

After Death 361

Chapter 361

I remained silent for a long time before uttering a word. "I'm sorry. Believe it or not, I have never thought about hurting Michael..."

I looked up at Lois. "You should be aware of Steven's situation too. He has a history of self-harm and suicidal tendencies when things get tough. I can't and won't leave or divorce him."

I took a deep breath, stared at Lois, and finally expressed what had been weighing on my heart. "And... Do you really believe that an abuser will regret abusing his victim?"

Lois was stunned and frowned at me. "What do you mean?"

"In Stephanie's eyes, Michael is the perpetrator. And you, you were a bystander. You could have intervened, but instead, you chose to play ignorant. You're an accomplice too..." The words escaped my quivering lips.

"You knew what Michael did to Stephanie, isn't it? Michael sexually assaulted Stephanie without her consent. What are your thoughts?"

Lois was instantly overcome with distress. "Don't make assumptions about Stephanie's feelings with such a tone. She loves Mike, and the two of them have a consensual relationship."

I clenched my fists, a smile gracing my face. "Love should never be used to justify any abusive conduct. Stephanie may have loved him. But that does not grant him ownership over her, nor does it entitle him to violate, degrade, and torment her..."

"Stephanie used a pregnancy test stick when she was pregnant. She threw it in the trash because she was scared. Later, she wanted to retrieve the test stick because she was worried about the nanny finding it. However, she discovered that it was gone. Did you take it?" I whispered, my eyes fixed on her.

Lois was momentarily shocked, looking at me in disbelief, as if she couldn't fathom that I was privy to such intricate details. Stephanie couldn't directly tell others this, right? She gave me a suspicious look but stayed quiet.

"Despite knowing that Stephanie was pregnant, you failed to intervene and stop Michael from engaging in harmful behavior. When he behaves like this today, regrets it, or even considers suicide, the responsibility lies with you and cannot be shifted. You should be held accountable for his suicide, not me."

I found it utterly ridiculous. They always sought to escape, running away from the truth. "Even if Stephanie is still alive, I don't think she will be able to forgive Michael. The damage has already been done. Does Stephanie truly deserve all the harm she has suffered, just because his self-mutilation and self-abuse are meant to compensate for past wrongdoings?"

I rejected it with a quivering voice as I handed the card back. "I apologize, but I'm not Stephanie. I don't think I'm able to help you. Please find another way."

I stood up, planning to leave.

Lois sank into the chair, exhaling deeply. "You had the chance to turn me away at Steven's doorstep. Why did you decide to come here?"

I remained silent, most likely due to the upbringing she had provided me with throughout these past few years. After all, she was the one who took me in during my most difficult times.

"It's not too late to regret it now. Otherwise..." she threatened me.

I didn't say anything and left directly.

"Hand it over to the police." Lois made a call when I entered the elevator.

The profound and complex way she looked at me conveyed a sense of pity, almost as if she were observing someone on the verge of death.

On my way home from the restaurant, I spontaneously decided to buy a serving of seafood croquettes from a roadside vendor. I couldn't explain it, but I had a strong feeling that Steven would enjoy them.

I was crying, but I didn't know why. I couldn't control my tears. I never expected Michael to take his own life, and I never considered forgiving him. What's the point of all this now?

"Stephanie, stop using the marriage contract to control me again. Just think, do you really want to marry me?" In the past, Michael used to ask me after drinking if I really wanted to marry him.

"Stephanie, you are awful."

"Your love is worthless."

"Why don't you go to hell..."

"Stephanie, you are mine, remember?"

Michael's repeated hurts were like leaving deep marks on me. He seemed to desire to possess me in a contradictory way, but at the same time, pushed me away with distrust.

"Stephany." I heard my name being called as I strolled down the alley on my way back home.

I turned around and realized it was Howard.

He appeared visibly panicked and shouted nervously, "Run!"

I was confused and frowned.

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Howard rushed over anxiously. "The police have discovered us."

He pulled me to take me away. The seafood croquettes in my hand scattered all over the floor.

"What do you mean..." I asked.

"Have you forgotten? Sir is assisting us in finding adoptive families for these children. Wasn't one of the most intelligent children adopted by a man named Yonah Zimmerman?"

Howard suddenly stopped and smiled at me. "Yonah is a human trafficker."

I stood motionless, unable to move. Before I could react, I heard the sound of a police car.

Howard's expression changed, and he pulled me with a horrified look on his face. "Stephany, run! Run!"

