

After Death 331

Chapter 331

“Where did she go missing?” Steven asked.

Michael rushed forward, trying to grab Steven. However, Steven dodged.

“Say what you need, but don’t touch me,” Steven said in annoyance.

Eason scoffed. Then, he pointed at the whiteboard full of clues.

“Yasmin went missing around 2:00 pm at IF Plaza. Before she went missing, she was shopping with

Michael.”

There was footage from the surveillance camera.

“Michael left earlier for the hospital. Later, he received news that Yasmin had gone missing in the shopping mall. Soon after, Michael called the police.”

Steven watched the surveillance footage and saw how Yasmin disappeared after entering the women’s washroom. It was as if she had disappeared into thin air. Someone had kidnapped her.

“There are no secret passages or doorways near the washrooms. The surveillance camera didn’t capture anyone suspicious or footage of Yasmin leaving. We’ve interrogated the janitors, but none of them saw Yasmin,” Eason said grimly.

Michael scoffed.

“Is that the best that the police can do?”

“If you’re so almighty, why did you leave your beau behind at the shopping mall? If you loved her so much, you should’ve accompanied her shopping and bought her luxury gifts. Jerk.”

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Rachel rolled her eyes. “Don’t bother Stephani–Stephany anymore. I get nauseous when I see you.”

Michael glared at Rachel. He was about to say something when I stopped him, “Mr. Ford, we should focus on locating Yasmin.”

He scoffed, then explained, “Well, Yasmin was helping me pick a gift for you. She encouraged me to pursue you again and suggested buying something you’d like...”

Frowning, I signaled Michael to stop.

Michael wanted to explain further, but Steven pulled me into his embrace and warned Michael.

“She’s mine, and we’re married. Who do you think you are to pursue her? How shameless of you.”

Steven said it so seriously that it made Rachel laugh.

I wanted to laugh too, but I was angry and didn't want to acknowledge him.

Steven looked at me woefully. "Stephie, we're legally married. He's trying to seduce you, so he's a bad guy. He's immoral."

Michael clenched his jaw. He was pissed at Steven.

"Excuse me, sir."

Meanwhile, Eason was going crazy.

"Can you get your mind off dating for a moment? Help me locate Yasmin. If something goes wrong under my watch, I'm going to have to direct traffic with Zion!"

On the other hand, Zion, who was not on duty, was relaxed. He raised his brows at the statement.

"The Traffic Enforcement Unit welcomes you."

Eason ignored Zion.

Steven looked at the surveillance footage again, then said, "She won't die. She left on her own."

"What do you mean?"

Eason took a closer look at the footage. He had watched it numerous times.

"Pause at 38 minutes 47 seconds," Steven said.

Eason paused at a specific part of the video, which showed a middle-aged woman with long hair and a

hat.

"This is Yasmin," said Steven determinedly.

Yasmin had put on a disguise and left of her own accord. That meant she was not kidnapped. The investigation started on the wrong foot.

"The murderer may not have done anything. This is Yasmin's plan."

Eason frowned.

"How do you know that's Yasmin?"

"Her fingers. Yasmin's fingers are slender and long, yet she's deliberately wearing old, bulky clothes. Also, if you look at the footage before that, there are no records of when this woman entered the washroom."

Steven had a photographic memory. That was the scary part of being a prodigy.

"Aren't you the genius of the investigation squad? You couldn't tell?" Zion provoked Eason.

Eason sulked a little. "I have my specialty in other things, not this..."

“That’s enough. Let’s stop taking advantage of police resources. Mr. Ford, your beau had run away on her own,” said Rachel, rolling her eyes.

Michael frowned.

“Is that how you plan to conclude the case? What if she was blackmailed? Where did she find the clothes to change into? Somebody must’ve threatened her to put on those clothes and leave.

“She’s timid, so she would’ve complied. Shouldn’t you first locate her?”

I looked at Michael with a sneer. Back when I was captured by the killer, he refused to believe that I was dead. He believed that I schemed the entire plan to confuse them.

He even stopped the police from investigating, which eventually led to my death.

Yet now, he firmly believed that Yasmin did not plan everything herself but was threatened instead. The double standards that he held were baffling.

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“Mr. Ford, I remember when all evidence pointed to the fact that Stephanie had died, you were certain that Stephanie wouldn’t die,” Zion said plainly to mock Michael.

Michael paused, then looked at me out of reflex.

sneered and looked away.

“Stephie...”

Michael tried to explain.

“Stephie, Yasmin rescued me, after all...”

I rubbed my ears in frustration. I was getting sick of his excuses about how she rescued him.

“Are you crazy?”

I would tell him that Yasmin wasn’t the one who rescued him, but I knew that he would not believe me.

After all, I had already told him before.

Not wanting to entertain Michael, I looked at Steven. “Can you figure out where she’s hiding? Since she’s distracting the police, she must be an accomplice of the culprit behind the mutilation case.”

