

Story Sample Shoot

Characters: Joe

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Chapter 1

The dim glow of my laptop screen is the only light in the room as I sit hunched over the keyboard, fingers hovering above the keys. My heart beats faster than it should while I reread the anonymous message that just popped up in the chat. "I know what you did last summer, Joe. And I have proof." The words stare back at me, cold and precise. I type quickly, "Who is this? What do you want?" and hit send before I can second-guess myself. The cursor blinks like it's mocking me while I wait for a reply. My mouth feels dry as I lean closer to the screen, pulse thumping in my ears. "Your move," comes the instant response on the chat window.

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I stare at those two words until they blur, my stomach twisting into a knot I haven't felt since the accident.

My fingers tremble as I type back, asking for details about what they claim to know.

The reply arrives with a ping that makes me flinch: a single attached photo of twisted metal and police tape under streetlights.

Sweat beads on my forehead while I delete the chat history with shaking hands.

I push the laptop away across the desk, its screen still glowing accusingly in the dark room.

A soft knock sounds at my bedroom door right then.

A soft knock sounds at my bedroom door right then. My pulse spikes as I snap the laptop shut and shove it under a pile of notebooks. The knock repeats, softer this time, followed by the metallic click of the knob turning. Mom's voice drifts through the widening gap, asking if I'm still awake and if I want a late snack. I force my voice steady while I tell her I'm fine and just finishing some homework, my eyes darting to the faint glow leaking from the laptop's edges. She lingers a moment longer in the doorway with a concerned tilt of her head before wishing me goodnight and closing the door again. The silence that follows feels heavier than before as I reopen the screen to check for new messages.

The silence that follows feels heavier than before as I reopen the screen to check for new messages. A new attachment loads slowly, pixelating into the outline of my old red jacket caught on a jagged fender. I slam the laptop lid down again, the sudden darkness swallowing the damning image while my breath catches. My chair creaks as I stand and pace to the window, fingers gripping the sill until the wood bites back. Outside, a distant siren wails once and fades into the neighborhood quiet. I turn back toward the desk, reaching for the power cord to cut the machine off completely. My hand freezes midway when three sharp knocks echo from the hallway again.

My hand freezes midway when three sharp knocks echo from the hallway again. I flash a devilish grin at the closed door even though no one can see it yet, the expression sharpening my features in the dim light. Stepping forward I swing the door open with a casual flair and meet Mom's worried eyes, letting the grin widen as I lean against the frame. "Everything's perfect, just

wrapping up something fun," I say, my tone laced with easy confidence that makes her shoulders relax. Her small laugh follows as she shakes her head and mentions the leftover pizza in the fridge if I get hungry later. I give her a quick wink before she turns to head back downstairs, the grin still playing across my lips while I close the door again. The laptop screen flickers back to life under my hand as I sit down once more.

The laptop screen flickers back to life under my hand as I sit down once more. A new line of text scrolls into the chat box without any sound this time. I read the demand for two thousand dollars wired by midnight or the photos go public. My chest tightens while I glance at the clock on the wall. Fingers flying across the keys I type a counter-offer hoping to buy some breathing room. The cursor spins as the stranger types back a one-word answer. The bedroom light suddenly clicks off behind me.

The bedroom light suddenly clicks off behind me. I spin in my chair heart hammering at the unexpected darkness. A faint click from the hallway tells me the switch was flipped from outside. My eyes strain to adjust while the laptop's glow casts long shadows across the posters on the wall. I rise slowly and move toward the door ready to confront whoever is playing games. The floorboard under my foot creaks loudly in the quiet house. "Come on out and talk," I call into the empty corridor.

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The echo dies without any answer, leaving only the low hum of the laptop fan behind me.

I step farther into the hallway, bare feet sticking slightly to the cool wood as my eyes scan the darker end near the stairs.

A sudden draft brushes my cheek carrying the faint scent of rain from an open window downstairs. My pulse throbs in my ears while I edge past Mom's closed bedroom door and test the banister with one hand.

The screen of my phone in my pocket lights up with a silent notification that makes me freeze mid-step.

I pull it out and see the latest message flash across its lock screen demanding immediate payment.