Even without my memory, I could still sense that he was setting me up.

"Howard, we have no grievances. Why would you want to harm me?" I stared at him, puzzled. He appeared to be the most compassionate and ordinary individual among those at the orphanage.

It turned out that people couldn't truly know someone's inner self based on their appearance. Those individuals at the orphanage were all truly malicious.

Howard sneered and whispered in my ear, "Every man for himself, and the devil takes the hindmost."

I glanced at Howard with indifference, wondering what on earth he was up to. Was he planning to plot against me and send me to jail?

"If someone wants you to disappear, they would undoubtedly need a compelling reason, such as... becoming a fugitive," Howard smirked as he suddenly took out a towel to cover my mouth and nose.

The pungent smell overwhelmed me, and I couldn't resist it at all, causing me to pass out. I had a strong suspicion about what Howard intended to do.

He wanted me to "disappear," and before my disappearance, he even framed me for a crime. The police were investigating the relationship between the victims of the mutilation case, and my interaction with the second victim would be the main focus of the investigation.

Lois handed the so-called evidence to the police. When the police called me in for questioning, they discovered that I was missing. No one could have imagined that I had been kidnapped.

They would all assume that I had fled out of fear after committing the crime. They had prepared a perfectly appropriate excuse for me.

...

"Since she isn't cooperating well, let's replace her." In a daze, I heard Lois' voice.

"Everything was fine at first, but suddenly she started getting out of control." Peter's voice echoed. It seemed like he was complaining about me being out of control.

"I have thoroughly briefed Yasmin on everything. If Stephany can imitate Stephanie with such precision, then Yasmin will remain flawlessly hidden. All that's left is to expose Stephany's dead body to the world, using the explanation that she has 'reborn' in Yasmin's body. Trust me, it'll be absolutely convincing," Peter declared with conviction.

"Does anyone truly believe it?" Lois clearly didn't believe this.

"You don't need everyone to believe it, just Steven and Michael. Isn't that sufficient? You mentioned that you only wanted Michael to live, so I did as you requested." Peter was displeased.

"I've already imparted psychological hints to Michael and Steven beforehand. Now, all I require is an opportunity."

Peter had done some tricks on Steven and Michael in advance. Gradually, they would come to believe that Yasmin was "Stephanie". Hence, I must die.

Lois asked furiously, "Didn't you actually plan all of this? After killing those two, will the Ford and Lincoln families be next in line?"

"I've never attacked the Ford or Lincoln family. We're in this together. Don't let anyone turn us against each other. Clearly, someone is intentionally trying to create division among us," Peter calmly replied.

Lois said no more.

"Go ahead. Leave no traces behind," Peter said in a deep voice as he departed with Lois.

I struggled in panic but couldn't wake up. They planned to kill me.

Steven... I couldn't figure out why, but for some reason, I thought of Steven. Would he come to rescue me?

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"Sir has instructed us to stage her suicide."

Howard rejected the idea. "It's a tragedy to end her life in this manner. Sir is suggesting that she took her own life out of fear of committing the crime. Can we instead stage her escape?"

"What do you mean?"

"She can still be sold for a good price." Howard sneered.

I attempted to open my eyes, but I was not able to do so at that moment.

Howard was actually one of the human traffickers. Unquestionably, they were all despicable individuals. It came as no surprise then, that every one of them was included in the serial murder case, with no exceptions.

"Mandy has passed away. We have lost direct communication with them, and now we have to share half of our earnings with them. This is truly unlucky!"

"The serial murderer is already dead, so what are you afraid of?" Howard identified the serial murderer as Simon, who was already deceased.

Mandy was the first woman from the orphanage to be killed. She was also considered the "boss" of the orphanage.

"Do you truly believe that the person who died was the mastermind and murderer of the serial murder case? Why do I sense that everyone on the Death List will eventually die?" Howard's accomplice, Bobby asked with a smile.

Perhaps Bobby was joking, but as someone on the Death List, Howard was clearly frightened.

"Don't be ridiculous. It's been a while and no one else has died. It's clear that Simmie is the killer and is already deceased."

Howard began to act recklessly after Simon's death. He used to pretend, but now he didn't even bother pretending.

"Are we really selling her? What if Sir asks..."

"Just say that we've taken care of her. Sir mentioned that she should disappear and not show up again," Howard said calmly as he walked to my side.

I was awake at the moment, but I didn't dare to open my eyes yet.

