

After Death 351

Chapter 351

I was left speechless, absolutely shocked. I glanced at Carol and then at Steven. What was going on?

"Carol, he's my husband." I attempted to change her mindset.

But Carol lowered her head and murmured. "It's not like we haven't slept together."

I momentarily froze as I thought I heard something unreal, then anxiously gazed at Carol. "What did you say?"

"I have slept with Steve before," Carol said seriously.

I subconsciously looked back at Steven.

He was always vigilant as if he already knew that Carol was going to talk nonsense. He took hold of my hands and patiently explained, "The 'sleep' she referred to is a different kind of sleep."

I couldn't quite understand what he meant. "What do you mean?"

Steven gritted his teeth. "When we were in the orphanage, Simmy, Carol, and I often shared the same bed. But it was purely for sleeping. I slept with you and had a baby, that's different."

I paused to take a deep breath, feeling a surge of anger from her words.

Carol kept talking foolishly, "He also slept with Simmy, and so did Stephie."

I was at a loss for words. What she said had the power to terrify people to the core.

Steven was clearly upset as well. "Just answer her questions!"

Carol appeared to be afraid of Steven, lowering her head and replying with a hint of grievance, "Okay."

"Do you still remember the worker who lived upstairs across from us committed suicide by jumping off the building?" I asked quietly.

She nodded with a stern expression. "I do."

"Before the worker committed suicide, do you remember if anyone came to see him?" I nervously inquired.

She looked at me and shook her head. "I don't remember."

I felt rather let down. Yes, it was true. Carol was mentally disabled and struggled with remembering people.

Carol's head tilted as she walked out of the door, pointing directly at the surveillance camera positioned outside her home. "Are you stupid? Steven installed a surveillance camera for me. He said that if I'm ever in danger, I just need to shout at the surveillance camera, and he will come to save me."

For a moment, I stood there stunned. I shifted my gaze from the surveillance camera to Steven. Indeed, he had connected with Carol very early on. He maintained continuous contact with her and even assisted her in installing a hidden camera.

Steven nervously lowered his head, possibly avoiding eye contact with me.

Did he install a surveillance camera outside Carol's house to ensure her safety? So, why didn't he intervene and stop her from being a sex worker? It left me feeling perplexed.

"Is the surveillance footage with you?" I asked with a hushed tone.

Steven nodded. "If you're interested in watching it, we can go back and check it out."

I clenched my teeth and gripped his arm tightly. Why didn't he tell me sooner?

With an aggrieved look, he turned to me and uttered, "I thought you wanted to look into Carol..."

After he finished speaking, he appeared momentarily taken aback before swiftly changing the topic. "I thought you were going to help Eason visit the site for investigation."

"Why should I ask her if there is surveillance?" I was trying to calm myself down.

"Then, let's go home," Steven said, feeling a twinge of guilt. He eagerly grabbed my hand as if he couldn't wait to take me away.

Carol tilted her head, looked at me quizzically, and then suddenly smiled. "Stephie...is the murderer."

Steven's footsteps came to an abrupt halt, and his frigid gaze sent shivers down one's spine. He glanced back at Carol. Overwhelmed in fear, Carol recoiled, crouching on the ground and clutching her head.

I also turned around in surprise. "What did she just say?"

Steven shook his head. "I didn't catch that."

Carol still murmured, "Stephie is the murderer... Stephie is the murderer..."

In fact, I did hear it. Carol was saying that I was the murderer. Was she still blaming me for taking Steven away and causing Simeon's death?

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However, the fire wasn't my fault. I sighed and asked quietly, "Steve, why don't you let Ewan take her away? After all, she is Simmy's sister."

"She refused," Steven replied, taking my hand and leading me away. As we walked, he explained that Carol had disagreed.

"This is Simmy and her home. She's guarding it and refuses to leave. No one can take her away. She'll go crazy," he explained in a low voice.

"But we can't allow her to engage in this type of business." I couldn't help but feel a tinge of cruelty.

"Each person has their own choice and way of surviving, and she has her own." Steven couldn't wait to take me away, to keep me out of there.

"Ah! Help!" Suddenly, chaotic sounds emanated from the room next to Carol, followed by a woman's cry for help.

I was momentarily stunned and turned to Steven. "Is there any danger? Shall we take a look?"

Steven kicked the door. "What happened?"

The woman inside the room appeared to be desperately attempting to open the door and escape. However, the man kept cursing, "Bitch! Where are you going? Give me the money!"

