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Dave grunted as he adjusted his grip on Hunter's limp form, cursing under his breath. He had underestimated just how heavy the man was. Dragging Hunter's unconscious body from the door further into the room proved to be far more challenging than anticipated. Hunter's shoes scraped against the hardwood floor as he was dragged, while Dave's arms burned from the effort.

"Damn it, Hunter," Dave muttered, sweat beading on his forehead. "Even when you're out cold, you're a pain."

He paused to catch his breath, bending over slightly, his hands resting on his knees. For a moment, he considered leaving Hunter sprawled on the floor, but that wouldn't work. If Hunter woke up unbound, things could escalate quickly. Dave knew Hunter was strong, maybe even stronger than him. He didn't need to test that fact, all he needed to do was to make sure the bindings were secure to avoid any disruption.

With one final groan, he managed to prop Hunter onto a chair in the center of the room. His arms

66.

trembled as he reached for the sturdy rope he'd prepared earlier. Unlike Estelle, who he bound with duct tape, he chose to use a rope for Hunter, given his strength. Dave began wrapping the rope around Hunter's wrists, pulling it taut enough to bite into the skin. He checked the knots twice,

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ensuring there was no room for escape. Satisfied, he stepped back, wiping his damp forehead with the back of his hand, his breath heavy.

He dropped the rope onto the floor and slumped against the nearest wall. His shirt clung to his back, damp with sweat. He glanced over at

Estelle, who was still unconscious and slumped in another chair beside Hunter. *The perfect couple*, he thought bitterly. Her pale face looked peaceful and beautiful under the dim light, and for a fleeting moment, he felt bad for her. But the feeling disappeared just as quickly as it came.

This was practically her fault. She had a hand in all this and should be punished for it. She wouldn't be in this situation if she hadn't clung to something she couldn't have. Dave's father had told him never to stubbornly covet what he knew he couldn't have. That was why he'd tried not to covet anything of Hunter's, even when they sparkled in his eyes. But Estelle's greediness had led to his pain, so she deserved whatever came her way.

Dave yanked at his tie, pulling it loose before tossing it onto the floor. He popped open the first two buttons of his shirt, his chest heaving with frustration. He glared at the two unconscious figures before him again, anger boiling inside him at the threshold as he glared at them.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

He hissed, slamming his fist into the wall behind him, the dull pain doing little to dull the anger in his chest. It was going to happen eventually, but not like this and not this soon. He had been

enjoying the slow, careful unravelling of their lives, watching them squirm and on edge. It was satisfying, but Ryan had to ruin it by trespassing into his house.

Flashback

It had all started hours earlier when Dave's phone buzzed with an alert when he was on his way to Hunter's office to deliver his father's message as the loyal messenger bearer. He stiffened, his brow furrowed in confusion when he noticed it was from his invisible security system. He'd set up a sophisticated system in his house that wasn't just your typical alarm or camera. The system included ultra-discreet cameras, hidden in mundane objects like picture frames and light fixtures, completely invisible to the untrained eye. He had installed one just under his doorknob - a type that sends an alert when touched.

His fingers flew across his phone as he pulled up the live feed. Unlike most people, Dave had deliberately avoided installing cameras in common areas like the living room or the house exterior. He wanted to appear simple so he wouldn't be suspected easily. Instead, the cameras monitored less obvious and unexpected spots like his kitchen, the hallway leading to his

room, and most importantly, his secret room, which he had made discreet to the eyes.

"What the hell?" he muttered once the camera feed loaded, revealing someone moving cautiously through the dimly lit hallway - and especially when the person made the mistake of bringing the torch to their face.

"Ryan?" Dave stood in shock, his heart raging with anger as he watched Ryan move cautiously around his house. *Why is Ryan in my home, and what is he looking for? Ryan didn't know he was associated with the attacks, did he? No, that can't be possible.* Dave had been discreet enough with his actions, except for that party where he almost got caught because the b***h screamed. His body trembled with fear as he recalled slamming into someone he later realized was Ryan. *Did I let slip something that could lead to me? Is that why Ryan is snooping around?*

"f**k," Dave cursed, pacing in circles as he tried to calm himself and think. Ryan's presence at his home was a problem, a huge one, even though he was confident Ryan wouldn't find anything. However, if Ryan was there snooping around, it meant he was suspicious. And if Ryan suspected him, others wouldn't be far behind. He needed to

act immediately without arousing suspicion.

"Dave? Are you okay?" A soft voice called, and he froze. He looked up sharply to see Estelle standing just a few steps from him, her brows knitted in concern. For a moment, his panic morphed into irritation. *Well, she's here. The catalyst of everything is asking if I'm okay.*

But then, an idea sparked in his mind, and a sly smile spread across his face as he approached her. She might have interpreted the look as tiredness or bother because her brow furrowed further in concern.