Howard stared at me for what felt like an eternity, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Stephany, don't you dare blame me. It's your own foolishness that's to blame here. You can't even survive anymore, but you still want to be kind and help those children who trust you. If we don't make use of you, then who else can we use?"

"Humans can't be overly kind-hearted. Refrain from getting entangled in other people's situations. It may lead to negative consequences for yourself," Howard murmured to himself.

I comprehended Howard's words, and a wave of relief washed over me. Stephany did not commit any legal infractions. Rather, she was taken advantage of. Moreover, the person they referred to as "Sir" was Peter.

Stephany's kindness toward those homeless children had unfortunately become an opportunity for these deceitful individuals to exploit. They aimed to use it as a means to threaten and potentially deceive her.

Combined with the charitable funds and projects mentioned by Howard earlier, it became apparent that Stephany could not single-handedly support so many children. Furthermore, some of the children had congenital diseases. Hence, Stephany required a significant amount of money.

"Stephany, I actually really like you." He firmly held my chin, seizing the chance to caress my face.

I could sense his malicious intent...

Seeing that I was unconscious, Howard became increasingly courageous. "It's unfortunate that Sir actually requested you to marry that fool. You are so obedient and willing to do anything as long as he provides money to help you support those little bastards. You can even sell yourself. You are truly a kind-hearted person..."

His fingers started to glide down, raising my garments.

I fought the urge to move. Howard was not alone in this place at the moment... If I were to wake up, I knew they would surely kill me.

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"I almost feel sorry for you, Stephany. If you went missing, they would think that you're the devil who deceived and trafficked those children. No one would remember the good deeds you've done. How stupid of you." Howard sneered, deriding Stephany's naivety.

Honestly, I felt sorry for Stephany too. She had done so much for the children... to the extent of impersonating "Stephanie" and marrying Steven just to get money for those kids' medical treatment.

However, her kind heart was exploited by these malicious people, ultimately causing harm to herself and those children.

"Steve is a complete lunatic. I'm surprised he didn't die in that fire!" Howard said through gritted teeth, seething with hatred.

"With people like him around, how can good students like us survive? We're just ordinary people. How can we possibly compete with a genius like him? Genius shouldn't even exist."

Howard's jealousy was palpable. He believed that the presence of geniuses like Steve and Simmy was the reason they could never rise above.

"Because they were geniuses, all the wealthy rushed to the orphanage to adopt them, including the Lincoln family. Who wouldn't want to be adopted by the Lincolns? Yet, they chose Steve above all.

"Okay, so Steve's the illegitimate son of the Lincolns! How about Simmy then? Why does that loser get to steal the spotlight too?

"Do you have any idea how much we hated them?" Howard undid my buttons one by one. "Back then, all the rich and powerful from all over the country flocked to the orphanage to adopt children, as if doing charity could bring them more benefits...

"The principal, teachers, and all the children in the orphanage were over the moon. We thought we had to chance to be adopted, but in the end... those people only came for Steve and Simmy!" Howard seemed a little deranged.

"Who would choose you over geniuses?" Howard's associate sneered sarcastically as he approached to join. "What's taking you so long? I've already contacted the other side. They'll be here in half an hour. The clock's ticking, so hurry up! I want to be next."

I gritted my teeth, feeling anger swelling in my chest, but I knew I couldn't afford to show too much emotion.

However, as they unbuttoned my shirt, I couldn't help but open my eyes and shout, "Howard Zachman, you disgusting animal!" I struggled forcefully, only to realize my hands were tied.

Howard, taken aback by my awakening, immediately reached for sedatives, intending to render me unconscious again.

"Heh, it's more fun when she's awake. No one will come to save her now." The associate smirked as he began to undress me. "Aren't you a pretty one? Look at this hot body! Can your idiot husband really satisfy you?"

"Get your hands off me!" Panic surged through me. If no one came to rescue me, I would be in deep trouble.

Tears welled up in my eyes as I thought of Steven, who always came to my aid in times of danger. Perhaps I always knew he was silently watching over me.

"Steve... save me," I cried out, tears streaming down my face as my clothes were torn by them.

As Howard tried to spread my legs, I struggled and cried out in despair, kicking him forcefully.

He slapped me hard across the face, losing his patience. "Damn it. Do that again and I'll fucking kill you."

I cried as I desperately struggled to get out of the ropes binding me. Howard pinned down my wrists, his smile filling me with despair.

