

After Death 451

Chapter 451

It seemed that Genome Society had been secretly monitoring Stephany's life.

Clearly, Stephany hadn't been as innocent and harmless as she appeared.

While she presented herself as an ordinary and timid individual, she had orchestrated accidents to exact revenge on her tormentors while sneering from the shadows.

Her Larson parents were arrested for human trafficking, and the Larsons' eldest grandson became intellectually disabled due to a high fever, leaving the grandmother impoverished with a mentally impaired grandson and a son behind bars.

Stephany was a shrew and cunning woman. She understood exactly how to manipulate the loved one of her targets as weapons, inflicting agonizing suffering and torturing their hearts.

Ann Larson was a case in point. Though it appeared that she had taken Stephany's supposed boyfriend, Stephany lacked emotions. It rendered her seemingly incapable of truly loving anyone.

Hence, it seemed more probable that she orchestrated the transfer of her supposed boyfriend to Ann, enabling her to dispose of him while maintaining her facade.

Obviously, all of us had underestimated Stephany Larson, who was also one of the experimental subjects.

As I stared at the experimental data scattered on the ground, my mind drifted into a deep reverie.

How was it possible that someone as intelligent as Stephany ended up dead?

She was meticulously chosen and brought into the Lincoln family as the prime candidate for reproduction, yet her life was cut short by overdose- induced heart failure... Then, by some miraculous twist of fate, I found myself reincarnated in her body....

Was it all just a series of coincidences?

And then there was Stephany's diary... Upon my return to the Larson residence, I stumbled upon it in the garage almost effortlessly. It was almost as if Stephany had planted it there all along...

Ironically, with Yasmin's claim that I was, in fact, Stephany Larson and not Stephanie Carlson... I couldn't help but question myself too....

Who was I? Or rather, what was I? What kind of experimental subject was I?

Were the people of Genome Society only interested in experimenting on our genomes?

Compared to prodigies like Steven and Jimmy, who were already considered perfected experimental data and fully integrated into "production," it seemed that I had lost my value as a subject.

Yet, Genome Society continued to observe me and other experimental subjects without ceasing.

In essence, Stephany and I, along with the other clone experiment subjects, might harbor deeper and more terrifying secrets...

As Steven and I returned to his place, Stevie greeted us eagerly at the door. It was wagging its tail with excitement.

Seeing Stevie's enthusiasm reminded me of my old pet, Georgie. Despite its ferocious demeanor toward others, Georgie had always shown obedience and gentleness toward both Steven and me.

"Did you finish your food, Stevie?" I crouched down, running my hand over Stevie's head.

Almost instinctively, I raised my right hand. It was a gesture that had become familiar from the days when I trained Georgie.

Back then, whenever I raised my hand, Georgie would promptly sit on the ground with its tongue sticking out. It would then await my next command.

Sure enough, as I raised my hand, Stevie immediately followed suit. It sat down just like Georgie, waiting for my instruction.

A bit surprised by Stevie's quick response, I pointed toward its bowl that was placed far away in the garden. "Bring it here.""

Without hesitation, Stevie dashed over to its bowl, grabbed it in its mouth, and trotted back toward me.

Meanwhile, Steven observed our interaction from the swing in the yard.

"Good boy!" I praised Stevie, rubbing its head and cradling it in my arms. I felt a sense of nostalgia as if Georgie had returned to me. Suddenly, Stevie let out a series of frantic barks toward the gate.

Chapter 452

I turned around and spotted a black car parked outside the gate. Feeling alert, I stood up, my brows furrowing at the sight of the uninvited guest- Peter Jones,

"Looks like it's time to move," Steven said solemnly.

With our residing location now exposed, our safety was compromised. Anyone could find us here, including dangerous individuals.

Peter stepped out of the car, clad in a black trench coat and holding a black umbrella. "Stephany-no, perhaps I should address you as Stephanie Carlson?"

I frowned, staring at him warily.

