

After Death 31

Chapter 31

I once questioned Michael why he felt entitled to make such a decision.

He replied, “Simply because you’re living and eating under my roof. You won’t be able to repay the kindness my family showed you throughout your entire life. It’s just a student exchange spot. How dare you yell at me?”

That day, I sat on the ground dejectedly and felt like an abandoned stray dog.

Jack wrapped his arms around Eva, the person who stole my spot, and walked toward me. They proceeded to trample on me with the cruelest words.

Eva said, “Stephanie, you’re really worthless. Mike’s affection should only be reserved for my sister, not someone as unworthy as you. You’re nothing more than a stain in Mike’s life.”

Jack kicked me and added, “Mike said the thing he regretted most was having Auntie Lois adopt you.”

I sat there, and my body gradually stiffened.

“Stephanie, I’ll kill you if you dare breathe a word to Mike,” Jack threatened me.

“Don’t worry. Even if she did, Mike wouldn’t believe her. Nobody would believe a woman like her.” Eva strutted away proudly, holding a bag that Michael had gifted Yasmin. The bag was easily worth tens of thousands.

Michael always claimed I owed him and the Fords.

Throughout these years, my living expenses at the Fords and tuition fees only totaled a few tens of thousands. I had a scholarship that essentially waived my tuition and covered my living expenses.

I would rather work night shifts in 24-hour convenience stores than spend any of the Fords’ money. What I owed Michael was nothing more than my parents’ funeral expenses and the penalty he had paid off for my family for not honoring the business contract. The workers were compensated using my parents’ death compensation and the sale of the house.

I knew I owed Michael a significant amount of money. Still, even if it was substantial, it couldn’t compare to the amount Michael spent on Yasmin, her family, and friends.

I vividly recall when I fell sick in my junior year. I had encephalitis and fainted on the school field.

Despite my high fever, Michael insisted that I perform a physical fitness test on behalf of Eva.

I told him I was suffering from my fever, but he remained persistent. “Stephanie, it won’t kill you to

1. go.

I couldn’t argue. I’ve always remembered he said, “Stephanie, you owe me“.

I just thought of it as repaying what I owed.

Lightheaded, I got up from the bed and went to the field.

That day, I fainted halfway through the half-mile run. My elbows and forehead stung from the scrapes.

The doctor called me crazy and said that I didn't value my life for attempting a physical test with a 10% -degree fever.

Due to this incident, the school discovered that Eva had someone else take her physical test. They canceled her qualification for the student exchange program.

That day, Michael rushed into the hospital ward with a gloomy face. He nearly yanked me off the bed.

“Stephanie, I didn't know you were so cunning. How could you do this to Yasmin's sister just because she got the spot?”

He had called me cunning and calculating, but he never once acknowledged my hospitalization due to encephalitis.

My encephalitis almost took half my life. I desperately needed money for the hospital treatment, or I would die. However, my living expenses for that month were not sufficient to cover my expensive medical bills.

I had begged Michael to lend me money for the treatment. I promised to repay him after I recovered and started work.

However, he only gave me a look of disgust. “Stephanie, you're still pretending at this point. It's such a waste that you're not an actress.”

My head throbbed as I dropped onto the ground.

“If you want money, fine. Show me what you're willing to do for money.”

Michael grabbed my hair and sneered, “What did you exchange in return for asking Jack for money before? I have already told you to come to me if you need money. How can you be so dirty?”

I stared at him blankly and explained, “I didn't ask him for money.”

“You're still making excuses. You've been full of lies since you were a child!”

He pushed me away and leaned against the wall. “Stop acting if you want the money. Leave, I'm not interested in having you around.”

I lowered my head as my tears fell.

He repeatedly called me dirty and vented his anger on me.

That night, my fever didn't go away. I bled from both nostrils and collapsed in the hotel bathroom. The janitor discovered me the following day and took me to the hospital.

I could've died if it had been any

later.

Yet Michael never gave me any money. Left with no alternative, I phoned Rachel. She hurried over from the hospital.

She begged her father, who had never supported her ever since her parents' divorce, for five thousand

dollars.

Rach and I both sacrificed our dignity, all for the sake of five thousand dollars.

We shared laughter and tears in the ward without uttering a word.

I knew she was the only one I had.

On the day of my discharge, I ran into Michael at the hospital. He appeared somewhat fatigued as he moved in and out of the inpatient department.

Chapter 32

Later, I discovered that he left me at the hotel to die that night because Yasmin's father, Roger Bailey,

fell ill

He had suffered a sudden cerebral hemorrhage while drinking. His hospitalization, recovery, and subsequent recovery cost a lot of money.

Michael insisted on the best for everything. He demanded a private room, the finest nurse, an elite medical team, and top-notch rehabilitation

He could spend tens or hundreds of thousands, or even millions for Yasmin without batting an eyelash.

Yet, he treated me with extreme cruelty.

While Yasmin enjoyed his unreserved generosity, I carried a heavy burden.

It seemed that no amount of money and kindness I had shown throughout my life would be able to repay him.

For a long time, I struggled to differentiate gratitude, guilt, and feelings. I couldn't distinguish them clearly.

Sometimes, I wondered if I really loved Michael, What did I love about him?

Did I fall in love with him when he rescued me?

Did I become infatuated when he risked his life and rushed into the car to carry my parents' bodies?