"Hmph, if it weren't for that lunatic, Steve, we would've all had our way with Stephanie... Since we couldn't have that genius's woman, you'll suffice." Howard's words were filled with sarcasm and mockery.

My head buzzed intensely. Had those men at the orphanage harmed Stephanie?

"I remember it was Yasmin who lured Stephanie into the small garage behind the orphanage, telling her that Steve was injured. Stephanie actually fell for it, haha... " Howard bragged to Bobby.

"At that time, Mandy managed to get her hands on some drugs, so we used them on Stephanie. As soon as we covered her mouth and nose with the drug, she passed out in no time." Howard pinched my chin, a smirk forming on his lips. "It was the same sedatives we just used on you."

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"You... you monster... go to hell," I glared fiercely at Howard, feeling my breath constrict as he tightened his grip on my neck.

As I watched Bobby start to remove his pants, a wave of despair washed over me.

I was now certain that no one would come to rescue me...

Peter was meticulous in his planning. Since had instructed Howard to bring me here, the chances of the police or Steve finding me were slim.

The cold, painful sensation of men's hands gripping my legs only deepened my despair. Memories of the fear and hopelessness from my previous life, when Michael and his gang bullied me, flooded back, suffocating me.

"I'll kill you... " I cried out in despair, feeling sick and repulsed by their touch.

"Get away from me. Don't touch me, you filthy animal." was all I could think.

"Steve... " I sobbed, desperately praying for someone to come and save me.

"Bang!" The iron door was violently kicked open.

Howard and Bobby were caught off guard, their pants still undone, as they cautiously eyed the doorway.

I desperately tumbled off the wooden bed, my hands still bound above me.

I had hoped it was someone coming to rescue me, but it wasn't; it was another one of their accomplices.

A man with sunglasses emerged from the car. His loosely buttoned shirt revealed the tattoos that adorned his muscular body, extending up to his neck. He had a menacing look, with lip piercings and a towering stature, his hair tied back.

"I'm here for the goods," the man said in a low voice.

Howard and Bobby sighed with relief, cursing, "Couldn't you at least knock on the damn door before barging in?"

The man glanced at me. I was squatting on the ground, trembling, with my torn pants discarded aside, leaving my pale legs exposed.

"Boss wants me to inspect the goods first." The man advanced slowly toward me, gripping my hair to tilt my head up for inspection.

I trembled with fear, meeting his gaze with trepidation. Yet, there was something strangely familiar about this man...

He stared at me for a moment before chuckling, "Is this all you've got?"

Howard appeared rather displeased, his brows furrowing. "Are you blind or something? She's nearly as stunning as the top star in our country."

Stephany was undeniably beautiful; at least, that's how I saw her.

I had a suspicion that the man was intentionally mocking me, but it wasn't the time to dwell on that. I remained trembling with fear, wondering if there was any chance of escape.

"Ah!" I let out a call as the man suddenly cut the rope binding my wrist with a knife.

Then, he hoisted me up and pushed me onto the bed, spreading my legs in an embarrassing and uncomfortable position.

I regarded him warily, my body still shaking. My gaze darted to the knife he had set aside.

"I need to examine her. Is she a virgin?" the man asked.

Howard and Bobby scoffed. "You want a virgin? Go fuck yourself."

The man raised an eyebrow, a smirk playing on his lips. His hands, adorned in black gloves, gripped my thighs, slowly moving upward.

My breath hastened and my hands clenched tightly, watching him intently to see what he was going to do.

"She's worth nothing." Suddenly, his hands left my thighs, and he turned to light a cigarette.

His knife was left beside me, as if deliberately placed. I stared alertly at his back.

Howard's accomplice couldn't stop cursing. "Fuck! Are you messing with us? You took in those ugly non-virgins before but rejected this pretty one?"

Howard observed the man warily, then pulled Bobby. "Something's not right..."

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Howard narrowed his eyes and pulled out his phone. "They were supposed to arrive in half an hour, but they're here early."

Just as Howard was about to make a call, I grabbed the nearby knife and plunged it fiercely into his shoulder.

"Ah!" he screamed in agony, his blood splattering into my eyes as I pulled out the knife.

I knew Howard couldn't die so easily at my hands; If he did, I'd be even in deeper trouble with the police.

As Bobby tried to approach, I stabbed him with the knife in defense. Then, I cowered behind the bed, terrified, my legs giving way as I fell to the ground.

The man with tattoos leaned against the car, watching me casually, seemingly enjoying my resistance.