He smiled and continued, "Yasmin tipped you off about some of our secrets, didn't she? Well, that's just the tip of the iceberg."

He was aware that Yasmin had told me about those so-called cloning experiments.

"Yasmin betrayed me. Now, the police have started their investigation, and soon... they'll be onto me. As you might have guessed, I'm but a pawn raised by the rich and powerful. When push comes to shove, they won't hesitate to sacrifice me," Peter sounded pitiful.

Then, he opened his car door and added, "If you want to find out more, come with me."

I regarded him with caution, wondering if this was some kind of trap. Would he truly divulge those secrets?

"Do you think we'll fall for that?" Steven queried gravely as he approached my side.

Glancing at Stevie, who was snarling nearby, Peter chuckled and said, "Trust no one, Stephanie Carlson. Anyone around you could be planted by Genome Society to monitor you. Even a dog could potentially be an NPC designed to extract experimental data from you..."

Peter's words sent a shiver down my spine. Though he used a dog as an example, I sensed he was alluding to everything surrounding me. "Have you watched 'The Truman Show?'" Peter suddenly asked. "Art imitates life, but life always exceeds art."

I clenched my fists as I glanced at Steven.

If everyone was just an NPC, as Peter described, was Steven one of them too?

I recalled a fragment of my memory. I was covered in blood as Steven held me with an agonized expression, desperately trying to stop me from harming myself.

"Stephie... I have nothing in this world. I'm just a created pawn. I can give up on everything, but I can't live without you... Please, stop hurting yourself, Stephie," Steven pleaded in that memory.

If faith was the driving force behind one's will to live, then perhaps Stephanie Carlson embodied Steven's faith and courage.

"My time is running out," Peter reminded me.

The Rebels' protest game had evidently caused a significant butterfly effect, drawing attention from the higher echelons. It seemed that the rich and powerful figures behind Genome Society were starting to dismantle their operation.

While I had anticipated Yasmin being one of the targets for elimination, I hadn't expected Peter to be included.

It seemed they wanted to silence him before the police tracked him down.

"I have no regrets, though. After all, I've lived many more years than your parents," Peter remarked as he folded his black umbrella and entered the car.

I exchanged glances with Steven, both of us acknowledging that Peter didn't have much time left. However, there were still many unanswered questions that we needed to address.

Despite the risks involved, we made the decision to get into Peter's car.

"By the way, I'm sorry about your parents' death," Peter remarked from the driver's seat, referring to Stephanie Carlson's parents.

"As for your father..." Peter's gaze shifted to Steven. "His demise was of his own making. Openly opposing Genome Society was a futile endeavor against such immense power."

Steven frowned, his expression hardening.

"Here's my advice-refrain from acting impulsively until you wield power feared by the rich and powerful," Peter continued, sounding like he was imparting final wisdom from his deathbed.

"Steven Lincoln, it was very unwise of you to sell off the Lincoln Group to Crowdstar Group. Their swift rise has unsettled even the forces behind Genome Society, leading to attempts to court them.

"Crowdstar's hefty donations to Genome Society's laboratory have solidified their influence within the organization... By selling Lincoln Group to them, you've only bolstered their strength."

If that were true, our situation would grow increasingly dire.

Clasping my hands tightly, Steven retorted with a sneer, "That's none of your concern."

I glanced at Steven.

To challenge the rich and powerful, one had to first have a powerful backer.

Was Steven somehow tied to Crowdstar Group?

Chapter 453

Peter gazed out the car window as he said, "Human desires are like a black hole, bottomless and capable of devouring everything... Some even proposed that humans are not native to the Earth but rather sinners who are trapped here, living through endless cycles of life, from birth to aging and death."

"Do you buy into these fallacies too, Dr. Jones?" I scoffed.

"Fallacies? Theology is, in fact, the ultimate frontier of science. Everything inexplicable by science can be explained through theology," Peter sneered.

"For instance, immortality. It may seem conceptually impossible, but is it really so? Did people from 3,000 years ago ever anticipate that the average human lifespan could extend to 73 years old, as it does nowadays?