Or was it the moment when he gazed at me with concern and fear of losing me when the car exploded?

As it turns out, I was deceiving myself.

Back then, I believed Michael genuinely cared about me.

I believed he loved me as well.

Unfortunately, it was all just a figment of my imagination.

Even the love I once felt for him now felt like a distant illusion.

“Stephanie, aren't you ashamed to keep lingering around the Fords? You were already an adult when you entered the Ford family. Have some shame, will you? You're staying here just to get close to Michael, right?”

That day Yasmin fell down the stairs at the Ford residence was the day I got discharged.

Aunty Lois traveled to Georgeke as Michael's father was unwell. He had been undergoing treatment there throughout the year. This time, Aunty Lois intended to stay with him for about half the year.

I felt scared whenever Aunty Lois wasn't around. In her absence, there was no one to protect me.

Michael would treat me even more cruelly without her in the house.

I contemplated escaping or finding refuge in the dormitory. It didn't matter if I had to rent a house and live in the basement.

But Michael caught me in the act every time. He always brought me back and questioned how long I intended to keep up this act.

“Stephanie, the same trick loses its effectiveness once overused.” Yasmin stood by the staircase and looked at me mockingly.

“Do you know what people are saying about you? They're saying that you bring bad luck. You have caused the death of your parents,

“Even Michael's father fell ill since you joined the family. What's the point of someone alive?”

“Shut up.” I lost control of my emotions after being provoked by Yasmin.

Because it was the day of my parents' death anniversary.

like

you being

In the first two years after I joined the family, Michael still remembered my parents' death anniversary. However, he soon forgot about it.

“I would have quickly died if I were you,” Yasmin's cousin sneered along with Michael's friends, all

mocking me.

They never regarded me as a human.

“Michael's not back yet.

“Stephanie, I heard you’re lacking a man? Come, let me offer you some warmth while Michael’s away.

I shivered at their disgusting words as if it was a curse.

“Let’s go, come with me.” Yasmin held my wrist and dragged me down the stairs forcefully.

I retreated in fear, watching as Yasmin deliberately released my hand while I struggled. She sneered at me and then tumbled down the stairs.

Everyone was shocked and quickly stood up.

Horror filled me as I watched Yasmin lay in a pool of blood on the ground. Then my gaze shifted to Michael, who had just entered. I shook my head anxiously.

It wasn’t me, it wasn’t me.

But nobody would believe me.

Even if everyone other than Michael saw that it wasn’t me, they wouldn’t defend me.

“Stephanie! How can you be so evil!” Eva rushed over and slapped me. A punch and kick soon

Touted up in the corner, holding my head. I was too scared to move.

“It wasn’t me...”

It really wasn’t me

Chapter 33

The ambulance arrived and whisked Yasmin away

I watched as Michael anxiously lifted Yasmin into his arms. He even glared at me fiercely.

Everyone present bore witness to me pushing Yasmin down the stairs. Even the servants from Ford family sided with them.

At that moment, I was in a daze. I even started doubting if it was me who pushed Yasmin down the stairs.

Once again, I fell into the trap of self-incrimination.

I didn’t know how to explain myself. It seemed wrong to explain myself, but not explaining myself was also wrong. I curled up under the stairs and waited for a very long time.

Finally, Michael returned at dawn.

I stood up with bloodshot eyes and choked out, “Michael, it wasn’t me.”

There was a resounding slap as he struck me. My ears rang intensely...

My nose bled, and my hearing was muffled. I probably had a ruptured eardrum. He put a lot of force into that slap.

“Do you know that Yasmin’s sister wanted to call the police? You had deliberately hurt her!” he yelled.

He then dragged me up from the ground and forcefully pulled me into the study.

“Stephanie, have I spoiled you to the point where you dare to do something illegal?” he roared.

He continued, “What’s next? Do you plan on killing someone?”

I covered my face and looked at Michael, desperately wishing he would believe me. I cried and pleaded, shaking my head.

“Michael, it wasn’t me. It truly wasn’t me,” I said, but he did not believe me at all.

“Jack saw it. It wasn’t me. I didn’t push her. It truly wasn’t me,” I explained desperately, nearly getting on my knees as I begged him to believe me.

Yet he did not believe me.

“Jack said he saw you push Yasmin down the stairs! Yet you still want to deny it!”

My heart sank at his words.

Right, how could I be so foolish to think that Jack would stand up for me? After all, they were the ones who spread rumors about me to ruin my reputation from the start.

“If Yas doesn’t forgive you when she wakes up, I’ll send you to prison!”

He said he wanted to send me to prison. It scared me. I was unwilling to accept that.

After the death of my parents, I worked desperately and studied hard. My hard work was what gave current achievements. I refused to accept having it destroyed in such a manner.

me my

“I refuse to go to prison. I didn’t push her!” I stared at him fearfully. My breathing was shaky.

Terrified, I stood up and found the courage to push him aside. I then desperately fled the Ford home.

I ran from this place I once thought was paradise but later turned out to be hell.

I ran and hid in a dark alley for a long time. I was terrified. At that moment, I felt utterly alone.

I did not remember when I fell asleep. Nor did I recall who placed a worn but clean blanket over me. was not sure who left a cup of cheap but clean tea and a lollipop beside me either.

This was not the first time someone had left me a lollipop while I was alone in the dark.

