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The weight of doubt had always lingered, a shadow in the corners of his mind. But now, doubt was dead, its place taken by a truth so stark it left no room for denial. The kind that shatters your breath and presses its hands around your heart. But if the answer stood so clear, why did the questions still scream louder? Why did the truth feel heavier than the lies? Why did clarity sting sharper than confusion? It wasn't just about what he had uncovered; it was about the reason behind it all. And that reason, buried deep, might be even darker than the proof itself.

The gravel crunched softly beneath Ryan's boots as he trekked along the secluded road. He had parked his car a safe distance away, hidden behind a dense thicket of trees to avoid drawing attention. The night was silent and dark, save for the occasional rustling of leaves in the cool breeze and the faint glow of the moon. The air carried an intimidating stillness that made his heart pound harder with every step.

This was madness.

He barely knew what he was looking for and

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shouldn't be on a mission to invade someone's privacy, but a nagging suspicion had lodged itself in his mind and refused to be silenced. He knew he had to see for himself. The idea that Dave could have been involved in Estelle's attack was both absurd and plausible. Ryan needed answers, and this was his only lead.

Adjusting the strap of his backpack, Ryan's fingers tightened around the flashlight he had deliberately left off for now. His instincts screamed against this reckless plan, but he pushed forward. He needed to do this, even if it was dangerous. It was an unexplainable feeling, doing something he'd never done for anyone—not even his mother. His heart twisted, and he shook the feeling off, his eyes focusing on the approaching view of Dave's condo.

When the modest silhouette of Dave's condo finally came into view, Ryan paused, crouching slightly as he scanned the surroundings. The house wasn't extravagant, but it was far from small. With its well-kept exterior and dim porch light, the house didn't appear heavily secured, as he had hoped. Surrounded by tall trees, it lacked visible security or CCTV cameras. Either Dave was overconfident or just careless. No lights glowed from inside, confirming Dave wasn't at home, as

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Ryan had learned beforehand. He had made sure Dave was away before choosing to invade his space.

Taking a deep breath, Ryan darted across the clearing, his footsteps muffled by the soft grass. Reaching the side of the house, he pressed his back against the cold wall, listening intently while his eyes scanned the area again to be sure it was safe. His hand reached into his pocket, and he pulled out his gloves. There could be no evidence of his intrusion. After putting them on, he tested the doorknob. Locked. Good.

Fumbling in his backpack, he retrieved a set of lock-picking tools. His heart thundered as he worked the lock, beads of sweat forming at his temple despite the cool night air. It clicked open after a few tense moments, and he eased the door open just enough to slip inside.

The house greeted him with an unsettling silence and darkness. Ryan exhaled slowly, closed the door behind him, switched on his torch and scanned his surroundings. The interior was unexpectedly tidy. Everything was in its place - pristine, absolutely neat, suggesting Dave was meticulous about his space. A small sitting area to his left, an open kitchen to his right, and a

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narrow hallway led deeper into the house.

Ryan moved with practiced caution, his senses hyperaware and his steps careful and deliberate as he began his search. The house was small enough to search quickly, but he knew he couldn't afford mistakes. He couldn't touch or move anything in a way that Dave might notice later.

He started in the living room, scanning the shelves and rifling through a stack of papers on a side table. Nothing. The kitchen yielded equally fruitless results - just neatly labeled jars and an empty sink. He wasn't disappointed, as he hadn't expected to find anything suspicious in such open places.

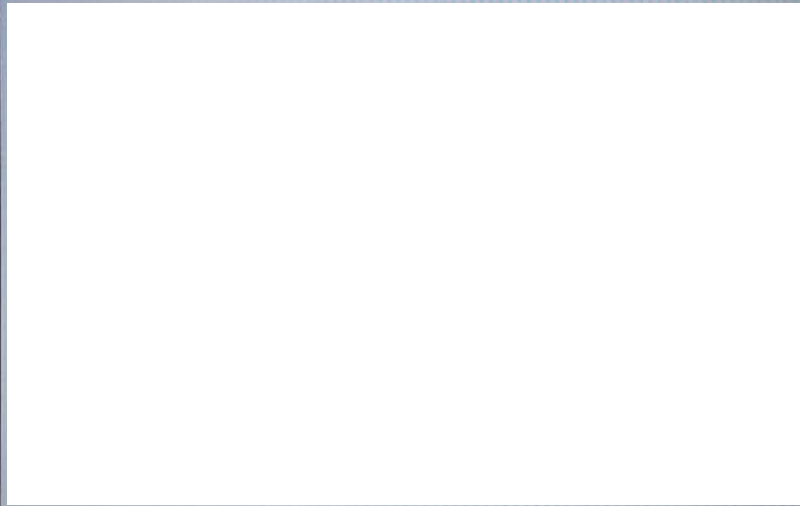
He ventured into the bedrooms next. The first was a guest bedroom, neatly arranged but devoid of personality. It contained a neatly made bed, a wardrobe, and a single chair. Nothing out of the ordinary. Ryan scanned the dresser, the closet, under the bed and found nothing. He moved on.