“Stephie... What does this have to do with the mutilation case? You can’t...” Michael tried to defend

Yasmin.

I glared at Michael in silence, and he went silent.

“The victims of the mutilation case are still receiving intensive treatment at the hospital. The police force was distracted by her disappearance. That’s why Zion got injured!” Rachel snarled.

She pulled at Zion’s injured arm and continued, “Look, he was stabbed in his arm. If he had gotten stabbed in his chest, he would’ve died!”

Zion grimaced. “Hey, careful! Watch out for my arm.”

Rachel awkwardly let Zion go. “Sorry.”

Tired, Zion rubbed his brows.

Michael frowned. He still believed that it was a coincidence. “It was just a coincidence. Anyway, the police must locate Yasmin first.”

I said to Steven, “Some people just refuse to believe it until they see hard facts.”

Steven nodded. He went over all the evidence and surveillance footage from the streets near IF Plaza. In

the end, he locked down on Yasmin.

Yasmin got into a black car voluntarily.

“Check this.”

Steven took a screenshot of the license plate, and the police immediately looked it up.

“It’s a ghost car with a fake license plate,” Phil reported.

Eason frowned.

“As expected, it’s an organized and premeditated plan.”

Steven looked at the traffic map near IF Plaza. “Ghost car. Rewind for 30 minutes and check the surveillance footage near the overpass. Look out for this car.”

Within moments, Phil said, “I found it! Oh my god! How did you know that it would take 30 minutes for them to get here?”

Steven looked at the car. “Ghost cars wouldn’t dare to openly drive around the city. If they get stopped by the police, their driver’s license and license plate won’t add up.”

Zion observed the car. “They drove out of the city, so they may have switched out the license plates. There are surveillance blind spots there.”

“Yasmin is vain. If she left voluntarily, she wouldn’t be able to stand how demolition areas have neither

electricity nor water, where she can’t shower.

“These parts outside of the city are demolition areas. You should search for areas where you can hear

generators. That should be where they’re hiding,” Steven said softly.

Shocked, Phil gave Steven a thumbs-up.

Eason nudged Phil and said, "Hurry and go search."

Steven glanced icily at Michael. "Let's make a bet. You don't believe that Yasmin hid away voluntarily, do you? If we find her at the demolition area, what are you going to do?"

Michael frowned. "What do you want?"

"Stay away from my wife and stop bothering her," Steven warned coldly.

Michael tightened his fists.

"In that case, if Yasmin can't be found in the demolition area, you should divorce Stephie. I'll take her home."

The atmosphere between Michael and Steven was tense. It was as if a fight was about to break out. I felt a little upset. Why did they have to get me involved in their bet?

"Sure..."

To my surprise, Steven agreed.

I frowned. I wondered if Steven would actually divorce me if they could not locate Yasmin.

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Michael scoffed, seemingly mocking Steven. He believed that Steven would be wrong and that he was being prideful. Michael stubbornly believed in Yasmin.

At that moment, Michael seemed pitiful. He was blinded by a one-time life-saving grace.

"Stephie..."

When the police left to investigate, both Michael and Steven tried to talk to me.

I frowned and stared warily at the two men.

One was the ex-lover whom I had completely forgotten after suffering from amnesia. Meanwhile, the other was the man that I once stupidly loved after my amnesia.

But the both of them... felt like strangers to me.

Michael seemed to be regretful, but the attitude he had toward Yasmin was ridiculous and ironic. I could see through him.

And it was even more so for Steven. He was a genius. He could locate the missing Yasmin by just looking through the surveillance footage.

It was impossible for him to not have found clues to the serial murder cases, unless the culprit behind the serial murder cases was more intelligent than Steven or a prodigy like him.

Back in the days of the advanced class, there were only two top prodigies who scored full marks. They were Steven and Simeon. If Simeon was alive...

For years after that, no other students in the advanced class could score full marks. Steven and Simeon made records in school history.

"Stephanie..." Michael stepped forward. "Yasmin would never voluntarily expose herself to danger. She won't be in the demolition area. These are all deceptions, unless..."

Michael lowered his voice and whispered to me, "Unless Steven planned the entire thing. He got somebody to kidnap Yasmin and hypocritically accused someone else for doing that."

I glanced icily at Michael. I noticed his hostility toward Steven.

"You should mind your own business, Mr. Ford," I said, backing away.

Feeling hurt, Michael frowned and gazed at me, wondering why I did not trust him.

"Have you ever thought of how he might be the mastermind behind the serial murder cases? He arranged for the killers. He's trying to kill you by taking advantage of the killers."

Beginning to feel upset, I frowned. Michael was getting noisy.

But his words reminded me of one thing. If Steven was the mastermind... nobody would discover the truth.