Suddenly, the sound of police sirens filled the air, and the entire scrap iron factory was surrounded.

Howard's face discolored instantly. He and Bobby tried to get up and flee, but the police tackled them to the ground; I remained on the ground, hugging my bare legs in fear.

Meanwhile, as the police rushed in, the tattooed man took off his sunglasses and wig. He then walked over to me and draped his jacket over my shoulders, saying, "Useless fool."

Trembling, I gazed at the man before me, noticing his tattoos were all fake. Although he had applied dark foundation all over his body, I could still tell he was - Joel, the high schooler.

I looked up at Joel, who dressed like a gangster straight out of a movie, feeling a surge of grievance for some reason.

"Where's Steve..." I sniffled, trying to choke back tears.

Why didn't Steven come?

Joel furrowed his brow and said, "Seriously, if you don't wise up, Steven might end up dead because of you sooner or later."

I lowered my head, tears falling to the ground.

Joel continued, "Steven asked me to keep an eye on Mrs. Ford all this time, trying to prove your innocence. He knew she would collaborate with Peter. He specifically told you to stay home, but you just had to go meet Mrs. Ford, didn't you?"

Joel tossed away his cigarette butt and crushed it underfoot. "Actually, it's a good thing you've turned into a a bit of a fool, but try not to be too stupid, will you? Back then you were

Joel paused halfway through, staring at me skeptically, "Sometimes I really wonder if you're the real Stephanie Carlson."

My heart skipped a beat as I nervously stared at Joel. "What happened to Steve?"

"Since these people finally acted, I need to ensure they take you away so I can assist the police in catching these filthy rats and uncovering the human trafficking ring behind them, don't I?" Joel shrugged nonchalantly.

Obviously, he had used me as bait.

"Does Steve... know about this too?" I clenched my fists, feeling a mix of relief and a sharp pang in my heart.

Did Steven know I was taken away? Did he cooperate with the police and agree to use me as bait to lure Howard, Bobby, and the human trafficking ring behind them?

Though it was a sound tactic, capturing these individuals might help solve the case of missing teenagers...

But still, why did I feel so upset?

"You better go back now; otherwise, Steven might kill himself." Joel frowned.

"What do you mean?" I grabbed Joel's arm.

Joel's emotions were spiraling out of control. "Steven couldn't possibly let you get into danger, could he? If he witnesses what just happened, nobody here would make it out alive!"

"You know damn well that every time you're involved, he loses control. Yet, you keep putting him in danger over and over again. If I let him come, he'll probably spend the rest of his life in the mental hospital!"

He then took a deep breath and said in a low voice, "I tricked him into the basement and locked him in a room. So, we better head back now. If he doesn't see you soon, he'll go crazy in there."

I understood Joel's concern. Howard and Bobby were crucial figures; they couldn't die right now.

However, if Steven had found them before the police, he would surely ensure they paid for their crimes...

Joel had made the right call, but if Steven was locked up knowing I was in danger, he would really start hurting himself!

Ignoring the pain in my legs, I struggled to stand and rushed outside, my bare foot stepping on the nails on the ground, causing me to wince in pain as I fell.

But there was no time to dwell on it now.

I had to see Steven immediately; I knew he would continue punishing himself until he saw me.

"The human traffickers have been apprehended, and these two are in custody. Thanks for the information." Zion announced, having intercepted the traffickers en route here.

Zion shook hands with his fellow officers, casting a concerned glance my way. "Stephany, are you okay?"

Tears welled up in my eyes as I looked at Zion. "Take me home. Steve is at home... Take me home."

Joel was right. If I didn't return home sooner, Steven might really harm himself.

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As soon as I arrived home, I hurriedly got out of the car and dashed toward the basement.

Stevie had been incessantly barking in his cage, clearly sensing his owner's danger and restlessness.

My heart raced with panic as the wounds on my foot reopened, causing me to stumble down the stairs. Pain surged through my body, and tears welled up uncontrollably.

Despite the pain, I limped toward the basement, consumed by fear.

If the basement was noisy, I wouldn't have been as worried because it would have meant Steven was still smashing things.

It was the silence that terrified me, remembering Joel's words about Steve's tendency to harm himself.

I didn't know why I was so anxious. It was as if there was a voice inside me urging me to save him, to go and rescue him...

With trembling hands, I gripped the doorknob and twisted the iron wires on the outside, pushing the door open.