In the past, when my parents were still alive, I would frequently throw tantrums and run away from home. Every time I woke up, there would be a lollipop by my side.

“Who are you?” I mumbled as I looked around.

Who was the person who always silently watched over me?

“Could you

take me away if you aren't human? I'm very cowardly, so I dare not kill myself.”

I did not dare to die. If I could genuinely die, I would have followed my parents when they passed away.

On the day of the car accident, I saw the blood of my parents mixing with broken glass.

They said, “Stephie, you must live on. Carry a part of us and live on. Bring us along to witness the future of this world...”

I couldn't possibly dare to die as I had been burdened with too much.

I

Michael had people searching for me for many days, but there was no sign of me. It was his and Yasmin's wedding day, but the atmosphere was not very lively.

Perhaps it was my imagination, but both Yasmin and Michael did not look well.

“Michael, she's not coming back,” said Rachel as she walked over. She looked at Michael and Yasmin's wedding photo and sneered before kicking it.

“How disgusting,” she said.

Chapter 34

“Rachel!” Jack and Michael's friends rushed forward to block her.

But Zion, who had followed Rachel, furrowed his brow and said, “Everyone, be quiet.

The police had laid in wait everywhere. They were waiting to see if I would show up. I found it funny because I was right beside them.

Unfortunately, no one could see me.

“Michael, you're the one who killed her. She won't come back!!!

But as time passed, there was still no sign of me. Even the surroundings of the wedding venue were filled with people Michael had arranged in advance.

Still, there was no sign of me, no sign at all.

Somehow, Michael ditched Yasmin and the guests and left as if he had lost control of himself.

“Mike...”

Yasmin followed after him with red eyes. “The guests have arrived, and my family is here. You can't do this, you promised me...”

“I'm sorry, Yas. I can't marry you,” said Michael. He then removed the flower from his chest and

turned to leave.

“Michael!” Yasmin watched him leave.

Upset, she gritted her teeth and clenched her fists. She couldn't help but shout, “Michael, you'll never find Stephanie! She's dead!”

After she had said that, she seemed to regret her words. Her face turned pale, her eyes filled with panic.

Michael stopped in his tracks and turned to look at Yasmin. “What do you know?”

Yasmin's breathing sped up. She tried to change the topic.

“I just... spoke without thinking. Mike, please stop making a scene and come with me. My parents are here...”

Michael frowned. His expression was unpleasant as he walked up to Yasmin.

“Do you know something? Tell me!” Michael seemed to lose control as he grabbed her by the shoulder, demanding answers.

I had never seen Michael treat her so harshly before. It was quite unsettling for me.

I sneered as I stood by the side. Of course, she knew I was dead.

“On the 13th and 14th, we asked Stephanie to wear a red dress to Serenity Lane. Why did she appear in

Sunset Alley on the 15th?” Michael lowered his voice. He looked as if he was interrogating her.

I didn't know if he found anything, but I was somewhat surprised that Michael would be suspicious of

Yasmin.

“... I don't know. “Yasmin nervously took a step back.

Michael clenched his fists. He scrutinized Yasmin without saying a word. Zion and Rachel had been waiting, anticipating my appearance and arrival.

“Stephanie will come. She loves Mike so much. She loves him shamelessly. How could she not show up?” Jack muttered quietly

They all firmly believed that someone like me, who loved Michael to the core, would surely appear at the wedding reception to try to stop it.

But what puzzled me was that it was supposed to be the wedding of both Michael and Yasmin. Yet only Yasmin's family was present. None of Michael's relatives showed up, not even his aunt.

“Mike, she’s not here.” Michael’s friends had also arrived. They shook their heads, saying they had carefully observed the surroundings and hadn’t seen me.

As the wedding reception came to an end, I still hadn’t appeared.

“Mike, it’s almost time. Why haven’t you two come in yet? Everyone is waiting,” Yasmin’s mother came out to ask at the entrance of the banquet hall.

Yasmin looked somewhat guilty.

She pleaded with Michael, “Mike, please. I didn’t know my sister would tell everyone in my family about the wedding. Now all my relatives know, and they’re here. I can’t do anything about it.”

“I told you, this wedding was only to lure Stephanie out!” Michael spoke in a low voice.

Zion glanced at Michael and signaled his employees to stand down. Continuing to wait here was meaningless. Stephanie wasn’t coming.

When they found my fingernail on that corpse, the police understood that I wasn’t coming back. However, Michael insisted I wasn’t dead, so they decided to come over to go through the motions. “Michael, she’s not coming back. Are you satisfied?”

Rachel’s face turned pale. Her determination was crumbling.

Following Zion dejectedly, Rachel took a few steps forward. She said, “She’s not coming back. She’s not coming back.”

“Officer Landon! We found Steve!”

Last night, the police had conducted a raid but hadn’t caught Steve. Yet, he had appeared at the wedding.

Chapter 35

The clothes he wore today suited him better. Although it looked rather faded, it covered the worrying scars on his ankles and calves,

He stood under the shade of a tree opposite the road. He looked a little down.

Zion led his men across the road. They then surrounded him.

Steve looked somewhat normal today. He did not wear his hooded sweatshirt and seemed to have washed his face.

A youthful aura seemed to emanate from his very bones. He was tall, with skin as fair as the moon. His freshly washed face appeared flawless, especially his captivating eyes.