"The advancement of medical technology has nearly doubled the human lifespan, leading to societal aging and increased burden."

I furrowed my brows, contemplating Peter's words.

"The result of medical advancement is exacerbated aging, decreased birth rates, and an increased focus among the upper class on the quality of their offspring-high intelligence, superior physical strength, innate immunity to diseases from birth, and other 'evolutionary advantages..." Peter smiled knowingly.

What he mentioned fell within the realm of current technology and medical care.

"Have you ever wondered why the wealthy tend to live longer than ordinary people, remaining vibrant and full of life even at the age of 90 or even 100? Do you think they possess some sort of longevity genes inherent in them?

"No. It's because of the things they have access to, things most ordinary people have never even imagined in their weirdest dreams... whether it's drugs or other special treatment methods."

The things Peter mentioned were all built upon money and power, far darker than my imagination could have conceived.

"And you, Stephanie Carlson, your very existence is deeply entwined with the interests and destinies of many... You're akin to the protagonist in *The Truman Show*.

"Your entire life, your transformation, and your evolution are all scrutinized by countless eyes behind the scenes... including your 'reincarnation' into Stephany Larson after your death.

"As preposterous as it might sound, someone has entertained such a hypothesis. Not to mention, the force behind this operation is capable of amplifying such value..."

Peter chuckled and asked, "You have no idea how valuable you are, do you, Stephanie?"

Understanding Peter's implication, a chill traveled down my spine.

With the potential validation of this 'reincarnation,' more affluent individuals would likely be inclined to invest.

Genome Society could attract further capital infusion with me as a prime example. They could continue their research on clones, delve deeper into methods of "reincarnating" souls and memories, and strive to resist natural aging and death in pursuit of prolonged vitality.

Ultimately, their goal would be to achieve the so-called 'immortality,' inevitably leading to more ethical dilemmas and sins.

"Was everyone destined for hierarchy from the outset? Was there ever true fairness in the world? 'Fairness' is merely a term." Peter's laughter hinted at a touch of madness.

"Whether you are truly Stephanie Carlson or not, I sincerely hope you're not her... 'His words seemed to carry deeper significance, urging me to conceal myself without being discovered.

"I've been working tirelessly to prove that you're not Stephanie Carlson, to safeguard you, Stephanie," Peter declared. "We're here. Let's go."

I furrowed my brows as I stepped out of the car, finding myself standing in front of the asylum run by Peter's father-in-law.

"This is where all the sins are hidden, Peter remarked, his gaze fixed on the asylum's inpatient building.

"Steven, it was very clever of you to infiltrate this place, pretending to be a mentally ill patient. Trying to investigate the organization from within, weren't you? I'll give you that...". Peter's voice was low, reflecting genuine admiration for Steven's tactics.

"However, those people are more vigilant than you think," Peter continued as he walked toward the entrance. "Come with me."

"Dr. Jones, our hospital has strict rules against allowing outsiders- the security guard interrupted, his tone wary.

"He's a patient here, and this lady is his family," Peter explained, pointing at Steven.

The guard quickly checked his tablet and verified Steven's information. "Okay, Dr. Jones. Please come-"

But before the guard finished his sentence, a truck suddenly came crashing toward us.

Steven instinctively pulled me into his arms, holding me tightly as he dodged the truck's path.

Unfortunately, Peter wasn't as fortunate. He was struck and thrown aside by the truck.

"Free... yourself..." Peter's voice was hoarse, as though he was struggling to muster his last breath.

Free yourself.

With those words, Peter urged me to run away from the clutches of Genome Society, just like the protagonist in *The Truman Show* who eventually broke free from his monitored existence.

Chapter 454

"Dr. Jones!" The security guard rushed out to check on Peter and dialed 911.

I stood frozen in place, my fingers tingling with numbness.

Despite Peter's significant role in the organization, he was also marked for elimination...