Steven frowned and was about to leave with me when Carol suddenly dashed out and forcefully slammed the door. "Stop hurting her! Stop!"

I couldn't bear watching Carol cry and bang on the door, so I eventually kicked it hard. The iron door wobbled so hard that the lock got crooked from a kick.

Since I couldn't kick the door open, Steven gave it a hard kick and the door finally budged. The man inside was naked. Steven immediately covered my eyes.

The man exclaimed angrily, "What the hell are you doing? This is my wife."

A woman crawled out, her body covered in wounds. Tears streaming down her face as she sought refuge behind Carol. "Carol, please save me."

Carol comforted her in a panic, saying, "It's okay, you're fine now."

Without hesitation, Carol summoned all her courage to confront the man. "Callum Cooper, you bastard! How dare you hit your wife? You are nothing but a heartless monster."

For an instant, my body tensed up. I promptly moved Steven's hand off me and directed my gaze toward the man. Callum Cooper? He was also one of the students at the orphanage.

His sequence of the serial number of the welfare home was right after Yasmin. In short, after Yasmin passed away, it was now Callum's turn.

Callum was also a key target for Zion's protection and surveillance. What a coincidence that he also lived here!

"Is he also one of the students at the orphanage?" I asked Steven quietly.

Steven stood there with a look of rage and murderous intent. His hands were clenched, and his entire body was shaking with hatred.

"Are you out of your mind? It's none of your business when I beat my wife. You're responsible for the broken door, so you have to pay for it!" The man briskly adjusted his trousers, dressed in a delivery uniform. He was cursing and swearing.

Steven rushed forward, delivering a powerful punch that sent him sprawling to the ground. Then, he kicked Callum hard in the abdomen.

"Steve..." I did not stop him.

Maybe Steven would feel better after beating him and letting out his anger. After all, this scoundrel seemed to deserve it.

"Does it hurt?" Steven asked in a hoarse voice.

He forcefully yanked Callum's hair and slammed him back onto the ground. "I'm asking you. Does it hurt?"

When Steven was attacking someone, his presence was so terrifying that it captivated everyone's gaze. At this time, he seemed to have unleashed his true nature. He was as fierce as a person emerging from hell.

Callum's eyes were swollen, but when he saw Steven clearly, he smiled. "Lunatic... It's you. Of course, it hurts."

"Then enjoy it." Steven kicked Callum again.

In a fit of pain, Callum writhed on the ground, his laughter filled with madness. "Steve, that fire should have consumed you... Monsters like you and Simmy shouldn't exist in this world." "Haha..." He was still chuckling, provoking Steven.

While I wasn't aware if he had provoked Steven, it was undeniably true that he had provoked me.

My head was in so much pain that I instinctively moved forward and delivered a forceful blow to Callum's face. "Trash like you have no place in this world. You deserve to die... And after Yasmin is gone, it will be your turn. Just you wait..."

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Callum looked at me, his initial mockery slowly transforming into horror. "Stephanie Carlson..."

The fact that he shouted the name Stephanie Carlson indicated that he knew me and would be frightened upon seeing me.

"You're alive..." Callum dodged in fear and abruptly became frantic. Then, he pushed me aside before getting up and fleeing.

I regained my composure and glanced at Steven. "He appeared to be scared of me."

Steven held my hand and whispered, "He mistook someone else. Let's head back."

"Thank you all." Callum's wife expressed her gratitude despite being covered in wounds and with blood at the corner of her mouth.

"He is abusive. You can contact the police or leave him by getting a divorce." I whispered, not wanting to intervene further. Then, I turned around and left with Steven.

"When you reach your breaking point, you don't have to endure it any longer." I vaguely heard Carol say this behind me.

When I turned around, she was still standing there foolishly, comforting the woman who had suffered from domestic abuse.

I followed Steven, feeling puzzled by his attitude towards Carol. "Carol is Simmy's sister, right? You can obviously help her out of trouble even if she doesn't agree."

"Everyone has their own life, and we shouldn't interfere forcefully," he replied with a stern expression.

I furrowed my brow, struggling to comprehend.

"I have repeatedly asked Austin to give her the money, but she refuses. I have even attempted to bring her away forcefully and arranged for her to start a new and better life elsewhere. Despite my efforts, she could always find a way to escape. She insists on staying here and working, believing that she should be compensated for her labor..." Steven looked upset.

He had helped Carol many times. It was Carol who insisted on embracing her current life. I was shocked and remained silent.

