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To you, it was just another fleeting moment, a memory you could toss aside without thought. But for me, it was the night when the stars refused to shine, and the earth crumbled beneath my feet. It was the moment my heart screamed in silence, shattering into a million irreparable pieces. You moved on so easily like nothing had happened, like nothing ever mattered. But I was left there, clutching the fragments of a love that once held my entire world together. And even now, when I look at you, I see the night that it all fell apart etched into your indifference. You never even noticed how I broke, while you simply walked away.

Estelle stirred awake, her mind foggy and confused, her head pounding as if someone had been hitting it with a hammer. Her eyelids felt impossibly heavy, and her mouth was dry like she had swallowed cotton. Her arms ached, and nothing happened when she tried to move them.

Her eyes fluttered open as her heart raced with panic. *Why can't I feel my hands?*

She strained, wiggling her fingers, but there was

no response. She twisted her wrists, hoping to break free from whatever invisible force held her down. Her heart raced. A sickening sense of déjà vu washed over her as she strained against her restraints repeatedly, her chair scraping slightly against the floor as she thrashed. *No, not again. This can't be happening again.* Her breathing quickened, the panic rising. *How did I end up here again?*

Then it hit her, and she stilled, her eyes assessing her surroundings. The room was dimly lit but unmistakably familiar.

This place

Dave's house? Yes, she had been at Dave's house.

Her mind raced as memories came rushing back in pieces: Dave inviting her over, the wine she had sipped while waiting, and the sudden wave of drowsiness that followed. Her heart pounded as the realization struck her. *She had been drugged?*

But how? By Dave? Or had someone else entered the house? But it was Dave who had offered her the drink before leaving. *Had he drugged her? But why?*

A cold sweat broke out on her skin as her gaze darted around the room. Where was Dave? Was he

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in danger too? Or was he the danger? But why would Dave do something like that?

Her frantic search halted when her eyes landed on a shadowed figure slumped in a chair a few feet away. From the silhouette, it was a man. And he

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wasn't moving.

Her heart jumped into her throat. She wet her dry lips and, with a soft and trembling voice, whispered, "Dave?"

No response.

Her voice trembled as she tried again. "Dave, is

that you?"

Still nothing.

"Dave." She tried again, louder this time, the sound of her chair scraping against the floor echoing in the silence, making her heart palpitate with fear.

Still no response.

s**t! Her panic deepened. *How did this happen? Who did this?*

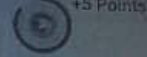
Her thoughts raced to the possibility of someone else breaking in after Dave had stepped away or maybe even before they arrived. *Was someone also after Dave?* She had sent her security team back, trusting Dave's house to be safe. Now she realized her mistake and the danger she'd dragged herself into. *How could I be so careless?*

"Dave, please wake up," her voice cracked as she called out once more.

A faint click of a switch made her freeze, and a moment later, the room flooded with bright light. Estelle squinted against the sudden brightness, her eyes instinctively snapping shut before opening again.

"Are you looking for me?" A voice she knew too well said, sending chills racing down her spine.

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Her head darted toward the source of the voice.
And there he was.

Dave.

He stood across the room, leaning casually against the wall with a smirk dancing on his lips. Something about his posture, his expression, sent chills racing down her spine.

Her voice trembled as she stammered, "Dave?" Confusion and dread tangled in her words. Slowly, with a dread-filled heart, she turned her head to the side and saw the figure slumped beside her. It was Hunter, tied up like her. His clothes were soaked with sweat, his face pale, but he was unmistakable.

Her heart pounded like a drum in her chest as she turned back to Dave. "What's going on?" she asked, her voice trembling.

Dave's smirk deepened, his eyes gleaming with something dark, something she didn't recognize, something that made her heart want to scurry in fear.

"Something terrible," he replied, his tone as casual as if he were discussing the weather.

She frowned in confusion tangled with fear. "What

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do you mean?" she asked, her voice rising in desperation. "Dave, this isn't funny at all."

But Dave didn't answer. Instead, he only smirked and pushed himself off the wall, walking toward the corner of the room at an almost leisurely pace while picking up a bucket she hadn't noticed before.

"Dave..." she whispered, her eyes widening in horror, her body instinctively thrashing against her restraint as he approached her and Hunter.

But Dave only smiled. "Calm down. This will wake him up," he said, almost cheerfully, nodding toward the unconscious figure beside her.

"Wait, what, no -"

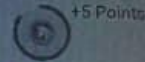
Before she could finish, Dave tipped the bucket forward, pouring its contents over Hunter's head.

Estelle watched with horror, a gasp escaping her parted lips as the water splashed against Hunter's face, jerking him awake with a sharp gasp. His head whipped around in confusion before his gaze landed on Estelle.