His jet black hair fell messily across his face. In the current lighting, he seemed to outshine any celebrity.

I stood in the light. My gaze was fixed on his slender fingers, and my breathing sped up. In his hand was a bundle of lollipops tied together with a red string

He seemed to look forward to my appearance at the wedding. Did he look forward to me being alive? Or did he look forward to me crashing the wedding?

“Stephie...” Steve’s voice was hoarse. His eyes were somewhat red. He looked like he was anticipating the outcome that he hoped to witness.

I was a little suspicious. Was he pretending to be crazy? Or was his acting that good?

“Stephie isn’t here.” Rachel’s previous animosity and wariness toward Steve were absent.

Upon seeing the lollipops in his hand, she choked.

“Previously...” she trailed off and continued, “Were you the person who constantly protected Stephie in secret and gave her lollipops?”

I froze for a moment, then anxiously looked at Rachel.

“Don’t fall for it! He’s a murderer. He’s only pretending right now!” I yelled.

Steve said nothing. He merely lowered his head.

“Steve, come back with us. If you wish to find Stephanie, please cooperate with us.”

Zion’s voice was gentle. He gestured at his colleagues to not startle Steve.

I anxiously stared at Steve and looked at his face. “You liar... You fake.”

A few female police officers stepped forward to lead Steve into the car. Upon seeing his appearance, they looked away bashfully.

“I couldn’t tell at first, but he looks so handsome, just like a movie star,” said one of them.

Steve’s head remained down. He didn’t fight back as he obediently got into the police car and sat in the corner confusedly. He stared at the lollipops in his hand.

He feigned compliance. Looking at his long and trembling lashes, even I was bewitched. For a moment, I questioned if I had misremembered the moments before my death.

“What do you plan on doing?” I followed him into the car and gathered my courage to sit beside him.

“Why did you kill me?” I asked. Steve kept his head lowered and didn’t say a word.

“What do you want? Does killing others benefit you?” I kept interrogating him, but it also felt as if I was speaking to myself.

“Why did you have to kill me?” I trailed off.

Steve stayed silent. Suddenly, he lifted his head. His gaze was blazing as he looked at me.

He startled me. I looked around anxiously.

The heat in his gaze slowly dissipated. He then lowered his head once more and remained silent.

“Steve, how did you know that the murderer would place the corpse at the old dilapidated welfare home?” Zion asked gently. He was afraid of agitating Steve.

However, Steve said nothing. I furrowed my brows as I looked at Steve. It was because he was the murderer.

“Steve, it’ll be very hard for us to find Stephanie if you don’t cooperate,” Zion then sighed.

He continued, “You know Stephanie, right? You don’t want her to die, right?”

Steve raised his head and looked at Zion.

“The welfare home...” he said those words with a hoarse voice.

Zion looked at Steve for some time. He then turned and said to his colleague, “Go to that welfare home!”

The old welfare home was roughly a 20-minute car ride away.

I was rather surprised that Michael and his friends were present as well. Was he not at the wedding? Was he not getting married?

“Officer Landon, we found an eyewitness to what happened on the night of the 15th. He saw someone pull a large luggage from Sunset Alley to the welfare home,” Jack said anxious

It was possible that he feared I had actually died.

Zion looked at the old dumpster diver. He then stepped forward to question him.

“What did

you

see?”

“I saw someone dragging a large trash can over to this area. I remember very clearly because all the

garbage in that area was being collected by me.” The old man sounded a little angry that someone had taken away the garbage that belonged to him.

Zion looked back at his colleague. “How far is Sunset Alley from here?”

“Here!” Steve suddenly rushed toward the wall of the courtyard. A small door was blocked with wooden boards leading directly to Sunset Alley. Zion and his colleagues exchanged glances and rushed over cautiously.

The main entrance of the welfare home was far from the Nocturnal, but this backdoor led directly to Sunset Alley, providing a shortcut.

“Call for backup, surround the welfare home, and conduct a full search,” Zion ordered. In the bushes, he had found bloodstains and traces of torn clothing.

Chapter 36

“Officer Landon, do you suspect this is the scene of the first incident?” a colleague asked. Zion nodded.

Steve stared pointedly at the door and then turned to start looking around.

The welfare home was large and had been abandoned for many years. Earlier, the police had searched it several times before but found nothing.

Steve picked up a stick and began searching everywhere. I followed behind Zion anxiously as well.

Was I about to be discovered? Nobody could escape justice. If the police were diligent, they should be able to find the scene of the first incident.

Michael’s expression was also grim as he followed the police in silence.

“Mike...” Jack’s voice trembled, hesitating.

“Speak.” Michael frowned. He shot Jack a warning look.

“The monitoring device in my garage...” he trailed off.

He continued, “I checked the computer yesterday and found a recording... from the night of the 15th...”

Not only did Jack’s voice tremble, but his legs too. He kept hesitating on whether he should speak. Upon seeing Michael, who called off his wedding and came to find Stephanie, Jack suddenly panicked.

I could tell that Jack was truly scared. He feared the police investigation might lead to him.

“I’m sorry, Mike. I didn’t know, I really had no idea...” Jack handed the USB drive to Michael and retreated in a panic.

Michael’s expression darkened as he turned to look at Zion.