What if Steven had planned everything, and someone else executed it—just like how it was illustrated on the wall of evidence in the basement?

There were two question marks. One pointed to the planner, one pointed to the executor.

I wondered if Steven could have been hesitant to reveal himself.

But if Steven was responsible for my death yet treated me kindly after recognizing me and behaved so obediently...

That would be horrifying... and crazy.

"Stephie..." Steven stood near me and softly called my name.

I glanced at him before looking away.

As if knowing that he was at fault, Steven's head hung low.

I hated it when people made me the wager of a bet. Michael once made me a wager in a bet with his friends, and Steven did the same this time...

No matter who ended up winning, I felt very disappointed.

"Found them!"

After a long silence, Phil rushed in to tell us the news.

"We heard sounds of a generator in a soon-to-be demolished building in the demolition zone. Yasmin was inside! She was free, and nobody was constraining her. She was in hiding!"

Panting, Phil poured himself a glass of water.

Steven kept his head low in silence, and he didn't dare to look at me.

On the other hand, Michael's expression darkened.

He asked, "Was it you?"

He was questioning Steven.

"You sent somebody to take her there, didn't you?"

Steven gazed coldly at Michael.

"You bet, you pay. Are you a coward, Michael? Trying to shift the blame now?" Rachel snarled.

"Do you think Yasmin is a good person?"

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Rachel rolled her eyes, then looked at Zion.

"I knew it, Yasmin was being a bitch."

Michael angrily pointed at Steven. "You designed all this."

Steven was silent, but he glared at Michael with a mocking smirk. Angered, Michael leaned forward to assault Steven. I stood in front of Steven to protect him, glaring at Michael.

"Michael Ford, you bet, you pay. You offered to make a bet, and you lost."

I hoped for Michael to permanently exit my life starting today.

Steven embraced me from behind while his gaze toward Michael became increasingly cold. "You lost..."

Michael clenched his fists but remained silent. He was holding it in.

Soon, they returned with Yasmin.

The police had no right to restrict her freedom while Yasmin had the right to go anywhere she wanted. As such, Yasmin started to make excuses.

"Somebody told me that the killer was targeting me. They told me to escape and not let anyone discover me. I was told that there were clothes hidden in the washroom, and I should escape after putting them on."

Yasmin sobbed and continued, "I was afraid... that I would get killed. I was scared to be made into a specimen like Stephanie Carlson and be eternally stuck in a glass display cabinet."

With red eyes, Yasmin showed the police a phone number.

"This was the person who sent me the messages."

"And you believed a stranger? What if that was the killer? If we hadn't found you, you might have died already!" the police berated Yasmin.

Crying, Yasmin said to Michael, "Michael, you left to meet Stephie... I was too scared, and somebody texted me. So, I trusted them."

She purposefully glanced at Steven. "I'm so scared..."

It was obvious that she was starting to put up an act, trying to blame Steven.

"Was it you?" Michael glared at Steven and grabbed his collar.

"What would my objective be?" Steven asked plainly.

"You baited Yasmin away on purpose so that I'd panic. Then, you'd help find her and make a bet with me, making sure that I'd lose!" Michael growled.

Zion sighed. Even Eason couldn't bear to listen further.

It was evident that Michael could not win Steven, be it with his intelligence or debate skills.

When Michael accused Steven, Steven did not try to explain himself. Instead, he let Michael describe his objectives. But the more Michael spoke, the more mistakes he made. Everyone knew Michael had suggested making the bet while Steven had simply agreed.

At that moment, Michael came to realize it. He glared at Steven. "You knew that I was going to make a bet with you?"

Michael was not only angry but also surprised. It was as if he finally realized how scary Steven was.

"I don't understand what you're trying to say." Steven looked at me woefully, wanting me to defend him.

"Michael, you should go home with your life savior.

"It's getting late, don't disappear again," I said grimly, looking at Yasmin with tightly clenched fists.

"All victims of the serial murder case were discovered in rivers. I'm sure there'll be a nasty river that's good for the murderer to dispose of your body at..." I scoffed as I stared icily at Yasmin.

"You want to be a specimen in the glass display cabinet? Who do you think you are?"

Scared, Yasmin hid behind Michael. She looked at me in fear. "Stephie..."

Steven panicked just like Yasmin. Almost out of reflex, he pulled me into his embrace.

He said, "Stephie, my wounds hurt... Let's go home, okay?"

I snapped back to my senses and paused. I was surprised to hear what I said earlier...

Eason stared at me in confusion, but he didn't say anything.

I looked at Rachel and Zion. I was afraid that they would misunderstand me.

I was afraid that they would suspect that I was related to the culprit.

After all, Stephany's identity was rather special.

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Luckily, Zion was on the phone, and Rachel thought that what I said wasn't harsh enough.

"She doesn't even deserve to be dumped in a stinking ditch. Her body should be thrown into a septic tank," she spat.

