

31.



31.

"Not all who wear an angelic face carry an angelic soul. Some hide darkness so deep, it makes even the purest light tremble. Evil, too, can wear a mask of innocence."

Estelle stood frozen in place, her clothes soaked and clinging to her skin. The room felt suffocating as if the walls were closing in, with everyone holding their breath and whispering while their eyes remained on Carla, who lay limp and motionless on the cold floor. Hunter knelt beside her, desperately performing CPR.

Oh God!

Estelle's breaths came in short, ragged bursts, her heart racing wildly. This can't be happening. It shouldn't have come to this extent. She had jumped in to save Carla the moment she remembered Carla couldn't swim, and that wasn't even a minute ago. So why wasn't she waking up? Why?

The whispers around her grew louder, the tension in the hall suffocating. Everyone was staring—her family, the guests, the staff—all with a mix of confusion, judgment, and fear. But Ryan Hayes

stood in the dark corner of the room, his face hardened in a mix of anger, curiosity, and interest, watching the drama unfold.

"Come on, Carla," Hunter muttered through clenched teeth as he pressed down on her chest again, desperation creeping into his voice while his heart raced with fear. *Wake up*, he almost cried as he pushed harder on her chest. *Wake up! Wake up!*

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Carla's body shuddered, and she spluttered water onto the floor. A collective breath of relief filled the room, and Estelle felt her knees buckle beneath her. She collapsed to the floor, her body shaking with a mixture of exhaustion and emotion. Tears of relief streamed down her face uncontrollably.

Her mother knelt beside her, gently stroking her hair, offering quiet comfort. Estelle leaned into the touch, but her gaze remained fixed on Carla as if fearing that if she dared blink, she might miss something important.

"Carla," Hunter's voice broke the tension in the air, shaky but laced with overwhelming relief. He cupped Carla's face in his hands, helping her sit up. But instead of speaking, Carla broke into sobs, pressing her face into Hunter's chest, clinging to

him with a desperation that made Estelle's stomach twist painfully.

Hunter held her tightly, his brow furrowed, his eyes still filled with fear. He stroked Carla's back, trying to soothe her, though his heart still raced. His eyes briefly flickered at Estelle, sitting soaked and trembling across the room, but the look he gave her wasn't one of gratitude. It was something more like suspicion. He had been too shocked to process what had happened when he saw Estelle pull an unconscious Carla from the pool, but now, with Carla sobbing in his arms, he was curious and couldn't help but feel suspicious. *But this was Estelle.*

"What happened?" Hunter asked softly, his voice thick with emotion as he pulled Carla back slightly to look her in the eyes.

Carla hiccupped, her breath shaky. "I was... I was trying to find Mara," she stammered. "I saw her with... with Estelle..." Her voice cracked as she uttered Estelle's name, her blue eyes wide with fear.

Hunter stiffened, his jaw clenching at the mention of his daughter being alone with Estelle. He knew he was already suspicious of Estelle, but it was Estelle they were talking about. She couldn't hurt

anyone, but then, that was the Estelle he knew. This Estelle? He wasn't so sure anymore, making the thought of her being alone with his child unsettling. A murmur rippled through the crowd, and Estelle felt every eye in the room turn toward her. Whatever twisted game Carla was playing, it was unfolding exactly as she wanted."

"I... I was scared, Hunter," Carla continued, her voice trembling. "You can't imagine how terrified I was. I saw Mara with her, and I panicked. I just wanted to protect her."

Estelle's stomach twisted with unease, a sinking realization settling in. *Of course. That conniving witch.* She should have seen this coming. A snake never sheds its true nature. Carla had always known how to turn situations in her favor, to paint herself as the victim. She should have been ready for this and should have anticipated the manipulation. But no—she'd been too wrapped up in trying to do the right thing, too caught up in her own act of righteousness to remember just how deceptive and manipulative Carla could be.

Carla's lip quivered, her gaze distant as if replaying the moment in her mind. "And then... she—she smiled at me," she whispered, her hand trembling as it gripped Hunter's arm. "She started saying

31.

these... these horrible things, and then she... she pushed me." Her voice broke into sobs again, and she buried her face in Hunter's chest, shaking.

A collective gasp rippled through the room,

[Ads-free >](#)

followed by a deafening silence. Estelle's heart stopped, and she jumped to her feet, stumbling a little at the suddenness of it.

"Estelle___" Anna called

"No," she whispered, her voice barely audible. She could feel the ground slipping beneath her feet. "

No, I didn't... I didn't push her."

31.

But no one seemed to hear her. The room had erupted into murmurs, hushed whispers that echoed louder in her ears than any shout ever could. Accusing stares landed on her from every corner of the room, and she could feel the weight of their judgment crushing her.