The police were still searching the welfare home, and everyone was tense. Even the police dogs were

there.

“What happened on the night of the 15th?” Zion murmured and used the USB drive on the police

computer.

“Mike... Mike, where are you guys? I’m feeling scared...”

“Mike... I’m afraid of the dark. Can you say something?”

“Michael, this time... if we catch the killer, can you let me go? Let me leave.”

“Michael... How long do I have to keep repaying you? Can you give me a figure? I'll pay you back in the future.”

“Michael, say something, I'm begging you.”

The recording was of me murmuring in the alley as I trembled in fear. I had begged Michael to say something so I would know that he was nearby and could feel a bit more at ease.

Michael's face had visibly paled, and his breathing was shaky. Rachel's eyes were bloodshot as she stared at Michael with hatred.

“You're such a bastard! You let Stephie go to Sunset Alley alone! You let her die, Michael!”

“I didn't...” His arms lost strength. He looked as if he was about to explain himself.

I cried, then laughed. See Michael, isn't it painful when you can't explain?

“Michael, I want to leave, I'm so scared...”

In the recording, I told Michael I wanted to leave. However, just as I turned to leave, someone grabbed me and covered my mouth.

“Mm.... help... help...”

“Mike... help me...”

I struggled and cried for help, but my voice slowly faded. The noise in the recording gradually disappeared. Everyone's nerves were on the edge, including mine.

Hearing this recording confirmed that I was murdered.

Michael's fingers kept trembling. His eyes gradually turned red.

He turned back to look at Jack. His eyes were bloodshot.

“When did you find this recording? I'm fucking asking you, when did you find it?”

Jack was terrified. His legs felt weak. “Y-yesterday...” he stammered.

“You damn well tell the truth!” Michael rushed up to Jack and roared at him like a deranged beast.

Jack fell onto the floor in fright. His face was pale as he spoke with a trembling voice.

“The police... the police came to us that day and said that on the 15th, Stephanie was also seen in Sunset Alley. I went back... went back to check the computer. I'm sorry, 'Mike, I was too scared.” Jack was crying as he admitted that he was scared, so he hadn't dared to hand it over to the police.

I looked at these people helplessly. These conspirators who murdered me. None of them were innocent.

“You bastard! If anything happens to Stephanie, I’ll kill you!” Michael went crazy and punched Jack repeatedly in the face.

I sat there numbly, smiling at the sidelines. “Michael, what are you acting for?” I trailed off, wondering why he was pretending to be a good person.

“Michael, it was you who killed me. What expression will you make when you see my body?”

Michael was pulled away by the police. He pounded the wall uncontrollably.

“On the 15th... Was she stupid? I didn’t tell her to go. Why did she run off by herself?” he yelled. I looked up at Michael, got up, and slapped him. I knew that it wouldn’t reach him, but I still did it. “Didn’t you tell me to go? Yasmin said you told me to leave!” I yelled, but Michael couldn’t hear me.

“Officer Landon! We found something over here!” yelled an officer. Zion ran over cautiously.

I stood in place, waiting for the moment my body would be discovered. Perhaps by then, I would be free.

Chapter 37

I hurried over because the police found something

My memories of my death were already unclear. Some memories became blurry after awakening from unconsciousness, only to fall back into it again.

All I knew was that I was drugged on an old street. When I awoke, I was in a dimly lit warehouse, where I was stuffed in a wooden makeshift transport crate.

The crate was filled with hay, which seemed to be used to transport porcelain or fragile items.

Zion

discovered an iron gate covered by weeds in the southeast corner of the welfare home. The gate was rusty, but the grass on the ground had shown signs of frequent movement. Even the lock was newly replaced.

“We searched here last time, but the grass was too tall. We couldn’t have found it without careful observation,” Zion’s colleague said in surprise.

As Zion glanced around, he noticed Steve, who had sneaked into the yard at some point.

“When did he get over there?”

“Who knows? This man comes and goes like a shadow. I saw him jumping over in a swift move,” the colleague said with exasperation.

He never knew that Steve could be so agile as to jump over walls so easily.

Rachel and I followed behind Zion, who pried open the lock and entered the yard. It was a courtyard within the abandoned welfare home, usually where the director or other high-ranking officials

resided.

The yard was spacious and looked desolate after being abandoned.

I clung tightly to Rachel, who was always braver than me. No matter what happened, she would always walk ahead of me.

“I... think they drugged me and brought me here.”

I began to suspect reasonably that the serial killer was not acting alone. Steve definitely had an accomplice. He was a murderer who was too good at disguising himself. His appearance and face had deceived everyone.

“He’s a murderer! He’s a murderer!” I screamed uncontrollably, running into the room. It was filled with many wooden crates used for logistics transport, resembling a small warehouse.

My breath became rapid as I looked around.

This was it. This was where I was locked up by that person when I woke up halfway through.

It was here that I saw Steve’s face. He had been searching around the room anxiously, looking for

something, and finally picked up an ax from the floor.

I frantically searched around and saw the same ax in the corner, with dried bloodstains still on it.

“Officer Landon, there’s an ax here.”

Zion strode over and looked around before stating, “There are traces of dragging here, but this isn’t the primary crime scene.”

“There are bandages and clothing debris here.”

“There are a few strands of hair in this wooden crate.”