I couldn't help but wonder what kind of despicable people I was dealing with. For the first time, fear and terror engulfed me.

To those echelons, crashing us was as easy as squashing ants.

"This world is like a colossal ant hill, with clear divisions and a rigid hierarchy. The interests of the upper echelons can't be infringed upon. Anyone who dares to cross their path meets certain death."

Peter's earlier words echoed in my mind.

The entanglement of capitalists, the geopolitical tensions, even the conflicts among neighbors and colleagues... Every individual harbored their own ambitions and shadows, which shifted and magnified depending on their position.

"Steven, tell me, how can I distinguish what's real from what's not, especially when it comes to Stephany and me?" I asked softly, squeezing his hand tightly.

"Everyone is the protagonist of their own world; others are just NPCs," Steven replied, his grip on my hand firm. "You're the protagonist in my world, now and forever. And I refuse to be just an NPC in yours."

"What if... I'm not Stephanie Carlson?" I fixed my gaze on him, searching for answers.

If one day, data proved that I wasn't Stephanie but rather the subject of some memory implantation experiment, what would Steven do? What should he do?

I felt a tingling sensation on my nose, and my throat was burning. I lifted Steven's face with my hands, pressing his forehead against mine.

He had endured so much for Stephanie Carlson, sacrificing greatly on her behalf. What if everything he had done thus far turned out to be in vain? What should he do?

The thought tore my heart as if it were being ripped into pieces.

I couldn't be certain whether I was merely memories of Stephanie Carlson or perhaps her very soul... In fact, I wasn't even sure I was Stephanie Carlson herself anymore.

I felt as if the entire world was but an illusion woven by someone, an experiment.

"You're Stephe," Steven asserted, his confidence unwavering.

I couldn't discern whether his words reflected truth or if he was simply convincing himself.

"From a scientific perspective, both soul reincarnation and the existence of a parallel timeline are plausible. We can't dismiss the unknown but scientifically feasible phenomena..." Steven guided me to a secluded corner, gently cradling my face. "Don't worry, Stephe. I'll protect you, just as I always have."

Throughout the past, present, and perhaps even the future, Steven had remained steadfast in his protection of me.

The ambulance arrived and rushed Peter to the hospital. We followed closely, only to learn that while Peter survived, the odds of him regaining consciousness were slim.

Despite Peter's significant contributions to Genome Society, he was disposed of. He was discarded as if he were no longer of use to them.

It seemed Yasmin's contraction of AIDS marked not her end but the start of her nightmare. With Peter's demise, she would likely live in constant fear, seeking refuge with Michael. He was her sole remaining source of reliability. She could only hope that he could shield her from the organization's wrath.

"Steven, you now understand that seeking the truth through conventional means is futile, don't you? Join forces with us, and together, we can expose those responsible for Genome Society."

As we exited the hospital, we encountered Jimmy once again.

"You received the news quite promptly..." I regarded him with suspicion, finding his swift arrival after Peter's hospitalization rather peculiar...

Chapter 455

"I'm a Silver-class member of this club..." Jimmy indirectly responded to my question about his presence here.

The Global Trade Union was a gathering ground for the world's elite affluent. While many sought entry, the club maintained stringent membership criteria, assessing factors like intelligence, wealth, capability, and social standing. Essentially, it served as a playground for the rich and powerful.

Jimmy subtly suggested to Steven and me that to uncover the truth, gaining membership in this club was paramount.

"Entering this club isn't a walk in the park," Jimmy remarked with a smirk. "In Huma, the only member with a higher rank than mine is the enigmatic president of Crowdstar Group, who holds the coveted Gold class."

"Michael Ford, the president of Ford Group, is currently a Silver-class member. He was endorsed by his mother, Lois Smith."

Jimmy smiled as he continued, "Andy Lincoln was among the top ten members of the club, representing Huma alone."

"Despite my father's efforts to seek Andy's recommendation, he consistently declined, leading my father to feel slighted. This caused a rift between them, so now my father takes pride in my achievement of joining the club."

