one point. And just the night they kissed... Hunter's chest twisted. Shortly after,

62

Estelle was kidnapped, and again, attacked the same night he came back. It was enough to make him suspicious. But as Paul spoke now, a different suspicion took root. He wondered if his father - greedy, controlling, and petty, could be behind it. The thought sent a chill through him, yet he couldn't dismiss it.

"You're awfully comfortable saying such things about someone you were once desperate for me to marry," Hunter muttered, a challenge in his tone.

Paul leaned backward in his seat, sneering. "Well, it's a good thing you didn't listen to me, isn't it?" He chuckled darkly, and Hunter clenched his fists under the table. "She was an asset who failed to win your heart, and you failed as a businessman. A real pair, the two of you, always dragging trouble onto yourselves," Paul mocked, gingerly sipping his drink.

Hunter felt his pulse quicken, the calm he'd tried to maintain starting to c***k. The room seemed to close in, and finally, the words he'd been holding in escaped him.

"Did you have something to do with her attack?"

The question hung in the air, cold and sharp, slicing through the silence. Sarah's hand flew to

62.

her mouth, eyes wide in shock. "Hunter!" she gasped. Dave glanced up briefly, his attention returning immediately to his plate, drilling holes into it with his stare. Even Paul looked taken aback, his face shifting from surprise to simmering rage.

"What did you just say?" Paul's voice was deadly quiet.

Hunter's gaze remained unflinching. "I said, did you have anything to do with Estelle's attack? You're petty and greedy enough to go after her. It wouldn't surprise me if you did."

A dark flush spread across Paul's face, his mouth tightening as he regarded his son with barely concealed fury. "How dare you? You think I'd stoop so low for someone as unimportant as her?"

Hunter let out a bitter laugh. "I think you'd do anything to get your way. You've meddled in my life, ruined my marriage, and pushed me to the edge time and again. This would be just one more thing to you, wouldn't it? Especially since she was the main reason behind your son's downfall."

Hunter provoked his father, hoping to see a c***k in his mask, anything that would confirm he wasn't involved in the attack as Hunter suspected.

The tension in the room was suffocating. Sarah reached out, her voice trembling. "Hunter, please, this isn't the time—"

But Hunter was past restraint, the guilt and emotions he'd buried now rising to the surface. "No, Mom. I'm done pretending this is normal. I'm done listening to him tear people down just because he always wants more." His voice shook with anger, the veins on his neck and forehead visible. "If he can talk about Estelle like that, someone he pretended to care about, I can't ignore the possibility he could've hurt her."

Paul's face darkened, and without warning, he slapped Hunter, the impact echoing in the room. Sarah gasped, covering her mouth as tears slid down her cheeks, while Dave quickly got up to help her away from the escalating scene. But she clutched his hand instead, holding him in place.

The shock left Hunter stunned briefly, the sting on his cheek sharp. He could taste blood on his lip, but he refused to look away, his eyes locked onto Paul's with an intensity that held no fear.

"How dare you disrespect me under my own roof," Paul hissed.

Hunter smirked, defiant. "That's funny because I

62.

spent half my life under this same roof and never respected you, not even once. You know why?" He leaned forward, a smirk dancing on his lips. "You can buy people's loyalty, but you can't buy respect. That's something you never earned."

They stared each other down, neither willing to back down. Finally, Paul growled, pointing to the door. "Get out!"

Hunter stood, jaw clenched, still wearing the smirk, however, with a glance at his mother, her face pale with distress, her eyes soaked with tears. He felt a pang of guilt for disrupting her birthday. But he couldn't stay, not here, not with a father who would speak so heartlessly.

Without another word, Hunter turned and walked out, the sting on his cheek and the ache in his chest a reminder of his mother's birthday now ruined.



6

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138

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