The forensic doctor, Keenan Sparks, was also Rachel’s senior. He inspected the scene meticulously, afraid of missing any traces.

On the wooden crate where I was previously held captive, he found several strands of hair entangled with the nails. Those were my hairs that got pulled out when I tried to escape.

I remember crawling out in a daze, wanting to escape. But the person wearing a hood had grabbed my hair and covered my mouth and nose. Then, I lost consciousness again.

When I woke up again, I was lying on a cold, operating table–like surface. Blood was being drained from my body, and the person was injecting some other liquid into me.

I couldn't see the murderer's face. I could only feel my blood slowly draining and my detaching in despair.

When I regained consciousness once again, I was... dead.

For some reason, when I woke, my soul was at the Ford residence.

I, too, had no idea where the primary crime scene was.

"Officer Landon!" Michael called out from outside.

My soul slowly

Zion walked out and saw him pointing to one corner with a pale face. A pair of blood–stained shoes and socks had been casually thrown there.

"These belong to... Stephie," Michael said with a trembling voice.

He had started calling me Stephie instead of Stephanie with his usual detestable tone. I was so disgusted by how he said my nickname.

"Based on the current evidence..." Zion hesitated, looked at Rachel, and continued, "I'm sorry. But based on our experience, it's highly probable that Stephanie... has been murdered."

Rachel's breathing became weak, her legs going wobbly, and she fainted.

Keenan quickly caught her and shouted, "Rach, Rach!"

I stood there bawling, not knowing how to comfort her

My dear Rach, I had not been in pain. I'd just... experienced a despair I'd never felt before.

"Mike...."

On the side, Michael also seemed a bit unsteady, his figure shuddering slightly.

I had no idea if he was acting, but I found his reaction hilarious.

"Impossible... She can't be dead," he murmured continuously.

"Officer Landon! We found a major clue!"

Outside the courtyard, a female police officer ran over in a panic.

"All the known female victims we found were all adopted from this orphanage. They were either orphans or abandoned by their parents."

Chapter 38

Zion stared at his colleague in shock.

“How did we miss such an important clue before this?”

The female officer explained, “Things have been complicated with this orphanage. In the beginning, it was privately run, with not many records and files. Moreover, the orphanage director was exposed several years ago for constantly abusing and violating the children.

“Consequently, he was sentenced, and the orphanage was shut down. Some of the orphans who were not adopted were transferred to other welfare institutions. The information of those who were adopted is incomplete, making it difficult to trace.”

She continued, “It was when I started asking around the neighbors and family members of the victims that I found them all to be adopted. I probed further in this direction and discovered that all the deceased were indeed adopted from this orphanage.

“Many of the victims’ families were initially unwilling to mention this but later confessed. It was all

because of this welfare home!”

“It seems that we were wrong from the beginning... We thought the victims were connected because they frequented nightclubs and other entertainment venues, but it seems to just be a coincidence, said Zion while lighting a cigarette in frustration.

I looked at the policewoman in astonishment. If all the victims were females adopted from this welfare home, then something wasn’t right. I wasn’t an adopted child. I was my parents’ biological child. Was I just unlucky?

“Mike, Yasmin..... I heard from Lily that Yasmin was actually adopted! The Bailey family has always been charitable. They must have liked Yasmin because she was intelligent, so they brought her home to keep Lily company!”

Jack said anxiously after he remembered something, “Is it possible that the killer was targeting Yasmin...”

So, it was not that the killer was targeting women wearing red dresses. Instead, the killer had dressed the victims in red dresses after killing them.

I staggered backward hopelessly, a bitter smile on my face. The truth was that I died on Yasmin’s behalf. What kind of injustice was this? Why did I have to die because of her? This was so unfair!

“Stephie... No...”

Steve had come back from somewhere and was holding dearly to a photo frame. He was standing at the door. He handed the photo frame to Zion.

I looked at Steve with hatred.

“Liar. You’re just a liar and a psycho! A murderer! Stop acting, you freak!”

the killed so many people

I desperately wanted to grab his collar and shout to the whole world that he was a murderer, but no one could hear my voice. I was in despair, feeling utterly hopeless.

You took the photo frame and looked up at Keenan

so

“The pictures who were adopted all wore red www.photographed in red dresses...”

dresses. When their adoptive families took them away, the

Keenan glanced at the photo and then looked at Steve, who was easy to identify because he was mixed

“Is this you?”

Steve nodded.

“No, Stephanie isn’t an orphan. She’s Mr. and Mrs. Carlson’s biological daughter. She’s also not from the orphanage. Does that mean the killer might spare her?”

“Maybe he didn’t kill her, and that’s why her body hasn’t been found. She’s waiting for me... She’s waiting for me to save her!” Michael shouted maniacally, appearing very agitated.

“I need to find Stephanie. I need to find her. She’s waiting for me,” he continued while grabbing Zion’s arm anxiously.

A man with pride was suddenly pleading with the police in such a humble and anxious manner.

“Please, please find her...”

I burst into laughter watching Michael. The contrast between his demeanor from before and now was too stark, making his act very fake.

“Didn’t you just think that the murderer hadn’t taken her away?” Zion asked with furrowed brows, obviously annoyed.

Dejected, Michael stepped back and mumbled, “I don’t know...”

He didn’t expect things to end up like this. He honestly didn’t know that I would still go to Sunset Alley on the 15th.