Rachel's ferocity managed to cover up my earlier slip of the tongue.

I watched as the suspicion in Eason's eyes slowly cleared away.

Zion hung up the call and looked at Eason. "The case with the mutilated corpses has been closed."

Eason was taken aback by that. "It has?"

"Well, the superiors called to say that the aid I provided to make the arrest was commendable since I got injured in the line of duty. I've apparently contributed to the closure of the case with the mutilated corpses,

"They said that they want to award me with a medal of honor at the Traffic Enforcement Unit," Zion said with a small smirk. He thought that they were going to finally reinstate

him. But the truth was far from it.

"Is that all?" Eason asked through gritted teeth.

"Well, they've also given me a long vacation. They said to only come back to work once my arm heals," Zion replied.

Eason scratched his head. "So, the case is closed just like that? Huh..."

It was clear that someone from above was pushing for the case's closure. The serial murder case had dragged on for quite a long while without any closure being given, after all.

The case involved the mutilation of corpses, after all. Seeing as the supposed culprit had been caught, the case needed to be closed promptly. Otherwise, it would incite widespread

panic.

"You guys should head back first. I'll check out the situation," Eason said, then spun on his

heel to seek the superiors out.

I looked at Steven. He was still holding onto me and seemed unwilling to let go.

Michael scoffed and turned to leave.

"Mr. Ford, you've lost..." Steven couldn't help but remind him mockingly. His tone was cautious, as if he was afraid that I'd get angry.

Michael's expression darkened with anger as he barked out, "You're so childish!"

Steven snorted and tightened his grip on my hand. Then, he scolded Michael loudly enough for everyone around us to hear, "You so shameless. She's my wife, you registered our marriage and everything, so we're protected by the law."

know. We've

Michael was enraged to hear that. He wanted to charge forward but was stopped by Yasmin who was crying. "Michael, let's just go..."

Michael angrily pushed Yasmin away and turned to leave.

Yasmin glanced back at me with a barely perceptible smirk in her eyes.

It looked like she was planning something. And whatever it was, it seemed as if everything was going to her plan.

I scoffed. I was ready to find out what sort of plans she had cooked up.

“Let go,” I said in a deep voice. I lifted my head to glance at Steven.

Steven hugged me with an aggrieved look on his face. He wouldn’t let go of my hand.

“Let go,” I said once more.

Steven cautiously released his hold on my hand.

“Rach, I’m going to head back home if there’s nothing else,” I said softly.

I must have still looked rather pale. I caught a glimpse of my ghostly reflection in the glass: It hadn’t been long since the miscarriage, after all. My body couldn’t handle too much stress.

“You should head home and rest for now. If I get any information related to the serial murder case, I’ll let you know right away,” Rachel said, looking at me with concern in her eyes as she held my hand.

She seemed to have something more to say. But in the end, all she did was choke out the words, “You can go now.”

My eyes welled up with tears as well. I wondered if she had recognized me.

I didn’t say anything more and quickly walked away.

Rachel knew that ever since I was reborn, I had been obsessed with looking for the culprit of the serial murder case.

I was the serial killer’s victim. I had been brutally murdered, so I had the right to seek out the truth.

“That guy confessed. He admitted to intentionally killing a bunch of people. He’s also from the demolition area at No. 37 Bridgeway Route. It’s said that he and the one who jumped off the building before went bankrupt trying to find their children. A case of human trafficking was even brought up.

“Yeah, the case of the mutilated corpses has finally been closed. But now, nasty businesses like human trafficking and kidnapping cases are coming up again.”

I had only just left the office area when I heard two police officers discussing the mutilated corpse case.

“If you ask me, those two should die. Human traffickers and kidnappers deserve to die.” I stood in place and looked at Zion.

It turned out that both of the deceased were related to missing persons cases.

The man who had jumped off the building was related to the missing 18-year-old girl and the murdered victims.

“No. 37 Bridgeway Route...” I murmured softly to myself, feeling dizzy all of a sudden.

No. 37 Bridgeway Route was one of the last standing slums in Huma.

It was inhabited by either migrant workers from out of town or homeless nomads with no money. These people were considered the rock bottom of society.

The man who had jumped off the building was called George Zucker. He was a primary school teacher. His wife was a nurse at the county hospital.

They were a diligent and hardworking couple. They weren't wealthy, but they lived a comfortable and happy life.

Their daughter was born with Asperger's syndrome, yet they had never complained. The couple had even actively encouraged and nurtured her talents and strengths to help her integrate into society better. She shone in her areas of expertise.

They weren't at fault for doing that.

It wasn't their fault that their daughter was so outstanding. Perhaps she had become so outstanding that she had caught someone's unwanted attention.

I leaned against the wall and stiffened suddenly. I turned back to the room and looked at Zion.