On the way back with Steven, I couldn't help but gaze out the window, my mind consumed by the diary left behind by my mother. In it, she expressed concern about Steven's violent tendencies and the abuse I endured at his hands.

"When I was 18 years old, I disappeared for a while. Did you take me away? Is it true that you imprisoned me and abused me?" I asked in a low voice.

Steven glanced at me knowingly, aware that I had read the diary. He gradually tightened his grip on my hand while speaking softly. "If I deny it, will you believe me?"

"Who is that, then?" I asked this question with complete trust in his response.

I simply wanted him to explain. However, he once again averted his gaze and chose to escape. This indicated a cover-up...

"You still want to protect him?" I laughed bitterly and forcefully pulled my hand away from Steven's grip.

The photo captured a harrowing scene where I was on the brink of torture and death, my hands bound tightly in chains.

I had no idea what I was experiencing back then. However, what set apart the person who abused me from the murderer who took my life? Steven defended the murderer, and now he wanted to shield the individual who had previously caused harm to me.

"Stephie..." Steven reached out to hold my hand once more, yet I purposely evaded his touch.

"I'm a bit tired." The car pulled up to the door of the villa. I got out of the car and wanted to go home.

After walking a few steps, I spotted Michael. Yasmin's disappearance left Michael quiet for a few days, but then he suddenly reappeared.

Michael reached out and grabbed my wrist. He said confidently, "Stephie, I found Ms. Clark."

I was surprised and glanced up at him.

Amanda Clark, a nanny who took care of me at home back then. She was also someone who remained in my memory.

In my recollection, she was the one who began looking after me when I was ten years old. Following my parents' death in a car accident, I could no longer afford to pay her salary, so I had to let her go.

Afterward, I was taken to the Ford residence.

"She can prove that he was the one who kidnapped and tortured you." Michael lowered his voice. This time, he appeared confident that he could take me away.

I turned to look at Steven and felt extremely uneasy.

Steven's expression was not very favorable. It was clear that he did not approve of my leaving with Michael.

Nevertheless, I remained determined to give it a shot. "Tell me who kidnapped me and hurt me before."

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I was curious to see if Steven would tell me.

Steven stood there, looking helpless and panicked. He urgently reached out to me, pleading for my presence by his side.

Somehow, I felt the urge to approach him. However, my rationale compelled me to keep my distance and press him further. "Tell me. Who hurt me?"

His hand slowly fell from its frozen position in mid-air, a silent testament to his refusal to speak.

I nodded, directing my gaze toward Michael. "I'll go with you."

Michael was quite happy as he led me toward the car. "Stephie, let's go."

I didn't look back, yet I waited for Steven to convince me to stay. However, he did not speak until I got into Michael's car.

He stood there with his head lowered, as though he were wrestling with a painful struggle and trying to make a difficult decision.

"I'll ask you again...who is it?" My eyes were red, and my heart was filled with unease.

Who exactly was Steven trying to protect?

Steven raised his head with tear-filled eyes. He opened his mouth as though he had been preparing to speak for a long time. "Stephie, it's me."

He claimed it was him.

"It's all me."

He shouldered the blame entirely. He claimed that he was the one. It was he who imprisoned and hurt me. Instead of revealing the identity of the person who harmed me, he chose to make me despise him, detest him, and keep my distance!

"I didn't lie to you," said Michael, looking at Steven with indifference before closing the car door for me.

I saw Steven standing outside and suddenly felt extremely disappointed and saddened.

Steven held his hand tightly, and I could see that he was holding back. The wound on the palm had clearly been pinched, and dark red blood was flowing down between his fingers.

"According to Ms. Clark, your parents had been desperately searching for you while you were missing. After finally locating you, they claimed that Steven had deceived you and confined you. He is a liar." Michael explained to me in the car why Steven had kidnapped me in the past.

Michael pulled a letter from his pocket. "He claimed to like you, but you knew clearly he was a lunatic. You want to break up with him. See for yourself. It's what you wrote to Steven."

As the car slowly drove away, I gazed at Steven through the window. He stood there, his entire figure shrouded in gloom, exuding a presence of melancholy.

I took over the letter from Michael, opened it, and scanned its contents. It was unquestionably my own handwriting.

"Ms. Clark has retrieved it from the original residence. Your parents discovered this letter in the basement where you were confined," Michael explained.

While reading the letter, I noticed how cold and determined my words and attitude seemed on the page.