"No," Estelle said louder this time, her voice shaking. "That's not what happened. I didn't push her."

"Estelle," Anna called again, but she didn't acknowledge her. Her eyes were trained on Hunter whose gaze snapped to her, his eyes blazing with fury. The calm, loving man she had once known was gone, replaced by someone unrecognizable. His face contorted with anger, and he stood, gently releasing Carla.

"Not what happened? You didn't push her?" Hunter repeated coldly, his voice dripping with disbelief. He took a step toward Estelle, his entire body radiating tension. "Then what happened, Estelle? Enlighten me. How did she end up in the water?"

Estelle opened her mouth to speak, but the words caught in her throat. She searched the room for support, but all she found were eyes filled with doubt, except her family, who seemed just as confused and furious as she was. Ethan stepped

in front of Estelle, shielding her. "Hunter..." he warned, just as Anna stepped forward too, her voice hesitant. "There must be some mistake. Estelle would never—"

"I don't want to hear it." Hunter's voice was sharp, cutting through the air like a knife.

"You better watch your tone."

"Watch your tone with my wife," Christian and Ethan growled at the same time. Anna placed her hand on her husband's chest, shaking her head at him in a silent plea. Christian glared at Hunter, whose eyes bore into Estelle's, full of raw fury, but he conceded to his wife's wishes.

"How could you, Estelle? How could you push her?"

"I didn't push her!" Estelle cried, her voice trembling with frustration and hurt. "I would never —"

"Then why is she saying you did? You can't tell me she intentionally pushed herself, knowing she couldn't swim," Hunter's voice was venomous, each word laced with accusation. "Why, Estelle? What reason would she have to lie about something like that?"

Estelle took a step back, her heart breaking with every word that left his mouth. "You can't seriously believe her," she whispered, her voice cracking. He might not have loved her, but he knew her better than anyone, other than her parents. "You know me, Hunter. You know I would never hurt anyone, especially not her."

"Do I?" Hunter snapped, his face darkening. "Do I really know you anymore, Estelle? Because the woman I once knew wouldn't be capable of half the things you've done since we separated."

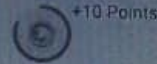
His words hit her like a physical blow, and Estelle felt her legs nearly give out beneath her. She stared at him, wide-eyed, as he continued, the anger in his voice growing more palpable with each second.

"You've become so... cruel, so vindictive," Hunter spat. "You can't stand the fact that I've moved on with my life, that Carla and I are happy. So now, what? You take it out on her? On our child?"

"Your child?" Estelle's voice rose, her anger flaring. "You really think I would hurt your child? I can't believe this."

"Our child," Hunter corrected sharply. "She's not just mine. She's ours." He pointed to Carla. "Which

31.



affirms everything since."

The room was deathly silent now, the tension so thick it was suffocating. Estelle's family stood behind her, the men fuming, ready to attack Hunter but restrained by Anna, who, although, believed her daughter wasn't capable of hurting anyone, even if that someone was Carla, knew this was Estelle's fight. She needed to fight it alone to clear her reputation, without turning it into a disastrous conflict, while Carla lay on the floor, playing the victim.

Estelle took a deep breath, her hands shaking as she lifted them toward Carla. "I saved her life, Hunter. I jumped in after her. I wasn't the one who pushed her in. Everything she said was a lie."

Hunter's eyes narrowed, his voice cold and cutting. "Funny, isn't it? How you're always the hero in your own story, and how others are always bad people, making you a saint."

A sharp pain shot through Estelle's chest, not expecting such cruel words from Hunter. When had she ever acted like a saint and made others look bad? When? Because all she remembered was being his shadow, his backbone when he didn't seem to need it. How had it come to this? How had she become a villain in the eyes of the

31.

man she once loved? She felt trapped, suffocated by the weight of Hunter's accusations and the stares of the room.

Tears welled up in her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. Instead, she stood her ground, her voice steady despite the tremor in her chest. "Believe what you want," Estelle said softly. "But I know the truth, and deep down, I believe you do too.

Whether you admit it to yourself or not."

Hunter's gaze hardened, and for a moment, Estelle thought she saw a flicker of doubt in his eyes. But it was gone in an instant, replaced by cold fury once more.

Without another word, Estelle turned and walked away, the sound of her footsteps echoing in the tense silence of the room.

Tonight was supposed to be perfect—a night where she would show the world that she had finally broken free from the chains of her past. But once again, life mocked her, throwing yet another hurdle in her path. Still, she would succeed. She would win, even if it took time. She had to.



24

Comments



47

Vote