“In what area was George Zucker's daughter exceptionally gifted?” I asked.

“I heard she's particularly gifted in areas related to numbers. She has a hundred times more spatial imagination than the average human being.

“She can count the number of wells a city has just by overlooking it. She can even vividly depict the entire city and its underground structures with very high accuracy.”

Her accuracy could rival computer-generated information.

“What about the person we caught this time? Did his child go missing too?” I asked anxiously while looking at Zion.

Zion nodded. “Yes. His son is missing. He was born autistic, but he's obsessed with various insects and poisonous plants. He seems to have a natural interest in such things, and he's a genius in chemistry.

“He once injected a toxin he had extracted from toads into the water bottles of some classmates who bullied him. It caused them to hallucinate, urinate, and defecate in class...”

I rubbed my forehead. “A toxin from toads?” I asked.

Steven explained quietly, “Yeah, from Bufonidae. Bufonidae can secrete mucus or release toxins through their skin. One type of toxin is called bufotenine, and the other one is called 5 -Methoxy–alpha–methyltryptamine.

“These substances combined can induce strong hallucinogenic effects in people and cause significant harm to the human body...”

“He’s got a gift, that’s for sure,” I muttered under my breath.

“They’re both outstanding and talented teenagers with autism and Asperger’s syndrome. I suspect they’re still alive, at least they will be until their value to the kidnapper gets exhausted. Is it possible that someone is intentionally targeting these gifted children?

“They might be trafficking and selling them to someone. Maybe even...” I trailed off. There might be an even more sinister conspiracy behind this.

Zion nodded. He had clearly considered that a possibility as well.

“Other than their conditions, what else do these two teenagers have in common?” I looked

at Zion.

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“Well, they both went missing five years ago. They also participated in a genius competition

Zion said, then looked at me with a shrug.

He continued softly, “I investigated the competition before. It was organized informally by an unknown association. Two competitions with generous prizes were held, so it was well- known at the time. But after the disappearance of the two teenagers, the organizers of the competition vanished as well.

“I’m looking into this association and the genius competition from back then.”

But because Zion did not have much authority at this moment, his ability to investigate was limited. As such, he had to ask for Eason’s help.

I bit my finger.

I kept getting the feeling that there had to be a larger conspiracy behind everything that happened. Something connected the disappearance of these gifted teenagers, the parents being manipulated into committing murders, and their attempts to destroy all evidence.

“Stephie, you should head home to rest now. You’re getting terribly pale,” Rachel said with con.

“There’s actually another thing that these teenagers had in common,” Zion said. He remained silent for a long moment before speaking again, “And that’s Stephanie.”

He continued to explain, “Before the two teenagers went missing, their parents had hired a private tutor for them. Stephanie was their private tutor. She was the winner of the first genius competition.”

Zion took a deep breath and continued, “I thought I was mistaken when I heard it at first. I figured their private tutor just had the same name as her, but I was wrong. Their private tutor was really Stephanie.”

I stiffened and stilled while staring at Zion.

Eason had also mentioned that the disappearances of the two teenagers were related to Stephanie.

Yet I hadn’t believed him then.

But Zion was telling me the same thing at this moment.

I felt weak all of a sudden. I took a step back and bumped into Steven.

He wrapped his arms around me and whispered softly, “Stephie…”

My voice was hoarse. I looked up at Steven, knowing he knew whether what they were saying was true or not.

“Tell me, is it true? Was Stephanie really the winner of the first genius competition?” I asked him.

I couldn’t believe I didn’t know that about myself.

“How is that possible?” Rachel exclaimed in astonishment as well.

Steven lowered his head and remained silent for a long while. Eventually, he said, “It’s true.”

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I stared at Steven in shock. He had just confirmed it.

This meant that it was really true. I had won first place in the genius competition that was held at Delmany. This also meant that it was true that I had worked as a tutor for those missing teenagers.

My fingers felt numb. I suddenly found myself feeling unsteady on my feet because of an oncoming headache.

Steven quickly stepped forward to hold me. He started to comfort me, saying, "It doesn't matter. Their disappearance has nothing to do with you. It was just..."

Steven's voice was hoarse. He glanced at Zion nervously and continued, "The genius competition back then was held just for show. The organizers enticed regular families to join through luxurious cash prizes. They targeted families that hoped their children could soar to great heights.

"Stephanie was also a victim in all of this. She was just a commodity the organization used, like a mannequin displayed at a clothing shop. She had no choice but to let herself be placed there as decoration. She did nothing wrong..."

Steven was too eager to explain my innocence to me. His body trembled as he held me.

"Stephie..." Rachel hurried forward and looked at me in panic.

Zion furrowed his brows but remained silent.

What was happening now clearly proved that Michael, Rachel, and Steven were treating me as if I really were Stephanie.