As soon as I opened the door, the smell of blood filled the air, sending shivers down my spine.

Terrified, I stood at the doorway, taking in the sight of the room. Everything was smashed, with traces of blood splattered everywhere. It was evident that Steven had lost control.

Steven lay on the couch, his fingers still dripping blood, appearing exhausted from the rampage. He was hurting himself.

"Steve... " I called his name, my voice quivering.

He struggled to open his eyes, and when he saw me, his gaze flickered.

With a surge of strength, he pulled me into his arms, murmuring, "Stephie... I'm sorry."

Even though it wasn't his fault, he always felt the need to apologize to me.

"You promised me you wouldn't hurt yourself." My voice still trembled with fear.

"I didn't hurt myself... " Steven lowered his head, acknowledging the lie.

I grabbed his wrist; the wound on the back of his hand was still bleeding.

"Stephie... " He gazed at me nervously, removing Joel's jacket from my shoulders, and replacing it with his own.

"Stephie... did they hurt you?" Steven's eyes focused on the swollen marks on my ankle, evidence of Bobby's assault.

Luckily, a policewoman had given me a skirt on the way here, covering the bruises on my thighs.

When Steven noticed the bloodstains under my foot, he knelt on the ground, his gaze turning violent. "I'll go kill them... "

"This is my own doing." I held Steven's face up, forcing him to look at me. "Stephanie... she was hurt by the people at the orphanage, wasn't she?"

In my fading memories, Howards mentioned they had drugged Stephanie before, trying to harm her.

Steven gazed at me, gently touching my swollen cheek, his eyes filled with rage and viciousness.

"Stephanie's body... is immune to drugs," Steven whispered. "Yasmin was the one who lured you over. You knew her intentions but went along anyway."

"Why would I go along with her plans?" I clenched my hands.

"Because those bastards have been using the same method to... harm Carol," Steven looked up at me.

I took a deep breath, my fingers instinctively tightening.

"Eason said, many years ago, there was a case where a teenager from the orphanage was stabbed. The wounds were shallow, not fatal. Although the teenager's life wasn't threatened, he was scared out of his mind when he woke up...

"Did I do that?" I asked, wondering why I had no faintest memory of it.

Did I deliberately let Yasmin trick me and then personally stab someone for the sake of Carol, or justice?

"Yes, that person was Jayden Cox, the leader among the boys. He led others to bully Carol, seeing that she was intellectually disabled. That was their secret." Steven took a tissue and pressed it against the wound on my foot.

So, back then, not only was Stephanie sober despite being drugged, she even stabbed the boys' leader Jayden.

Jaydon Cox was the first male victim in the serial killings.

Joel, who had shown up at some point, leaned against the door frame and let out a sigh of relief when he saw Steven was alright.

"Two lunatics... " he remarked.

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"Call the family doctor," Steven instructed in a cold tone, casting a warning glance at Joel, as if to convey, "This is the first and last time you do this to me".

Joel was clearly intimidated by Steven. He straightened up, trying to explain, "I had everything under control. I wouldn't let her be— "

Before Joel could finish his sentence, Steven mercilessly grabbed a chair from the ground and hurled it at him.

I flinched in fear, my breaths becoming rapid.

Joel managed to dodge in time. He stared at Steven in disbelief, his own breath quickening. It was evident he was disappointed and upset by Steven's action.

"Steven! You've been treating me like crap over and over again for the sake of that woman! I'm telling you, I've had enough! Damn it!"

Steven stood still, his fingers trembling slightly. Joel turned away and left, clearly disappointed and angry.

I thought they had a falling out, but soon after, Joel returned with a doctor, his head lowered as he carried a medicine box.

Joel huffed and stood aside, sulking. Steven gave him the cold shoulder and had the doctor examine my injuries.

After examining the sole of my foot and cleaning the wounds, the doctor administered a tetanus shot.

"Be careful not to get it wet for the next few days," The doctor advised before he left.

Ignoring Joel, Steven carried me to our bedroom. Joel stubbornly followed, and after taking a few steps, he said, "I was wrong... "

I looked at him, noticing his usual demeanor had faded, revealing an ordinary teenage boy. I was rather surprised that he was the one apologizing to Steven.

"Don't give me the cold treatment... " Joel muttered softly. "I don't want to go back to school."

Steven continued to ignore Joel, clearly still upset about Joel taking matters into his own hands and locking him in the basement.