"Steven,

I struggle with emotions. I decided to be in a relationship with you out of curiosity about feelings. I want to experience what love is and try everything that a typical person would.

However, reality has shown me that no matter how hard I try, I can never truly fall in love with you. I feel like I am unable to experience love and typical emotions like other people do.

Let's end it. I don't want to continue living a lie, deceiving both you and me.

Stephanie"

I was the one who wrote the letter, breaking up with Steven.

"This lunatic will lose control if he doesn't get what he wants. He is a complete lunatic. He is very dangerous." Michael frowned, attempting to bring me face to face with the harsh reality.

"Michael..." I held the letter, and an unbearable ache pierced my heart.

He gazed intensely at me.

"Stop the car," I said firmly.

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Michael was stunned. "Stephie..."

I looked at Michael and ripped the letter into pieces. "None of this matters now. Stephanie is dead."

Stephanie was dead, and the past no longer held any significance. What I knew for certain was that the pain in my heart was unbearable when I intentionally left just now, seeing Steven in such agony. It felt as though my heart was on the verge of shattering into pieces.

"I want to get out of the car," I requested Michael to stop the car.

However, he had no intention of stopping.

"Stop the car!" Overwhelmed by my emotions, I desperately struggled to unlock the car door.

Michael gestured to the driver to keep going and raised his hand to keep me in my seat. "Stephanie! Are you going to continue being crazy with him? I know you hate me and I know you want to punish me. Isn't that enough?"

His face clearly displayed a mix of distress and fury.

I struggled to distance myself from him, but he released me with eyes burning with emotion. He then discarded his suit, rolled up his sleeves, and revealed the scars on his wrists...

There were far more than I had seen before. They were crisscrossing horizontally and vertically, a clear indication of self-inflicted pain and self-destructive behavior.

"I'm punishing myself as well... I don't know how to make you believe me," Michael said, his voice hoarse and filled with sobs.

"You... you tell me what you want me to do, Stephie. Just say it, and I'll make it right. I'm willing to do whatever it takes to earn your forgiveness. Just give me the chance." Michael hugged me tightly, unable to contain his emotion.

His voice was hoarse and choked. "Even if you ask me to die, I can do it now."

"Michael... Stephanie is dead. What's the point of doing this now? Why didn't you cherish her when she was alive?" I asked in a strained voice.

"God has granted me another chance. I recognize you, Stephie." his voice trembled as he asked for my forgiveness.

"Please... please..." He tightly embraced me, desperately pleading for my forgiveness.

"How can you forgive me?" he seemed to beg.

"Then... go to hell." My voice was raspy, deep, brimming with hatred.

He would have been better off dead. Why did he mistreat me from the beginning? Why?

Michael's firm embrace around me suddenly halted, his arms gradually releasing their grip. Leaning back, he slumped in his seat and uttered in a hushed voice, "Stop the car."

Michael asked the driver to stop the car. I didn't even glance at Michael as I yearned to exit the vehicle.

"Even if he has been lying to you, using you, and hurting you... Even if what he does to you is much worse than what I've done, you still have to choose him, right?" Michael asked in a low voice. At that moment, he felt so wronged that he seemed on the verge of collapsing.

He worked relentlessly to find evidence that I did not love Steven. He also made great efforts to find proof that Steven had hurt me. He thought that by revealing the truth to me, I would leave Steven and decide to be with him again.

"If he has truly been lying to me, using me, and hurting me, I will leave him... I'll never want any of the trash who hurts me," I whispered as I opened the car door to step out.

In my hand, I held the letter I wrote to Steven, which I then tore into pieces. As I passed by the trash can, I decisively threw the torn letter inside.

Steven initially denied it and claimed it was not him. However, when he asked me if I believed him, I did.

But what made me furious was that he protected the culprit. He protected people who really hurt me. He also took all the blame upon himself for this.

Taking a deep breath, I raced towards Steven's house. I simply couldn't bear to let him go...

But I was still overwhelmed by fear and panic. If he was the one who harmed and killed me... What should I do?

After running for over ten minutes, I finally reached home. Only Leo was tending to the garden, which looked empty and somewhat desolate.

The wind got stronger, and it seemed like rain was coming. I hurried into the living room but couldn't find Steven. He was nowhere to be found in the bedroom, bathroom, or guest room.

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"Leo..." I rushed back to the garden and inquired Leo about Steven's whereabouts. But I didn't know sign language, so I could only gesture.