The second room was an office, bare but still functional. A quick search through the desk drawers revealed nothing but stationery and utility bills. Frustration built in his chest. Was he invading an innocent man's house? Was he risking everything for nothing? Even with doubt creeping

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in, Ryan continued his search.

The third room was Dave's bedroom. Ryan hesitated as he stepped in; the space was more telling, emanating a sense of personality that put Ryan on edge. He really was invading another man's space. The bed was perfectly made, a few



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framed photographs sat on the dresser, a jacket was tossed over a chair, and the closet doors were closed. Ryan's eyes lingered on a photo of Dave and a few friends, but his gaze focused more on the one with both Hunter and Estelle. The easy smile on Dave's face almost teetered Ryan from

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his mission, but he told himself he just needed to clear his doubts, that's all.

Ryan began his search once again, opening drawers and sifting through papers, careful not to disturb the meticulous arrangement. Still, nothing substantial emerged. He felt the weight of time pressing down on him. Every second spent here increased the risk of being caught. Something he dreads.

Sweat slicked his palms beneath his gloves and his shirt as he stood in the center of the room, breathing heavily. His nerves were raw, and doubt began to creep in. *What am I even doing here?* he thought.

Just then, his eyes landed on a door in the corner of the room. It was flush with the wall, painted the same color, and almost easy to miss. He hadn't seen it earlier, but something about it nagged at him now, probably from how discreet it looked. Instinct pushed him forward.

Ryan approached the door and tested the knob. It turned easily, and he opened it to reveal darkness. His fingers fumbled along the wall until they found a switch. The light flickered on, revealing not a closet, but a small room resembling an office. *Another office?* A desk sat against the far wall, its

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surface scattered with papers, and the walls were lined with shelves holding binders and stacks of documents. But what caught Ryan's breath were the pictures.

Ryan's stomach churned as he stepped closer. Pinned across one wall were dozens of photographs. What froze his blood was that they weren't just random images - they were of Estelle. Some were recent, taken from a distance as she walked to work or sat at a café. Others were older, candid moments with Hunter and his family. The collection was chilling, each picture meticulously pinned to the board like a hideous puzzle.

Ryan stepped closer, his eyes darting over the images. His stomach churned as he noticed some of the pictures had been marked with red circles as if Dave had been tracking them. Beneath the photos on a shelf were several receipts—gas stations, hardware stores, and rental equipment - all dated around the time of Estelle's attack. Ryan's hands trembled as he picked one up, piecing together the timeline.

His heart thundered in his chest. This was no longer suspicion. This was a proof.

Hastily, he swirled around, intending to rush out of the room when his eyes flicked to a bag shoved

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into the corner, partially hidden behind the desk. It was bulky and out of place amidst the otherwise organized room. He stepped toward it, compelled to see what it held. His fingers wrapped around the edge of the zipper, and he tugged it open without hesitation. The scent of fabric hit him immediately. He reached in and grabbed something soft.

He didn't have time to inspect further when the rumble of a car engine reached his ears.

Ryan froze, his heart slamming against his ribs.
Crap.

He dropped the fabric and quickly zipped the bag, ensuring it looked untouched. The sound grew louder, so he off the torch, dashed out of the room, hurried to the living room, and peeked through the window blinds.

His stomach dropped and blood drained from his face at the sight of Dave's car pulling into the driveway.

Crap! Crap!

Ryan slipped back from the window, his eyes adjusting to the dark. The sound of voices - Dave's and someone else's - carried faintly through the night as they exited the vehicle. Ryan couldn't

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make out what they were saying or who the other voice belonged to, but they were headed toward the front door. His mind raced, every instinct screaming at him to move. *I have to get out now.*

His gaze darted around in the dark, panic surging through his veins, and then he remembered the door in the kitchen. He had opened it earlier and knew it led to the back door, his only possible escape route.

The sound of buttons being pressed snapped him out of his daze. Ryan bolted for the back door, careful not to make a sound but desperate to escape. His palms were sweaty, his breaths shallow. Just as the front door creaked open, he slipped out the back, blending into the shadows of the night.

He crouched low, his heart pounding so loudly he feared they would hear it. He heard Dave's voice - casual and light as if they carried no malice, followed by the slam of the front door. For a moment, Ryan stayed frozen, listening for any sign that they had noticed something was amiss.

When nothing happened, he forced himself to move. Sticking to the cover of trees, he made his way back to his car, his legs trembling beneath him, his breath ragged from how fast his heart

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was beating. When he finally reached the vehicle, he climbed in and slumped against the seat, his chest heaving.

His hands shook as he gripped the steering wheel, the images from Dave's hidden room flashing through his mind. There was no doubt now - Dave was behind the attack. But as Ryan started the car and drove off, a new question burned in his mind.

But Why?



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