"Estelle," he said, forcing a weak smile. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just... stressed."

She hesitated, her eyes scanning his face. "Are you sure? You look... upset."

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "You still have your keen eyes," he chuckled, making it seem like a joke. "I had a... You know what? Forget it. It's nothing."

"But—"

"I swear it's nothing serious. It's just been a rough day."

"Okay," she said reluctantly, her unease evident in

the way she shifted her weight from one foot to the other, and he understood why.

"You know," he began, "I was just thinking about old times. How you used to come over for drinks... back when things were simpler."

Estelle's lips twitched into a faint smile, though it didn't reach her eyes. "That was a long time ago, Dave."

"But good times, right?" he pressed. "Come on, for old times' sake. One drink. It'll help me unwind, and I promise not to bore you with my problems."

She hesitated again, glancing at her watch. "I don't know..."

Dave's expression softened, and he sighed dramatically. "I get it. I shouldn't have asked. That's completely wrong of me. It's just... I guess I miss those days, you know? Before everything got so complicated."

Estelle's face softened, guilt flickering in her eyes. "Okay," she relented. "Just one drink."

The car ride to Dave's house was filled with light conversation; the tension between them had eased. They laughed as they reminisced how she used to visit him before she and Hunter got

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married and always joked that Dave's place was more of a home to Hunter than Paul's mansion.

However, as they pulled into the driveway, Dave's heart raced, though he kept his outward demeanor calm. Inside, he was alert, his senses on high as he thought about Ryan's intrusion. He wondered if

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he was late and if Ryan had found something that pointed toward him, even though that would be difficult. But what if he had made the mistake of leaving something open?

Once inside, Dave led Estelle to the living room. "Make yourself comfortable," he said with a

charming smile. "I'll grab us some wine."

He disappeared into the kitchen but detoured to his bedroom. Pushing the door open, his suspicions were confirmed - the door to his secret room was ajar. "Son of a bit**!" His jaw tightened, and rage bubbled just beneath the surface. *How did he find the room?* He needed to find Ryan quickly.

He marched to the kitchen, his movements sharp and deliberate. Pulling a small bottle of sleeping tablets from a drawer, he crushed several into powder and dumped them into a glass of wine.

Estelle was already seated when he walked back to the sitting room. You could tell how tense she was from the stiffness of her posture, but Dave wasn't in the mood to study her. She was an afterthought, one he'd deal with later.

With the spiked wine in hand, he walked toward her with a lazy smile, one she reciprocated despite her unease. He offered her the glass. "To old times," he said, clinking his glass against hers.

She let out a smile and a soft, "To old times." He watched as she took a hesitant sip. Satisfied, he gulped down his drink at once, then said with a smile, "Would you be alright alone for a moment?"

Estelle held her wine away from her lips and looked at him with a questioning expression, her brows furrowed. But Dave only chuckled. "I'm sorry. I just need to grab something from outside. I'll be with you shortly," he said casually. Estelle only nodded, and then he was out.

Once outside, Dave jumped into his car. He'd seen the door to his secret room ajar earlier, it was clear Ryan had found his way in. If Ryan discovered too much, Dave's plans would unravel before they even began.

He drove madly down the road, his hands tense on the steering wheel. He needed to find that son of a gun before Ryan went spilling whatever he had found.

He spotted Ryan's car on the dark, empty road and his hands tightened on the wheel as rage consumed him. Without further thought, he pressed hard on the pedal and slammed into Ryan's car with enough force to send it skidding off the road until it finally halted, upside down.

Dave stepped out, his heart pounding with adrenaline as he approached the wreckage. Ryan was slumped over the wheel, blood trickling down his temple. He looked unfit to survive even a few hours on such an empty road. Satisfied with the

appearance of everything, Dave returned to his car and sped back home.

The ride back was fast. Dave was disoriented. This was the second time he had done something like this, and just like the first, he couldn't control his heart from beating hard. That feeling infuriated him deeply, but he reminded himself it was a necessary action.

By the time Dave returned, Estelle was unconscious, slumped in the chair as he had predicted. He tied her up quickly, snapping a few pictures before sending one to Hunter with a text attached.

Maybe it was time to wrap this s**t up, and everyone can be happy.

Hunter had arrived faster than Dave expected. When the knock came at the door, he opened it without hesitation, smacking Hunter across the face with enough force to send him stumbling.

Hunter barely had time to process what was happening before darkness consumed him.

Dave stood over him, wiping his knuckles across his lips, a smirk dancing on his lips. "Checkmate, bastard."