"Estelle," he croaked, his voice hoarse but laced with urgency. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

For the first time since she regained

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consciousness, tears welled in her eyes at the concern in his voice. "I'm fine," she whispered, though her heart was anything but calm. *How can I be fine when nothing is making sense?*

"Aw, isn't that sweet," Dave interrupted, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Hunter's attention snapped to Dave. He glared at him, his wet hair clinging to his forehead. "What the hell is this, Dave?" he demanded, tugging against the ropes binding him, fury blazing in his eyes. "If this is some sick prank, Dave, I swear -"

Dave chuckled, a low, humorless sound that sent chills into the little air in the room and sent shivers down Estelle's spine. "A prank? Oh no, Hunter. This is far too elaborate for a prank, don't you think?"

Hunter's nostrils flared as he tried to rise, only to be reminded of his bindings. He struggled harder, the chair beneath him creaking ominously.

"Let us go, Dave," he growled, his voice dangerously low. "I don't know what this is about, but you'd better cut it out before someone gets hurt."

Dave's laughter grew louder, echoing in the small room. "Oh, Hunter." He chuckled, circling Hunter. "Always so quick to act like the hero. But you're not

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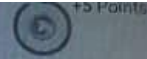
in control here. I am." He whispered into Hunter's ear, and Hunter went still, his struggles ceasing when he felt cold metal, unmistakably a gun, pressed to his neck. Dave only laughed at his reaction, patting Hunter's shoulder with the gun before moving behind their chairs.

"Dave," Estelle's voice broke through the tension, sharp and trembling. "Why are you doing this? We're friends. You and Hunter are practically family!"

Dave's smirk faltered, replaced by a sneer. "Friends? Family?" He spat the words like poison, his eyes blazing with resentment as they bounced from Hunter to Estelle. "Let me make something clear, Estelle. You only stuck around because of him," he said, jabbing the hand holding the gun toward Hunter. Estelle yelped in fright, her eyes wide with fear, but Dave only continued. "And him? He never saw me as family. I was just a servant, nothing more, right, Hunter?"

Hunter's jaw tightened, refusing to answer. His eyes stayed on the gun while his mind reeled. He had never really considered Dave as family. Maybe it was guilt, or maybe they just didn't click that way. But a part of him had thought of Dave as a friend, even though he had tried to deny it many

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times. However, now wasn't the time to dwell on that.

"That's not true," Estelle protested, her voice shaky as her eyes flickered from Dave's face to the gun now limp at his side. "Dave, you're wrong—"

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"Am I?" he snapped, cutting her off, and she went still again, her face pale. "Let's be honest, Estelle. If it weren't for him, would you have bothered to keep me around? Would you sit with the likes of me?"

Estelle's heart ached at the bitterness in his voice.

"You're my friend," she insisted, trying to calm him, her eyes flickering to the gun and back. "You've always been my friend."

Dave shook his head, a bitter laugh escaping his lips. "Friendship doesn't exist in a world of ours." He paused, his eyes gleaming with a dangerous light. "So, let go of the pretence."

Estelle shrank back in her chair, her heart breaking from his words. She had honestly regarded Dave as a friend. While, on the other hand, Hunter's glare didn't waver, though his heart trembled with fear. "So, what's your plan? Keep us tied up here forever because of your insecurity? Threaten us until we apologize? You're only making things worse for yourself."

Dave tilted his head, a cold smile on his lips. "Oh, Hunter. I don't need your apology, nor am I insecure. I just need you to understand what it feels like to be powerless. To have everything you value taken away."

Estelle's chest tightened as she struggled against her restraints. "Dave, please. You don't have to do this. We can work this out. Whatever you're going through, we can fix it."

Dave laughed, the sound echoing through the

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room like shattered glass in an empty space. "Fix it? Oh, Estelle, you're as naive as ever. This isn't something you can fix with a smile and kind words. This is justice."

Hunter's eyes narrowed, but his heart was trembling with fear. "Justice for what?" he demanded, though his voice was quieter than he intended.

"For everything," Dave spat, his voice raw with emotion. "For the pain you made me go through. For what you took away from me."

Hunter opened his mouth to argue, but Dave cut him off, stepping closer. His eyes glistened with unshed tears, his voice breaking as he continued, the gun pressed so close to Hunter's chest that it grazed the fabric of his shirt.

"You don't even remember, do you?" Dave's voice was bitter, laced with disbelief. "Of course, you wouldn't. Why would you? To you, it was just another night, just another argument with your father. But to me... it was the night my entire world fell apart. The night you and your father sent my father to his death."