But in Zion's eyes, I was Stephany. After all, how could a person turn into another person just like that?

It didn't make any logical sense.

"Stephie..."

Suddenly, an image flashed in my mind. The voice I heard was familiar yet chilling.

"Do you know what the most sophisticated way to deceive everyone is?" In my memory, Peter circled around me with a smile as he said, "It's with lies. Use lies that can deceive everyone around you, even yourself.

"Have you ever heard of something called the montage of lies? Each and every sentence that comes out of my mouth is a fact. But when I combine them in a particular order, it becomes a lie that suits my needs.

"Stephanie, you must first learn to deceive yourself with your own words.

"Let me demonstrate. I'm going to tell you that the woman I've fallen for is in the arms of another man from a wealthy family. Each part of this sentence is technically true when taken alone, but I've switched the order around.

"The sentence in the correct order should read, 'I've fallen for the woman in the arms of another man from a wealthy family'."

The same words were used, but the meaning was expressed differently through stylistic changes. It seemed to change the meaning completely.

"Tell me, how are you going to make him fall completely in love with you? How are you going to get him to love you to the point where he'll do anything for you, even take his own life? How can you make him trust you and everything you say?"

In my memory, Peter suddenly approached me. It made my headache intensify even further.

It seemed as if Peter was teaching me ways to deceive people. He was giving me pointers on how to plan.

But I didn't know who the target was.

I had no idea who it was that Peter wanted me to deceive. I wondered if he was talking about Steven.

"Remember that you're the only one who can save this world we're living in," Peter said. Then, he patted my shoulder and continued, "To make him believe you, you first have to deceive yourself.

"You're a genius. I believe you can do it. I want you to become his one and only love in this lifetime. I want you to get him to marry you, to make him obey your every word as if it were gospel. From then on, he'll be nothing but a puppet for you to toy with."

My head throbbed painfully. I tried to understand and work out who Peter was talking about.

Finally, I caught a clear glimpse of a photo on the table in my memory.

It was a photo of Michael.

"Stephie, your families have already arranged for you two to get engaged. He'll marry you, but that won't be enough leverage."

Peter looked at the photo on the table and continued, "If you don't do as I say, I'll find someone to replace you..."

"Stephie?"

"Stephie!"

I suddenly snapped back into reality. I breathed heavily as I looked around.

Steven and Rachel were staring at me anxiously. They were trying to ascertain if I was okay.

I shook my head.

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I sat down slowly and leaned against the wall.

Peter wanted me to get close to Michael.

He wanted me to deceive myself and get Michael to fall in love and marry me.

He wanted Michael to become an obedient puppet.

"Is it so that he can control the Ford Group?" I thought.

The Ford Group was involved in pretty standard industries. Those included real estate, medical equipment, domestic trade, and international trade. I couldn't work out what Peter wanted to gain through Michael. He was just a doctor, after all.

"Stephanie, you have to climb the corporate ladder to avoid being stepped on all the time. It's the only way you can break free from all of this..."

Peter's voice repeated like a mantra in my head, as if it was echoing in my ears.

He was a lunatic and might have been a devil in disguise.

I was almost certain that he had something to do with my amnesia.

"Is it possible that a person can forget certain memories if they were in a car accident and were subjected to hypnosis, medication, or other therapeutic methods? Could false memories be implanted through hypnosis by another person after that?" I asked in a whisper.

I was starting to seriously doubt that Michael was the man I had loved for ten whole years. Peter might have deliberately misled me to believe that about myself.

He might have taken advantage of the fact that I had amnesia to mislead me, causing me to have false memories about myself.

"It's possible," Zion said. His expression turned grave as he continued, "There was a case where someone was incited to murder someone else three years ago. A psychiatrist had incited his patient to commit murder on his behalf."

The psychiatrist in question hypnotized his patient, who already had psychological issues to begin with. He transferred his hatred toward the victims onto his patient, causing the patient to feel the same anger and hatred he felt toward the victim.

The patient ended up having delusions that the victim had deliberately hurt him and his family in the same way, which led the patient to stab the victim to death in public impulsively.

I sat there without saying a word.

There was something off about Peter. I was almost sure of it.

Michael turned out to be just another pawn on the chessboard. He was not the one playing chess.

I wondered if Yasmin was the replacement Peter had previously threatened me about. He told me that he would have me replaced if I didn't obediently do as I was told.

It felt as if Yasmin was playing the role of a catalyst.

Perhaps Peter had intended to use Yasmin as a warning to me. He wanted to egg me on so that I would complete my task of getting Michael to marry me quicker. However, he didn't expect me to die.

It seemed that Peter hadn't anticipated that I would die at the hands of the serial killer either.

I scoffed inwardly. This meant that everything had spiraled out of his control after that.

"The case has really been closed..." Eason murmured when he finally came back.

