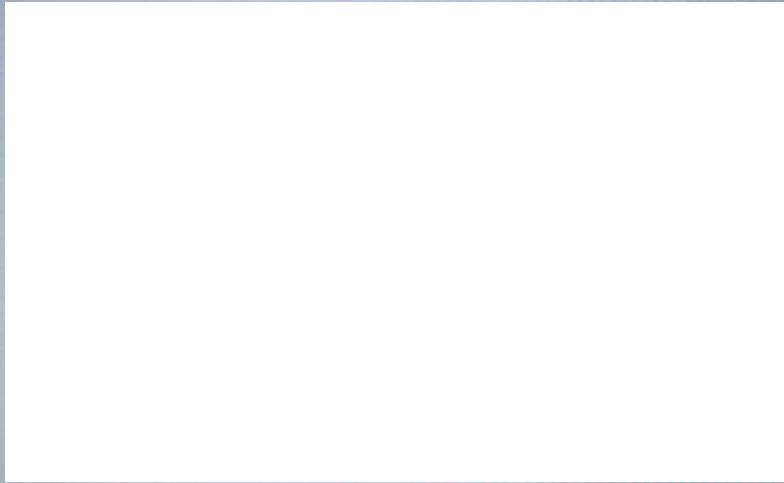


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*In the abyss of his despair, his lips parted to scream, yet no sound escaped, only a trembling whisper of hope unseen. His soul reached out, clawing at the darkness that closed in tight. Each*



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*heartbeat a plea, each breath a desperate fight. And as the void embraced him in its cold, suffocating grip, the last cry of his spirit faded, and he began to slip.*

Ryan's hands gripped the steering wheel tightly,

his knuckles white as he drove through the dark and deserted road. The night stretched endlessly ahead of him, the road illuminated only by his headlights cutting through the suffocating darkness. The hum of the engine and the loud beating of his heart were the only sounds in the silence of the night, but his thoughts roared like a storm in his mind. His breathing was shallow, and his chest was constricted by a strong mix of fear and adrenaline. He was trembling, not from the cold but from the sheer weight of what he had just uncovered.

He was right. It had been Dave all along.

The images in Dave's hidden room were burned into his mind: Estelle's pictures, Hunter's family photos, the receipts, and the chilling organization of it all. Ryan's breaths came in short, sharp gasps. Dave was behind it. He was the one who orchestrated Estelle's attack.

But why? Why target them specifically? That question rattled his mind the hardest. How could someone like Dave, a supposed friend to Estelle, and someone raised by the Grays, be capable of orchestrating something so heinous? What had they done to ignite such hatred? Ryan knew very well from his research that the Grays had

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welcomed Dave after his father, who was their employee, had died. So why harbor such a dark grudge, one that went far beyond mere resentment?

He clenched his jaw, his heart pounding. Knowing the truth didn't offer relief. Instead, it brought a gnawing fear that wouldn't let go. He had suspected Dave, sure, but proving his suspicion was an entirely different matter. It scared him and brought with it a thick, unyielding feeling to protect Estelle.

His heart pounded in his chest as he forced his gaze back on the empty, dark road stretching ahead. The night's shadows seemed to close in on him, matching the suffocating weight of his thoughts. He needed to tell someone. This wasn't something he could keep to himself.

His first thought was Estelle, but he immediately dismissed it. She had been through enough, and telling her wasn't an option. The shock would devastate her, and he wasn't even sure how she'd handle the betrayal.

That left Hunter.

Ryan scowled at the thought. He and Hunter were far from friends. They barely tolerated each other,

communicating only when necessary and often with biting remarks or glares. But this wasn't about petty animosities. This was about Hunter's life, too.

With a deep breath, Ryan fumbled for his phone in the passenger seat. The screen lit up, and his thumb hovered over the screen as he scrolled through his contacts. Finding Hunter's name, he hit the call button and put the phone on speaker, keeping his eyes on the empty road ahead.

The phone rang once, twice, three times. No answer.

"Damn it, Hunter," Ryan cursed under his breath.

He tried again, his frustration mounting. He gripped the wheel tighter as his heart raced. The line rang endlessly, only to go to voicemail. Ryan slammed his palm against the steering wheel. His jaw clenched as he cursed. "Pick up the damn phone, bastard!"

The blaring sound of the ringtone filled the car as he hit the redial again. He knew the bastard must be surprised to see his call, but courtesy demanded that Hunter pick up and at least hear why he was being called. He knew etiquette was far from Hunter's priority, and Ryan wouldn't have

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bothered to speak with him if Estelle wasn't involved.

Ryan was so focused on the call that he didn't notice the faint glow of headlights in his rearview mirror, growing larger by the second. He glanced in the mirror just as the car barreled toward him.

"What the—"

The impact came hard and fast, a sickening crunch of metal as the car behind slammed into him. Ryan's body jerked against the seatbelt, the force stealing the air from his lungs. His phone flew from the dashboard, crashing onto the floor as he gripped the steering wheel desperately. His car swerved violently, tires screeching against the asphalt as it skidded off the road.

Before he could even process what had happened, the car was hit again, harder this time. The force sent Ryan's car spinning, tires screeching against the pavement as it tumbled off the road.

The world turned into a chaotic blur of motion and crashing noise. Glass shattered around him, cutting into his skin. His head slammed against the side window, pain erupting like a firework behind his eyes.

The car flipped - once, twice - before coming to an

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abrupt halt. For a moment, everything was eerily silent, save for the soft ticking of the engine and the sound of his ragged breathing.

Ryan gasped in pain, forcing his eyes open to realize his car was upside down and he was dangling in his seat, held in place by the seatbelt. His body ached from the brutal collision. Pain radiated through his chest, his arms, his legs. Every part of him screamed in agony. Blood dripped down his face, the metallic tang filling his mouth. He blinked, disoriented, trying to make sense of what had just happened and struggling to stay conscious.

His ragged breaths turned shallow, his heart pounding. He tried to move, but the pain was overwhelming, forcing a groan from his lips. His hands, slick with blood, fumbled for the seatbelt, desperate to release himself, but his fingers felt numb and clumsy. Yet he didn't stop, even as his vision blurred more with each passing minute.

Through the shattered window, he saw headlights dimming as a vehicle pulled to a stop behind the wreckage. His heart raced. Was it the same car that hit him? Were they here to finish the job?

Shadows moved outside, and he could faintly hear the sound of approaching footsteps. His heart hammered

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against his ribcage, and even that slight action hurt. He watched the shadow with his blurred vision but he didn't see a face to it. Soon he was left alone, in pain, upside down in his wretched car. He coughed, blood spluttering out of his mouth. He needed help. He needs to get out.

[Ads-free >](#)

His eyes felt heavy and he jerked awake, the movement sending his bones on fire. His breaths came in short, sharp bursts, and fear gripped him when he realized he was losing consciousness. No, he had to fight it. He had to stay awake. But he couldn't. He couldn't stop his eyes from closing.

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He was completely vulnerable.

"Help..." he tried to call out, but his voice was barely a whisper.

The edges of his vision blurred, darkness creeping in as the pain and shock took their toll. His head lolled to the side, and he felt his consciousness slipping away.

The last thing Ryan registered was the sound of footsteps approaching - loud and deliberate - accompanied by shouts he couldn't make out who or what they were saying. Then, everything went black



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