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Someone wanted her gone—wanted her dead so badly they were willing to pay for it. The thought twisted like a knife in her chest. She wasn't just a target; she was a price someone had put on a life they deemed worthless.

Pain was the first thing Estelle registered the moment her eyes fluttered open. She groaned and squeezed them shut again, not because of the light, but from the excruciating ache coursing through her body. It radiated from her neck, snaking down her spine, through her arms, legs, and every other part of her body. Her hands were completely and painfully numb, bound for so long she'd lost all feeling. The same went for her feet and buttocks. She tried to move her head, but the effort only sent sharp, stabbing pains shooting from her neck into her skull.

She groaned again, forcefully leaning her head back against the chair. She must have fallen unconscious with her head hanging forward. That bastard didn't even bother to reposition her, or at least untie her. Not that she could overpower him, even if untied her. He had made that very clear

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+5 Points

with the slap earlier. So, what was his deal?

A hiss escaped her lips as she forced her eyes open, but the hiss turned into a sharp scream when she came face to face with her abductor, whose face was mere inches from hers. Her body instinctively jerked back, and the chair she was tied to toppled over. Pain exploded through her skull, radiating down her body as she hit the ground hard with a loud thud.

Her abductor's laughter echoed through the room, a sick, amused sound that made her blood boil with anger.

*How could he be laughing in this type of situation?
What's funny?*

"Are you going to help me up," Estelle snapped, glaring up at him from her awkward position on the floor, "or are you just going to sit there snorting like a pig?"

The man chuckled, rising to his feet. "Oh, darling, I'd love to shut that sharp, tempting mouth of yours for good. After all, someone promised me a nice payout for delivering the news of your untimely death. But, lucky you, I'm staying calm because there's still a balance owed." He gave a mocking shrug, his grin widening.

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Estelle's breath caught in her lungs. All the pain, the numbness, even the fear temporarily vanished, replaced by cold shock.

"Someone's paying you to kill me?" she whispered, her voice barely audible.

The man looked at her like she was the dumbest person alive. "Of course." He scoffed, pulling the chair upright with a single heave and setting it back on its feet. "Why else do you think you're here, tied to a chair, while I play babysitter?"

Babysitter my foot, Estelle wanted to scream at him, but...

Her heart raced, her chest tightening with every beat. Someone was paying him to kill her? Someone out there wanted her dead, and they were serious enough to offer money for the job.

But who? And why?

The more she thought, the more confused she was. She couldn't wrap her head around it. She wasn't important—not in a way that could warrant this. Sure, there had been gossip about her life in the media, but never anything that would fuel this much hatred. She wasn't someone who had enemies. At least, she didn't think so.

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Her heart thudded heavily as her mind raced through possibilities. So who could hate her enough to hire someone to end her life? Hunter? No, it couldn't be. She knew him better than that. Even with everything that had happened between them, she didn't believe he was capable of something like this. He wouldn't want her dead. Would he?

"Remember how you practically made him lose his job," a bitter voice in her mind whispered.

No, she tried to reason with herself. Hunter may have been cruel to her, but he wasn't violent—not like this. He once felt guilty for accidentally running over a puppy with his bicycle that, he didn't sleep for two nights. Hunter wasn't a murderer. He wasn't capable of ordering someone's death. There was no way he would—

Carla?

The name hit her like a ball on the head. A chill raced down her spine, and she felt the blood drain from her face. How could she have forgotten Carla? That sly, scheming woman with an innocent face and a black heart. She was capable of something like this. But... could Carla hate her enough to want her dead?

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"In the meantime," the man's voice sliced through her thoughts, dragging her back to the terrifying reality she was in. "Before I get my balance, I need to figure out how to do this." He clapped his hands together, as if excited about something. Seeing Estelle's confusion, he added, "There are so many

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ways to kill you. But I'll be nice and let you choose."
" He grinned, his face twisted with sick excitement.

Estelle's breath hitched. This man is a psychopath. He's a big-ass psychopath. Her heart pounded in her chest as she stared at him, horrified. And he

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was actually enjoying this, taking pleasure in her fear.

"No idea? I guess I'll have to go my way, then," he mused, flicking a knife from his pocket. His eyes trailed lazily over her body. Estelle's heart raced, panic clawing at her insides as déjà vu washed over her. This was the same look he'd given her before slapping her into unconsciousness, but this time, it was worse. This time, he had a knife.

He stepped closer, his voice low and taunting. "There's nothing more satisfying than spreading your victim's legs, watching them squirm beneath you, and then..." Estelle shuddered in fear and disgust, biting back a cry as his hand traced her cheek, making her skin crawl. His fingers slid down to her neck, stopping at her chest. "Watching the life leave their eyes."

He squeezed her chest, and Estelle jolted in shock, a terrified yelp escaping her lips.

He laughed—a loud, sickening sound that reverberated through the room and made every hair on her body stand on end. Estelle's heart pounded so hard she could hear it in her ears. Then she felt it: the cold edge of his knife sliding between the buttons of her shirt. Her breath hitched in her throat as the fabric tore, exposing

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her undergarments.

Shame and terror washed over her in waves. She wasn't fully exposed, but she might as well have been. The way he looked at her, hungrily, like a predator cornering its prey, made her stomach churn.

Was this how she was going to die? Abused and murdered in some abandoned warehouse, her body left to rot where no one would find it? Without even knowing the person who wanted her dead?

His hand moved toward her chest again, and in sheer panic, she shouted the first thing that came to her mind. "I'll pay you!"

He froze, his knife hovering midair. His eyes narrowed in suspicion. "What did you say?"

"I'll pay you triple what whoever hired you offered. No, forget that—name your price, and I'll give it to you." Her voice trembled, but she forced herself to sound as convincing as possible.

For a moment, silence hung between them. The man eyed her, the lust in his eyes gone, replaced by something unreadable. Slowly, a sly smile spread across his face, revealing his yellowed teeth.

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"Triple the amount?" he echoed, his gaze darkening as he straightened to his full height. He tucked the knife away, and for the first time since waking up, Estelle felt a glimmer of hope.

Maybe she'd survive this after all



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