Leo appeared to have noticed my nervousness, so he pointed at the backyard. I took a deep breath, turned around, and dashed towards the backyard.

The backyard was vast and empty, yet Steven was still nowhere to be found. I had expected to find him in the basement, at that secret base, yet it was also empty.

When I came out, I discovered Steven in the corner. He curled up next to the dog cage, cradling Stevie in his arms.

He appeared to be talking to Stevie, murmuring, "Stevie, she doesn't want me anymore..."

I approached him step by step until I was standing right in front of him. "So dirty."

Steven did not raise his head and continued to hold Stevie tightly, his voice trembling with choked sobs. "You don't want me anymore..."

I attempted to speak, yet no words escaped my lips.

"Steve, I'm exhausted," I whispered.

Steven glanced up at me with guilt in his eyes. "I'm sorry."

He seemed to be good at apologizing.

"Why are you apologizing to me?"

"I should not imprison you, should not hurt you, or tie you up," he replied softly.

"Did you really imprison me, hurt me, and tie me up?" I asked him, frowning.

He glanced down and nodded in agreement. I fell silent, unsure of the extent to which his words held truth and which were mere lies.

He stood up and followed me. "Stephie, I'm afraid you'll leave me. I'm sorry..."

"If you don't tell me the truth, I will leave you even faster. Let's watch the surveillance footage and find out who went to see the murderer who committed suicide by jumping off the building," I whispered as I wearily made my way to the basement.

Steven followed me closely, reaching out his hand and firmly gripping my wrist. "You go and take some rest. I'll search for it. Once I've found it, I will make a copy and show it to you."

I stopped. It would be good too.

"Steve, there are many issues we need to solve." I glanced at him, yearning for him to abandon his concealed self-interest.

Steven said nothing, and I turned and left.

Steven replied softly, "Everyone has their own secrets and things they want to protect. Stephie, I'm sorry."

My eyes were bloodshot, and I gazed back at him. "Are the things you protect more important than me?"

Steven clenched his fists. "Stephie, the one I protect is you."

I averted my gaze, refusing to entertain his nonsense. Upon returning to the room, I lay on the bed tiredly and closed my eyes.

"Stephie is the murderer... Stephie is the murderer..."

I couldn't understand why, but Carol's words continued to echo in my mind. "Stephie is the murderer."

I opened my eyes irritably and stared at the ceiling, breathing rapidly. What on earth had I forgotten?

"Stephany Larson! Stephany! Come out!" I heard someone loudly call my name from outside the house. I instantly recognized the voice. It was Yasmin's.

"Stephany! What on earth did you say to Michael? He took his own life... you must be content! It brings you joy to see him dead, doesn't it?" Yasmin was completely losing her mind outside the house.

I frowned, then got up and walked to the window to see Yasmin still crying.

"Michael committed suicide. It's your fault! You are the murderer!"

Michael committed suicide... Suddenly, I remembered that I told Michael to go to hell when I got out of the car. Would he really commit suicide?

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I had initially considered ignoring Yasmin. After all, if Michael had indeed committed suicide, it seemed unlikely that Yasmin would have the energy to come over and cause trouble. It appeared as though she was intentionally causing these issues.

If my assumption was correct, there ought to be reporters or someone observing nearby. Yasmin was putting on a show.

I furrowed my brows. Every action Yasmin took now appeared to me as another plot between her and Peter.

However, Steven was alarmed by her. He walked to the yard and looked at Yasmin outside.

Yasmin was clearly terrified and nervously took a step back. "Steven... Michael committed suicide, and Stephany was the cause. Have you never questioned her identity?"

Steven stared at Yasmin coldly. "Aren't you leaving? Release the dogs."

Steven raised his hand to signal to Leo, who was about to open the door. Stevie was eager to rush out.

Yasmin looked at Steven with terror, her face pale and filled with fear.

"I have evidence! Steven, listen! I have evidence that proves Stephany is fake. She's not Stephanie Carlson. She's been lying to you this whole time," Yasmin exclaimed urgently.

Yasmin trembled as she extracted an envelope. She accidentally scattered countless photographs.

Steven refused to talk to her and requested Leo to open the door. After the door was opened slightly, Stevie eagerly darted outside.

Yasmin screamed in fright and turned around. She dashed towards the car and slammed the door shut.

Steven walked to the door indifferently. Upon realizing that Yasmin had been frightened off, he hung his head and gazed at the scattered photos across the ground.