This likely fueled the discord within the Lincolns. After all, Martin was exceedingly ambitious and prideful, always striving to ascend the social ladder.

As far as I understood, the Global Trade Union held significant sway over the world's economic landscape. Joining such an organization would grant us access to its influential works and resources, undoubtedly expanding our opportunities.

It was fair to say that excelling in a particular field, whether it be medicine, science, or another domain, and securing membership in the club, would elevate one above the average person. This was regardless of their prior obscurity or lack of possessions.

The club imposed strict criteria for its hierarchy, with its top echelon consisting of global tycoons often featured in the news. These individuals typically wielded immense influence over their respective countries' economic landscapes, shaping national economies.

Beneath these top-tier members, the club's hierarchy comprised several levels, including Gold class, Silver class, and Bronze class.

Huma was among the world's most economically influential countries, yet the only individual who managed to obtain the Gold class membership was the president of Crowdstar Group.

Despite the Ford family's potential eligibility, I recalled Auntie Lois mentioning the club with disdain before my reincarnation. She had specifically forbidden Michael from joining it.

What drove Michael to defy her wishes and join the club? Was it also to uncover the truth we seek?

"Who exactly is the president of Crowdstar Group?" I murmured.

Jimmy glanced at Steven. "Steven, did you sell Lincoln Group to Crowdstar Group in hopes of securing a recommendation from the president for membership in the club?"

Indeed, gaining entry to the club required a recommendation from its members and undergoing extensive assessment.

Was this the motive behind Steven's involvement with Crowdstar Group?

"Honestly, your chances of entering the club without my help are quite slim, if not impossible."

Jimmy's words dripped with sarcasm and disdain. "The president of Crowdstar Group is an enigmatic and unpredictable character. I highly doubt he'll recommend you to the club just because you sold him Lincoln Group. Why not let me provide the recommendation instead?"

Jimmy's tone brimmed with confidence, indicating his belief that he was Steven's only viable option.

I chuckled and interjected with a cold edge, 'Without any tangible assets, you're merely a Silver-class member with the title of a business genius. Rather than relying on your recommendation, I'd prefer to collaborate with Michael. After all, he's the president of Ford Group.'

Though I aimed to undermine Jimmy's confidence, he remained unfazed by my words. It appeared he was certain that Steven wouldn't seek Michael's assistance.

"Setting aside my Steven's strained relationship with Michael, do you truly place your trust in the Ford Group? Considering the close connection between Peter Jones and Lois Smith... Peter has such a pivotal role within Genome Society. Is it possible that Lois has no association with the organization?"

I was taken aback. Jimmy's observation certainly struck a chord.

"Lois knew all along that Stephanie Carlson was an experimental subject and the prized asset of Genome Society, yet she deliberately kept Stephanie close, binding her with an engagement to her son... Essentially subjecting her to a cognitive experiment."

Jimmy smiled at me and continued, "Lois Smith is a cunning woman. She orchestrated Stephanie's amnesia, her involvement with Michael, and even her demise from beginning to end."

It seemed highly probable that Auntie Lois was indeed a member of Genome Society...

"No... it can't be," I uttered with a hoarse voice, taking a step back in disbelief.

So, my amnesia from that car accident, Auntie Lois' decision to take me in, my mistaken belief that Michael was the one who rescued me, the alleged engagement, the torment of our complicated romantic entanglement, and even Michael's distrust in me... were all part of an experiment?

Auntie Lois had always been aware of everything happening within the Ford family, yet she had done nothing to intervene. She even took away the pregnancy test confirming my condition, pretending as though nothing had happened...

Was it true that Auntie Lois had no genuine feelings for me and saw me only as an experimental subject?

Did she also involve her son, Michael, in the experiment?

Chapter 456

"Haha... so, it was all fake. Completely fake!" I scoffed bitterly.

"The Ford family can't be trusted," Jimmy remarked, maintaining his confident smile. His demeanor exuded intelligence and strategic planning throughout our conversation.