"The culprit managed to describe the facts of the crime very clearly. He said that he believed the victim had something to do with his son's disappearance. He had approached the victim about his son multiple times, but the victim kept turning him away. That's what led him to commit the murder."

The case sounded clear-cut when put that way. However, it was clear that someone had deliberately arranged for it to seem that way.

There were sub-cases within the case. And behind these sub-cases were more cases.

There were problems left and right in this case.

I stared at the clues Eason had plastered all over the whiteboard and said softly, "There are two cases here. One with serial killings, and one involving mutilation. It seems to me like the masterminds behind both cases are using the victims to commit murder for them."

"Victims are rarely ever completely innocent," Eason said while looking at me.

He continued, "There were six cases nationwide of teenagers with Asperger's syndrome going missing simultaneously that year. Do you know why only the parents of these two teenagers are still persistently searching for their children?"

I shook my head.

"It's because the others believed they had gotten rid of a burden. In their eyes, people with Asperger's syndrome or autism are monsters. Their parents regard them as aliens.

"Besides, when their kids went missing, the parents got to receive a large sum of donations from the public. Why wouldn't they welcome it?"

Eason sneered and continued, "Can you take a guess as to why the Lincolns didn't claim Steven back into their household back then? He might've been a bastard child, but it's not like the Lincolns couldn't afford to raise him.

"Maybe the Lincolns cared too much about their own reputation. But the thing is, Steven's mother and Andy Lincoln had gotten legally married in Melovia."

Steven frowned at that. He warned Eason to watch his tongue with his eyes.

Eason ignored him and continued, "They think Steven is a monster too. It was said that he wouldn't speak after he was born. When he was diagnosed with autism by a doctor and abandoned at the orphanage, everyone thought he was a mute."

Chapter 339

Eason was being a menace.

He was mocking families like the Lincolns. If a prestigious family like the Lincolns would rather get rid of their children born with defects, who was to say regular families wouldn't do the same?

"Furthermore, these two sets of parents who didn't give up on looking for their children refused to accept any donations. They sold all their property and spent their whole lives feeling regretful.

"They regretted allowing their children to participate in the genius competition. They also regretted putting so much pressure on them and blamed themselves for their incompetence..."

These parents truly loved their children.

But unfortunately, they ended up being manipulated.

They had turned into weapons of murder. They became sacrificial lambs on someone else's chopping board.

They were innocent, yet they ended up in such a pitiful situation.

Misfortunes always came in a series. The silent cries of despair coming from powerless regular people like them were depressing.

Those parents must have felt desperate enough to walk the path of becoming murderers willingly.

"The families received donations from the public? Which families received them? And which charity did all the donations come from? Who was the one who initiated it?" I asked Eason with a frown.

"I checked and found that the donation campaigns were organized by Angel Fund. Their aim was to provide comfort and relief to those families. Angel Fund has always been something the lower class in Huma went to for help. The organization has a good reputation in the charity industry.

"Nowadays, if a child from a regular family falls ill, they're eligible to apply to Angel Fund for help," Eason replied with a shrug.

I took a deep breath upon hearing that.

Angel Fund was something that I was all too familiar with.

"That charity was first established by Michael's mother..." I murmured softly. My voice was hoarse and trembling.

I hoped that everything was just a coincidence.

Otherwise, it meant that there was much more at stake. There were more pawns on the playing field than we realized.

How could small fries like us make it through to the end?

"Society is much like a huge spider web. There is no absolute good or absolute evil. The world we live in is not simply black or white," Eason said indifferently.

"The person you consider to be unforgivable might be someone who respects their parents a lot. The good Samaritan you know might have blood on their hands in secret.

"Something sinister must lay behind every person's immense wealth. Do you think that all the world's billionaires have clean backgrounds? Do you really think that they have no skeletons hidden in their closets?"

The world was essentially dark like that. One could only find great happiness and freedom if one lived a mediocre life in ignorance.

"Can you find out who funded the luxurious cash prizes behind the genius competition?" Zion asked Eason.

"I've already done that. It was Angel Fund," Eason answered with another shrug.

It wasn't really a secret.

Angel Fund was dedicated to treating and supporting children with congenital deformities as well as genetic and rare diseases. As such, it attracted widespread attention from society.

The Fords were also constantly praised by the media and newspapers for this good deed. This laid a solid foundation for Michael's takeover of the Ford Group later on.

No one could achieve success overnight, after all. If Michael hadn't used the Ford Group's predecessor as a stepping stone, he wouldn't have acquired the position he was in today.

I took a deep breath and rubbed my brows.

It turned out that Angel Fund, the Fords, and Michael were somehow involved.

So, Michael wasn't the only one who deliberately lied to me back then. Perhaps I had also approached him with the intention of deceiving him as well.

I couldn't help but wonder what my relationship with Peter in the past was.