"I apologized! Isn't that enough?" Joel's youthful pride couldn't tolerate Steven's cold shoulder.

"I didn't anticipate her to become so foolish... " Joel muttered in displeasure. "Back then, nobody dared to mess with her. Who knew she would turn into such an idiot all of a sudden."

As Joel continued to mutter to himself, Steven glanced down at me, who listened attentively to Joel's words in his arms. Then, he turned to Joel and gave him a stern look. "She's fine as she is now."

Joel snorted and huffed. "No one but you have eyes for idiots."

Steven ignored Joel and headed right to our bedroom. He kicked the door shut, leaving Joel outside.

He carried me to the bathroom, intending to give me a bath.

"Steve... " I nervously looked at him, pressing his hands that were about to remove my skirt.

I had no choice; Stephany's legs were too fair, making the red marks left by Joel's grip visible. If Steven saw them, he might dash out of the room and settle the score with Joel.

"I'll wash myself... just leave me alone," I pleaded softly.

Steven lowered his head, speaking aggrievedly, "Stephie, your injured foot can't get wet. Let me wash you."

"Your hands are injured too," I said firmly.

Steven gently pulled my fingers. "Stephie... My hands don't hurt."

Seeing that he had no intention of leaving, I stood up and unfastened my skirt...

As I had anticipated, the moment Steven saw the red handprint on the inside of my fair thighs, his gaze turned icy.

"I'll kill them... " Steven's voice was low.

"It's... It's Joel," I whispered softly, as if reporting Joel's wrongdoing to him.

Joel had it coming; he was to one who had to pretend to be a... jerk while rescuing me.

Although Steven frowned without making any comments, I could feel the pressure already.

It seemed like Joel was in huge trouble.

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"Stephie, this shower gel is nice. It lathers up really well." Steve remarked as he squeezed some onto the bath puff and started rubbing it in.

I was in the bathtub, one foot propped up outside, feeling embarrassed. "Can you please leave? My foot hurts, not my hands."

Ignoring my request, Steven began lathering foam onto my leg.

Blushing furiously, I covered my face, feeling like I was being treated like his favorite toy. "Steven, seriously, get out."

But Steven paid no attention, continuing to apply foam all over my body.

"Steven Lincoln!" I warned firmly, feeling the heat rise in my ears.

He stayed silent, leaning against my shoulder and rinsing my back with the showerhead.

"Stephie... Don't listen to them. You're not a fool. You're fine as you are, really..." Steven said softly, trying to comfort me. "They don't know anything. They're the ones who don't understand."

"Wasn't the old me good enough?" I asked softly.

There was a brief moment of tension in Steven's body before he shook his head. "No, that's not it—"

"Then what is?" I pressed, looking at him.

He straightened up, avoiding my gaze. "You weren't happy, and I didn't know how to make you happy."

Stephanie's original state lacked basic emotions. She had studied and imitated all feelings and sensations by herself.

When she recognized that normal people would smile in a situation, she would smile along; if it was a situation for tears, she would react accordingly.

She felt like a misfit, out of sync with society. Agony, sadness, or even joy were all beyond her comprehension.

"But now, I'm not happy either..." I felt like an idiot who couldn't even recall my own memories.

"Stephie... Forgetting is best for you." Steven looked at me seriously. "You chose to forget. You made that choice."

I fell silent, feeling unbearable discomfort overwhelming me.

If I were to revert to my old self, would Steven still love me?

"By the way," I suddenly remembered something. "Peter and Auntie Lois—"

I intended to inform him about Peter and Auntie Lois' plan to have Yasmin impersonate me, although I wasn't sure if they had succeeded. But I could finish, someone interrupted.

"Sir, Yasmin is here to see you," Ewan announced, knocking on the bedroom door.

I was taken aback, feeling a tightness in my chest.

Yasmin... Was she here to see Steven, pretending to be me?

Since Michael was still unconscious, did she decide to come to Steven first?

"I won't see her," Steven replied, furrowing his brows.

"She's acting strange today. She asked me to pass this to you, saying that you'll agree to see her once you read it," Ewan added.

Steven's expression darkened. He gave me a reassuring glance and said, "Wait for me, Stephie."

I nodded, despite the surge of uneasiness in my heart.

Swiftly rinsing off under the shower, I stepped out of the bathtub, wrapping a towel around myself as I approached the door.

I was curious to see what Yasmin had passed to Steven — it was a piece of paper with a 'π' written on it.

Frowning, I didn't understand its significance.