I couldn't see the photos from upstairs, but I had a vague feeling that things were not that simple. Yasmin would not come here for no reason.

I rushed downstairs to see what she had brought. However, upon my arrival, Steven had already destroyed all the photographs.

"What did Yasmin say?" I asked.

Steven instinctively hid the torn photographs behind his back. "It's nothing... she's out of her mind."

I hadn't uttered a word, nor had I inquired about the photo.

Stephen also didn't mention the photo and approached me with a low head. "Stephie... are you still angry with me?"

I remained silent, and Steven kept his head down, unable to meet my gaze.

"Stephany." Outside the door, yet another black car pulled up. When the window was rolled down, Lois was sitting inside the car.

I was stunned for a moment. Could it be that Lois was coming here this time because Michael had committed suicide? Did he truly take his own life?

"Mrs. Ford," I still greeted her respectfully.

Lois gave me a chilling look and said, "We need to talk."

Then, her gaze landed on Steven. "I'm sorry. I need to talk to her privately for a while."

Steven grabbed me and glanced at Lois with complete indifference. "Not a chance."

Lois' expression turned grim as she spoke calmly, "You dared to sell the Lincoln family's property to someone else. Your actions have made you a laughingstock in the entire Huma business district. If you have nothing of value, why do you believe you are worthy of speaking to me in such a disrespectful manner?"

Lois spoke the truth. Steven did, in fact, sell the Lincoln family's property to Crowdstar Group. Such treachery, selling off the family's belongings, was truly unforgivable in the Lincoln family. This behavior had become a laughingstock in the business community.

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Who, in their right mind, would consider selling their own family property to someone else at such a low price? Only a complete fool would even contemplate such a nonsensical action.

Furthermore, this approach had left Martin and the money-grubbing members of the Lincoln family feeling quite uneasy.

Crowdstar Group had officially started the liquidation process. Following its acquisition of the Lincoln Group, it had initiated a significant staff restructuring. While Martin was currently unable to address the situation with Steven, his animosity toward him must be at an all-time high.

He would certainly take action against Steven. It was just a matter of timing.

I frowned, but I still stood in front of Steven. "Mrs. Ford, regardless of Steve's actions, this is a matter for the entire Lincoln family. It's clear that your son has not been brought up well. If you hadn't kept the news under wraps so tightly, Michael would likely have become the laughingstock in Huma when Stephanie passed away."

Lois' expression turned grim as she gazed at me with deep contemplation. "Stephany, get into the car. I think you'll want to have a conversation with me."

Noticing my indifference, Lois spoke again. "When I give you a chance, you must cherish it."

I assumed Lois came to see me because of Michael. But judging from her current state, Michael's suicide should not have been life-threatening.

"Stephie..." Steven grabbed my sleeve and adamantly refused to let me go with Lois.

"Sir," Ewan also arrived, appearing somewhat apprehensive. He leaned in close to Steven's ear and whispered.

Steven's face grew somber as he cast a glance at Lois. Then, he whispered to me, "Stephie, there is an issue within the Lincoln Group. I'm going to handle it. Stay home. Don't leave with her."

Steven had sold Lincoln Group to Crowdstar Group. What might be causing Steven to feel so anxious now?

I looked at Steven, waiting for him to explain to me. As his current "wife", I was also concerned about his situation and safety. But Steven never seemed to consider my feelings as a "wife".

It felt as though I were a fragile object he held high and protected under glass, not wanting me to know anything.

For instance, Eason and he had devised a plan to visit the asylum to unravel Peter's situation. He could have informed me beforehand, yet he chose not to do so.

"Listen to me and wait for me to come back home." As expected, he was still the same.

He departed without uttering a single word of explanation to me. I inhaled deeply, remaining silent as I observed Ewan driving him away.

Joel, who was seated in the passenger seat, remained inside the car without stepping out. From his position, he gazed at me with a frown. His expression seemed unwelcoming. I could sense a tangle of emotions reflected in his eyes.

Once Steven hopped into the car, it appeared that he and Joel engaged in some sort of communication. Although I couldn't discern their exact conversation, I couldn't help but feel isolated by them.

The sensation was incredibly uneasy. It resembled a friendship among three individuals, yet two of them congregated and exchanged whispers without including the third person.

"An employee of the Lincoln Group could not withstand the pressure to change its leadership team and tragically committed suicide by jumping off a building. The public opinion, which was once favorable to Steven, has now shifted," Lois spoke calmly, addressing my concerns.

I instantly looked up at Lois.