"Stephie, you don't look too well. Let's head home so you can lie down," Steven said as he looked at me with concern. He wanted to bring me home.

"Simmy's birthday is coming up in a few days. When you guys go visit him, could you help wish him a happy birthday for me? I won't be going..." Eason said in a huffy tone.

Whenever Simeon was ever mentioned, it made Eason feel uncomfortable all over.

Steven didn't say anything. He lowered his gaze, looking unusually pained and sad.

Simeon had died for him, after all. This was the nightmarish truth Steven would never ever forget in this lifetime.

"Why is Eason so afraid of Simmy?" I asked quietly after getting in the car.

"He's afraid of me as well," Steven said softly. He tried to hold my hand without me knowing.

I smacked his hand away, causing him to lower his head with an aggrieved look on his face.

"He thinks that Simmy and I aren't normal, that we're monsters..." Steve said.

"And?" I wondered if that was all.

"Well, he got everyone in class to call me and Simmy monsters. So, Simmy and I decided to fight him back. We would play small tricks on him every time. He couldn't detect or figure out what was happening most of the time," Steven said.

He let out a low laugh, as if he had recalled some funny memories of the past. His eyelashes fluttered.

Simmy had probably been one of the few good memories Steven had of his past.

Chapter 340

I suddenly felt a huge pang of sympathy for Steven. I instinctively reached out to hold his hand, but I recoiled in the end.

I didn't know what sort of person I really was, after all.

I wondered if Steven and I could even have a future together.

"Stephie, you're not a bad person," Steven said as he held my hand firmly.

Even at times when I doubted myself like this, Steven chose to believe in me.

"Do you know why Eason changed his name?" Steven asked. He seemed eager to cheer me up and was trying to change the subject.

"It was because he kept having nightmares after Simmy's death. He kept feeling like Simmy's ghost was following him around or something, as if he were by his side all the time. He even got electrocuted at home once and said he saw a ghost."

Steven chuckled and continued, "His parents tried bringing in all sorts of exorcists to exorcise the ghost. But a psychiatrist ultimately said that he was just hallucinating due to being electrocuted.

"But he was still worried, so he had a fortune teller change his name to get rid of Simmy's ghost. Simmy died in a fire..." Steven paused and tightened his grip on my hand.

His Adam's apple bobbed as he continued, "Anyway, the fortune teller told Eason that his old name was too easy for ghosts to latch onto, so in the end, Eason became his new name as it was shorter."

I stared at Steven, who was telling me what should have been a funny story. However, I couldn't bring myself to laugh.

I could tell that Steven was trying hard to cheer me up. I found his clumsy attempt rather endearing.

"I just want to make you happy, but I always end up messing things up," Steven said in a hoarse voice as he slowly released my hand.

We remained silent for the rest of the journey.

Once we were back home, I locked myself in Steven's basement.

I stared at the linked clues on the wall and lost myself in thought.

I wondered who Steven was protecting by being so evasive.

At the moment, the two people who seemed to matter most to him were Simmy and Stephanie.

However, both of them were "dead".

I fell into a daze as I stared up at the wall covered in clues.

I had started off distrusting Stephany and ended up suspecting Stephanie now. It felt as if I had fallen headfirst into a conspiracy that was spinning out of control.

Perhaps unraveling this mystery wasn't as simple as recovering my memories.

Behind the fog lay even greater mysteries, and there was more to come where those came from.

When I finally left the basement, Ewan saw me and let out a sigh as he said, "Sir is drinking."

I was taken aback to hear that Steven was drinking alcohol.

He shouldn't be drinking with the injuries he was sporting.

I wanted to check on Steven right away, but I suddenly recalled the event with the Crowdstar Group's president. "Mr. Bart, the charity banquet..."

I wondered if the charity banquet was successful.

Ewan seemed surprised. "Oh, didn't Sir tell you? Well, I suppose he drank too much before he had the chance to..."

Ewan paused and continued, "Sir sold all the shares he had legally inherited to the president of Crowdstar Group. It seems that the accident involving you and the baby has deeply affected him. He's willing to give up everything as long as your safety can be assured."

It didn't matter whether Steven and I survived or not at this point. After what Steven did, the Lincoln Group's ownership would change hands.

I was shocked to hear Ewan's words. This was an extreme measure I had not imagined Steven to take. Steven had actually sold the Lincoln Group.

He was such a fool. Without those shares, it meant that he had lost his only means of protection. Martin could take his life at any moment if Steven ever angered him.

Even though Martin no longer had a reason to kill me, Steven would become the scapegoat of the Lincolns.

They surely wouldn't let him off the hook.

I couldn't understand why Steven always had to bear all the pressure by himself.

Suddenly, a loud bang sounded. It came from the bedroom. Then, incessant barking in the backyard followed.

Both Ewan and I ran toward the bedroom in a panic.

Maybe something happened to Steven.