However, Steven's fingers visibly stiffened, and he instinctively glanced back at me.

For some reason, I sensed hesitation and suspicion in his eyes.

What was he suspicious of? A sense of foreboding washed over me.

Steven said nothing and headed downstairs.

Panicking, I swiftly changed into clothes and limped downstairs after him.

Outside the door, Yasmin stood there coldly, her gaze deep and noticeably different from before.

Startled by her stare, I nervously clenched my fists.

Her acting skills were convincing, causing me to doubt myself.

Yasmin cast a cold glance at me and spoke in a low voice. "I can't believe you actually buy she's Stephanie Carlson."

Chapter 370

Steven furrowed his brows. Yasmin's current behavior was eerily reminiscent of Stephanie Carlson's demeanor before she lost her memory.

"Peter Jones created a 'Stephanie Carlson', knowing you'd fall for it," Yasmin said indifferently, then glanced at the time. "Steven, I'm running out of time."

Steven warily stared at Yasmin and responded in a low tone, "Your acting isn't very convincing."

"I never claimed to be anyone." Yasmin sneered, gazing at Steven. "Are you afraid? Afraid that I might be the real Stephanie Carlson, knowing that everything you've said to her is just a lie?"

Steven clenched his fists tightly.

Yasmin spoke solemnly as she approached Steven, "Steven, you and I are born to be monsters with souls of demons. We lack emotions, destined to be free from emotional attachments.

"The emotions and love we experienced in the past were nothing but facades and imitations of ordinary people's lives. You wouldn't... actually believe it, would you?"

She then cast a sharp gaze at me and added, "Honestly, I dislike this body immensely. But what I detest even more... is being impersonated."

My heart skipped a beat. I never knew Yasmin was so talented in acting. She seemed like an entirely different person.

"Don't forget our plan," Yasmin reminded Steven.

"What plan? Remind me," Steven casually gazed at Yasmin, raising his hand to shield me, preventing me from making eye contact with her.

I hid behind him, feeling inexplicably nervous.

Yasmin chuckled, replying with just two words, "Project Zero."

Steven visibly stiffened. Perhaps this was a secret known only to him and Stephanie Carlson.

I stared at Yasmin in astonishment, wondering how she had discovered such a secret.

Meanwhile, Joel, who had been leaning against the main door, picked up a stone from the ground and hurled it at Yasmin. She noticed it but failed to evade it.

Joel chuckled and remarked, "If it were her, she'd have caught that stone in her hand."

"Fool..." Yasmin mocked Joel. "Stephanie Carlson's body was genetically enhanced. Do you think this body of mine now is anything of excellence?"

Joel furrowed his brows in silence.

"Recite pi." Steven calmly requested, maintaining eye contact with Yasmin.

Physical abilities might change according to the body, but a reincarnated soul wouldn't forget what it was familiar with.

I was stunned, gaping. If Steven asked me to recite pi, I definitely couldn't.

"3.14159265358979323..." Yasmin casually recited the numbers, her expression unchanged.

After a while, she nonchalantly added, "Was that enough? I can do this all day if you want."

If this was truly an act, she obviously had come prepared, putting effort into memorizing all that.

Steven turned to me and said, "Now, you recite."

I opened my mouth, pointing at myself.

Seriously? How was I supposed to recite pi? All I knew was 3.14.

Panicked by Steven's skepticism, I began to question myself.

Could it be possible that I wasn't the person I thought I was? Nonsense.

"Steve... Don't believe her. I overheard Peter and Mrs. Ford's conversation. They must have found a way to help Yasmin impersonate me. I—" I explained anxiously.

"Can you prove that you're Stephanie Carlson?" Steven interrupted with a probing question.

My mouth fell open; I couldn't provide any proof since I had no memories of Steven or anything from my past.

"If you don't believe me... just go ahead and call me a fake then," I replied in a low tone, turning away in despair, feeling utterly foolish.

I had to admit that Peter had done an impressive job in preparing Yasmin to imitate me.

"Steven, you should have believed me the moment I mentioned Project Zero and the secret of soul reincarnation. It seems your intellect has been compromised by her influence during my absence." Yasmin remarked solemnly before adding, "See you tomorrow at 10 am, the usual place."

With that, Yasmin left.

Joel glanced at Yasmin and then at me, commenting "That one seems more like her."

Obviously, even he found that Yasmin's current behavior was reminiscent of Stephanie Carlson's in the past.