Lois sneered. "So Steven is a sinner and the disgrace of the entire Lincoln Group. Only a fool would behave in such a way."

He believed that selling the company would finally resolve his problem entirely. This decision would have been acceptable when dealing with upright individuals. However, when facing someone as wicked as Martin, it was like playing with fire.

"Steven is still too young. He can't handle Martin," Lois was confident Steven couldn't win.

"It's still unclear who will win. If someone does something unscrupulous, they will be punished sooner or later," I replied with a stern expression.

"Your remarks are simply naive. Losers use such words to console themselves. Across the ages, history has always been shaped by successful individuals. How many siblings did kings throughout history slay when he ascended the throne? How many lives did those leaders sacrifice in their quest to unify the world? Behind every great wealth and power, there lies a trail of blood."

Lois appeared to be preaching, yet also seemed to be mocking herself. "I know it was Peter who asked you to provoke my son. You both are very successful. He committed suicide. Are you happy with it now?"

I was stunned and looked at Lois cautiously. "I don't understand what you're saying."

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"I always sensed that he was alert and cautious around people, but now he's determined to restore order within the family and is resorting to silencing them..." Lois murmured to herself.

I could see her veins bulging as she fought to control her anger.

"Meet me at Coast Restaurant at 6 o'clock to discuss the new terms. If you fail to come, I cannot guarantee my patience with you." Lois was giving me an ultimatum.

As soon as her car drove away, I swiftly ran toward the trash can. I was determined to find the envelope that Steven had discarded. It held the photos that Yasmin had brought with her.

Despite the photos being torn to pieces by Steven, I painstakingly pieced them back together. Within the photo, there was undeniable evidence that Stephany and Peter had met.

The photo captured a secret meeting between Stephany and Howard with Peter. There was also a photo of Stephany introducing a homeless child to a stranger. No... Not a stranger.

I managed to put the photos together as best as I could, my breath trembling. Stephany brought the homeless child to meet the man, who was the second victim in the mutilation case. Rumor had it that he was involved in import and export trading.

Combined with what Lois said about the consequences, it seemed that Stephany's identity was indeed more complex than I had imagined.

...

I arrived at the Coast Restaurant ahead of time, before six o'clock. To my surprise, Lois was already there, patiently waiting for me.

She was an exceptionally resilient woman. My mother had often mentioned her, stating that the Ford family relied solely on her. Her husband, Michael's father, on the other hand, contributed very little.

She was also a pitiful woman. She lived a life akin to that of a widow, yet she wasn't one. Ever since she had Michael, her husband was rarely present at home. During my time with the Ford family, I rarely had the chance to catch a glimpse of her husband.

Lois asked calmly, "How much money did Peter give you to pretend to be Stephanie, get close to Steven, and deceive him into selling the Lincoln Group and ruining the Lincoln family? What's the next step? The Ford family?"

I was momentarily stunned and did not argue. But, instead, I was contemplating her words. She believed that Peter sent me and that he intentionally asked me to get close to Steven and Michael.

"I don't understand what you're talking about," I replied seriously.

Why did Peter want to eliminate the Ford and Lincoln families?

Lois scoffed disdainfully. "No point in pretending, Stephany. I won't come to you if I don't find enough information about you. Do you truly believe I spent my time away on a vacation? Peter has taken care of everyone who needs to be taken care of. Do you really think I will just sit back and surrender?"

I frowned and said nothing.

Lois casually asked, "I looked into your background. Do you know why you resemble Stephanie? Do you know why he selected you to mimic her? It's because, in a way, you both share the same genes."

I looked at her in shock. "What do you mean..."

She took a sip of wine and smiled playfully. "You need to tell me Peter's conditions in exchange for a secret of equal value."

I had a headache and was completely clueless about the agreement made between Stephany and Peter. "All I can recall is that there was a classmate named Howard. He mentioned something about Sir asking us to do something, but I can't remember the details."

I was uncertain if that "Sir" happened to be Peter.

Lois said confidently, "It's very likely that Peter has your handle. Knowing Peter, he might brainwash you and then implant Stephanie's memories under hypnosis. When you wake up, you'll believe you are Stephanie."

She then murmured, "He's certainly a lunatic."

I remained silent, pondering the implications of Lois's comment about sharing the same genes.

"Charles' wife is unable to conceive, and he has been diagnosed with azoospermia, which means that they are medically unable to have biological children together," Lois explained in a low voice, looking at me.