“That silly woman... Why would she go there on the 15th? Why didn’t she call me...”

“We checked Stephanie’s phone records. She did call you a few times, and you even answered,” stated Zion, interrupting him..

Michael was stunned for a minute there as if his heart had just been shot.

Smiling, I said, “Yeah, you answered my call, Michael, and you asked me to die...”

And here I was, dead. It was just as you wished, Michael Ford.

He retreated dispiritedly and fell to the ground embarrassingly. He said nothing and kept quiet. Then,

he looked like he wanted to get up. He remembered what he had said.

“No... I didn’t... I didn’t mean that. I just...” he stuttered, his eyes becoming red. Those who didn’t know him might even think he was so in love with me.

Chapter 39

I looked down at Michael with a mocking smile

“Michael, I’m dead. Shouldn’t you be happy? Who are you putting an act for? It’s because of you that

I’m dead!”

“Alright, Mr. Ford. There’s nothing you can do here. You’d better go back and wait for our call,” said Zion, somewhat disapproving of Michael.

He probably couldn’t stand his contradictory attitudes.

“Michael Ford, you’re really disgusting!” Rachel suddenly shouted, still very agitated. She pointed at him and cursed, “Aren’t you getting married soon? Go back and marry your Yasmin!”

I stood beside Rachel and looked at Michael with indifference. At this point, I no longer had the strength to hate him. I was just Yasmin’s scapegoat. I shielded Michael’s beloved woman from the disaster of slaughter.

With this... I had paid off all my debt to him, even the life I owed him.

Michael remained rooted to the ground. Apparently, he already believed that something had happened to me.

As Rachel returned the coat to Zion and retrieved an envelope from her bag, she said, “Michael, I’m sorry. I didn’t want to give this to you before because I didn’t think you and Yasmin deserved Stephie’s blessing...”

As she spoke, her voice choked up. I wanted to wipe her tears and hug her, but I couldn’t.

“Three months ago, Stephie found me and said she had applied for an opportunity to study abroad. She asked me to keep it a secret...” she continued while trembling all over.

She was probably thinking that I wouldn’t have died here if I had gone abroad earlier.

“She has been wanting to leave you for the longest time. Every moment of her life, she was thinking about leaving you, and yet you think she would’ve done anything to have you,” Rachel sarcastically

mocked him.

“Your pitiful ego is truly pathetic.

“Enough...” Michael interrupted with a frown, clearly not wanting to hear any of this.

“The reason she has been enduring and indulging you is not because she’s debasing herself, but because she’s repaying what she owes you! That day, Stephie told me that repaying the money she owes you is easy, but she doesn’t know how to repay that life, that favor..”

She handed the envelope to Michael and continued, “All these years, she has been working non-stop, from selling her design drafts to tutoring.

“While doing three jobs all by herself, she tried so hard not to spend a penny from the Ford family

and save money to repay what she owes you.”

Then, Rachel took out a card from her bag.

“Stephie left all these with me. The envelope contains ten thousand dollars, which she prepared as a wedding gift for you. She said it’s not much, but it represents her sincerity because she sincerely wishes you and Yasmin...”

As she spoke, tears couldn’t help but fall.

I stood aside, quietly listening. Once, I truly wished Michael and Yasmin well. I had hoped that he could truly be happy after marrying Yasmin.

“Enough...” Michael uttered.

However, he didn’t even want to hear these well-wishes.

Ignoring him, Rachel continued, “Do you know how many jobs Stephie took to earn this gift money? Every day, she had to go to Richmond Hill to tutor the children of the wealthy. She’d get scolded. Sometimes, she even came back with injuries.

“At night, she had to work as a cashier at a 24-hour convenience store. She could only sleep for a maximum of five hours a day, depending on how busy work was.”

She sneered and said, “Stephie worked for over a month just to gather this ten thousand dollars for you. She said that she wanted to earn the gift money for you before going abroad.

Michael didn’t want to listen to any of that, but Rachel insisted on speaking.

“There’s over a million dollars in this card. Stephie’s been saving this money for four whole years, ever since her parents passed away. She said she’d eventually save enough to repay her debt to you.

Michael avoided eye contact and refused to take the card.

“Take it... You always said that I owe you too much, didn’t you? Take it, then...” I questioned him, my voice already hoarse.

But he never took the card.

“You said Stephie owes you a lot, but I don’t think the money she owes you is even enough to cover Yasmin’s father’s hospitalization fees, surgery, and rehabilitation expenses—let alone the cost of buying luxury goods.”

Rachel, losing her patience, threw both the money and card at Michael.

“Take your money and leave... Never appear in front of Stephie again. She hates you, and she doesn’t want to see you.”

I nodded, agreeing with Rachel. Indeed, I never wanted to see Michael again—not even in death.

“She’ll be fine... I promise that if anything happens to her, I’ll die with her. She’ll be fine,” Michael mumbled with a hoarse voice..

I found him incredibly ridiculous. He’d die with me? On what grounds? Was he even worthy

“Mike, you need to go back! There’s a call from the hotel saying that Yasmin committed suicide! Jack had taken a call nearby and rushed back in a panic, saying that Yasmin had tried to take her own

life at the hotel

I watched as Michael’s face turned even paler, his expression increasingly complex.

Chapter 40

“Suicide? Ha! If she had the heart to die, she wouldn’t have caused Stephie’s death!”