Lois's unexpected news stunned me. It turned out that Stephany was not their biological child as well.

"Back then, Charles and his wife begged Stephanie's mother to help them have a child. Stephanie's mother carried out an in vitro fertilization and embryo transfer for Mrs. Larson, resulting in an embryo with the same genes as Stephanie. That's all I know for now." Lois frowned.

She only knew that Stephanie and Stephany were embryos frozen in the laboratory for experimental purposes. Stephanie's mother only mentioned them because they shared the same original genes.

"After I married Steven, Peter didn't ask anyone to contact me or give me any tasks. Everything that happened was natural. Whether you believe it or not, Michael's suicide was a result of his own choices, and it has nothing to do with me." I tried to explain.

However, it was clear that Lois would not trust me.

Chapter 360

"I know that you are short of money, and I also know that Peter used those homeless children to threaten you. There are three million dollars in this card. You only need to agree to one request of mine. I will pay you a sum of money every three months from now on," Lois said, her eyes burning with intensity.

I furrowed my brow and cast a wary gaze at her. Clearly, she knew too much...

The Angel Fund was established by the Ford family. Lois was undoubtedly linked to Peter, my parents, and even the Lincoln family in some way. No, now the Larson family was involved, with Charles and Nadia.

It turned out that they were unable to conceive a biological child of their own. Stephany was also conceived through in vitro fertilization, meaning that her genetic makeup did not belong to them.

As a result, they simply desired to have a child. They did not care whether the child was being replaced by the nanny or was elsewhere. The reason for Charles and Nadia's indifference, coldness, and mistreatment towards Stephany was now clear.

One was a daughter who was born, but not related by blood. The other was Ann, whom they had raised for eighteen years. Naturally, they preferred Ann.

The reason why Stephany's genes and Stephanie's genes were the same was that they belonged to the same batch of embryos. Biologically speaking, they were biological sisters.

"What do you want me to do?" I stared at Lois.

"Divorce Steven, to be with Michael, and keep pretending to be Stephanie," Lois asserted as she pushed the card across the table to me.

She asked me to continue pretending to be Stephanie and accompany Michael.

"Why? Don't you think I was sent by Peter?" I couldn't comprehend her intention.

She scowled and let out a sarcastic chuckle. "What a joke..."

"After Stephe died, Michael completely lost control. He is truly unlike his father. I never imagined he could feel such profound love. Previously, I viewed him as heartless and foolish, much like his father."

Lois spoke again, the tone filled with mockery. "But since Stephe's death, he appeared to have lost his mind. He isolated himself in his room, refusing to eat or drink, and inflicted harm upon himself."

"I've never seen him like this before...desperate, regretful, crazy..." Lois was likely scared by Michael's behavior as well.

"I had to force him to eat, but he ended up vomiting most of the food. He said he didn't realize how much Stephe loved him, and now he regrets it."

Michael never believed that Stephanie loved him, and he was unaware that she was pregnant. He carried his regret with him until it became too heavy to bear.

She clenched her fist and murmured. "He wants to die. He said that if he dies, he can be with Stephanie. He's falling in love with an experimental subject... it's just fate."

I looked up at her, my eyes on high alert. She was also aware of the experimental subjects...

Lois clenched her teeth in frustration. "After punishing himself dejectedly for a few days, he began to harm and abuse himself. I have no other way, so I reached out to Peter, hoping that he could help him out... But little did I know, this was just the start of Peter's conspiracy. He must have brainwashed Michael to make him believe that Stephanie is still alive..."

"Did he really commit suicide?" I had my doubts. Could someone like Michael truly take his own life and engage in self-mutilation out of guilt?

"The first time, he cut his wrists. The second time, he not only cut his wrists but also wanted to drown himself in the bathtub. He mentioned that Stephe must be enduring intense pain... He said that Stephanie was afraid of the darkness, and he wanted to accompany her.

"For the third time, he went on a hunger strike, pushing himself to the brink of death.

"The fourth time, this time... he cut his wrists in Stephanie's room, making both horizontal and vertical cuts."

Michael was still unconscious after being rescued. It was uncertain when he would wake up.

She sneered and pushed the letter in front of me. "This is the letter he asked the nanny to pass Stephanie before his accident. As a mother, I'm asking you, please, pretend for once, even if you have to lie..."

"I just want him to live." Lois pleaded, her voice trembling with tears.

She actually begged me... She begged me to help Michael, to be with him and lie to him even if it was just for show.