Rachel yelled

uncontrollably.

Her hatred toward Yasmin was intense, perhaps because I had become her scapegoat.

“Calm down for now. Go and see what’s going on first,” Zion intercepted the emotionally unstable Rachel and handed her over to Keenan. “Take care of her.”

Keenan nodded and held onto her.

“You’re a doctor too. You know more than anyone that you shouldn’t let emotions cloud your judgment at any time.”

Without saying anything, Rachel just stood there with red teary eyes.

Zion glanced at his watch and sorted things out at the scene before rushing to catch up with Michael.

He said, “Mr. Ford, I’ll go with you to check out the situation. Based on the current investigation, your wife, Yasmin, is also one of the girls who left the orphanage back then. So, the murderer will continue to target her.”

Michael’s steps froze for a moment. With a low voice, he said, “She’s not my wife...”

Zion was baffled by Michael’s odd behavior, but he didn’t say much. I followed behind the two and got

into the car too.

“The girls who left the orphanage back then have grown up and are now scattered throughout the city. There are no significant patterns to the list and order of deaths. It’s as if the murderer is seeking

revenge.

Zion looked at Michael and continued, “If your wife isn’t afraid of dying, I wonder if she can cooperate with us to catch the murderer as soon as possible?”

Originally, he didn’t want to suggest this, but Yasmin and Michael were the ones who had pushed me into becoming bait.

I smiled at Zion and teased, “As if he’d agree to that. He treasures Yasmin so much. How could he possibly let her be bait to lure out the murderer?”

“I said... she’s not my wife,” said Michael, who seemed to be very bothered by the title. “Besides... something has already happened to Stephanie. I can’t possibly let Yasmin take any more risks.”

I laughed. See, he’d never agree.

“Risk? Mr. Ford, what were you thinking when you asked Stephanie to become bait, then? Or is it that in your eyes, Yasmin’s life is worth something but not Stephanie’s?” Zion countered.

Clearly caught off guard, Michael sat there stiffly.

I could only feel a bone–piercing chill run through my entire body. Yes, my worthless life could never compare to Yasmin’s precious one.

“Yasmin is in poor health, and her emotions have always been unstable. You heard it too just now, that she attempted suicide!” Michael fumed, glaring at Zion. “You’re a police officer. How could you say such things?”

Zion remained silent, but it seemed Michael’s response had confirmed his suspicions.

“Michael, Stephanie wasn’t from the orphanage, and her body still hasn’t been found. My team and I think there’s a high probability that she’s still alive. If we don’t find her soon, she’ll die for sure,” said Zion after a long silence,

He hoped that Michael could persuade Yasmin to help the police and ultimately me. He was already being quite tactful with his words.

The fastest way to find the murderer now was to use Yasmin as bait to lure them out, but Michael hesitated.

I had already accumulated enough disappointment in him. Now, I found myself able to face it with some resignation. I knew that I had no place in his heart, and his choice was within my expectations. My feelings for him that had been buried deep in my heart during my youth rapidly took root and grew into a towering tree. But they were later crushed and destroyed.

My love for him ended in the year 18th birthday.

Michael’s car stopped in front of the hotel. Guests at the wedding reception hadn’t left, including Yasmin’s parents, who obviously looked upset.

“Michael...”

Yasmin’s mother, Jacquelyn Case, was an elegant woman—especially since she came from a well-off family. It was just that they had gone bankrupt in recent years. That was why they needed Michael’s help.

“Mrs. Bailey,” Michael greeted as he lowered his head, seemingly feeling guilty..

I stood not far away, watching the family and feeling a sense of irony.

“Why are you still calling her ‘Mrs. Bailey’? You should call her ‘Mom’ by now,” said Yasmin’s father, Roger Bailey.

He sighed and continued, “Michael, we’ve seen how you treasure Yasmin. But regardless of the reason why the reception turned out like this... embarrassing Yasmin in front of all her relatives wasn’t right. You should go talk to her properly.”

Michael was silent before he opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

He just nodded and replied, “Okay.”

Zion

I was smoking in the smoking area nearby. He seemed to be a heavy smoker, probably due to the long hours spent investigating cases.

I was there next to him. I subconsciously coughed because I couldn’t stand the smell of smoke. It became a conditioned reflex for me to avoid whenever I saw someone smoking.

However, after coughing twice, I suddenly realized that I was already dead... Why should a soul... be afraid of second-hand smoke?

I snickered and turned to face Zion.

“You see, Yasmin’s suicide is just an act. If she really wanted to die, she should be in the hospital now and not resting in a hotel room.”

Zion couldn’t hear my words, but he seemed to share my thoughts.

He also chuckled sarcastically and said to himself, “Is it really suicide or just an act to get Michael to come back?!”

I glanced at Zion with a smile, glad to find someone on the same page as me.

“Mr. Ford, I would like to see Ms. Bailey,” said Zion to Michael after Yasmin’s parents left.

Michael frowned and answered, “Let’s do it another day. I don’t think we should agitate her further. Mr. and Mrs. Bailey said she broke down just now and only just fell asleep.

Oh, how considerate he was being.

“Delaying this by another day... means giving Stephanie another push toward her death,” said Zion, his brows knitting together.

“Michael, tell me, do you really want Stephanie to be found?”