He was indeed sharp, possessing the self-assurance typical of highly intelligent individuals.

"Steven, I'll be waiting for your reply," Jimmy said, slipping his business card into Steven's hand before he left.

A few steps away, he turned back and addressed me with a smile, "Stay alive, okay? You're more valuable than you think, so please stay safe."

I clenched my fists, a shiver running down my spine.

His implication was clear. My existence was merely a subject of observation and research for the rich and powerful.

Those people watched me like bloodthirsty wolves, scrutinizing my every move to see if I could overcome the obstacles they set, if I could achieve the outcomes they desired... It was all for their mass production plans.

I stumbled backward, feeling absurdly trapped. Jimmy's words seemed to crush my spirit.

Gradually consumed by fear and confusion, I began to sense the presence of surveillance cameras around me. My breathing felt constricted.

"Stephie..." Steven enveloped me in his embrace. "Don't let his words get to you. Stay strong."

I clung to Steven's shirt, my gaze darting nervously around us. Even the sight of passing strangers heightened my unease.

"Stephie..."

"I want to go home, Steven. Take me home," I choked back my fear and gripped his collar tightly, my breaths coming in ragged gasps. "Steven... take me home."

They kept me hidden away, shielded from their scrutiny. Who gave them the right to observe me like some kind of lab rat? Who did they think they were?

I yearned to push back, to unleash my fury and madness building inside me.

A searing pain shot through my head, driving me to the ground as I clutched my hair.

I remembered... I remembered why I had lost control, why I had tried to hurt myself, why Steven and I had fled, only to be recaptured by those people at the warehouse...

It was because I had overheard my parents reporting my growth and abnormal behavior to their superiors over the phone.

Unable to accept the truth, I spiraled into madness and attempted to flee.

I pleaded with Steven to take me away, to hide me.

"Let's go home, Stephie. Let's go home." Steven's arms tightened around me, his body trembling with anxiety.

He seemed reluctant for me to recall the past, fearing it would lead me to hurt myself again if I refused to accept reality...

Yet, Jimmy's words effortlessly dragged me back into hell.

"Stephie!"

As my consciousness wavered, unbearable pain drove me to my knees.

When I regained my senses, I found my hands covered in blood.

Unconsciously, I had scratched my own face, indulging in self-harm...

I lifted my head, staring grimly into the distance. I sensed someone watching me.

"I will find you..." I murmured hoarsely.

I would find each and every one of them, and I would eliminate every single person who threatened Steven and me, one by one...

Chapter 457

"Stephie..." Steven was shaken by my self-harm, understanding it as a form of protest against those lurking in the shadows. Yet, he couldn't bear to see me hurt.

He would rather I remain in amnesia than face the unbearable truth. At least I could have lived a carefree life then.

For all the years I had been without memory, Steven had chosen to watch over me from a distance, enduring his own suffering to ensure I remained safe.

He kept himself hidden from me, dreading the idea of triggering memories that would plunge me back into a world of torment. His sole desire had been to protect me.

Even as I had found love elsewhere, he had kept his distance, silently bearing the heartache.

I could only imagine the anguish he felt as he witnessed the woman he loved forget him entirely and fall for another.

"Stephie... will you please look at me? I beg of you, please look at me," Steven's voice sounded distant as he pleaded for my attention, his tone trembling.

Looking into his eyes which were as deep and blue as the sea, I once wished to drown in them. For me, death wasn't punishment but rather a release.

Unfortunately, it seemed I was cursed to be reborn after every death.

"Stephie." Steven led me to the basement as soon as we arrived home.

Holding me in his arms, he whispered, "Stephie, we'll win, no matter what."

"Will we be able to escape from them?" I asked Steven, echoing the same question I had posed when I pleaded for our escape at 18.

"No more running away..." Steven's reply held a sense of finality.

Back then, Steven assured me that we could certainly flee, but our youth and lack of resources led to failure against the rich and powerful.

However, this time, Steven decided against running, and I concurred.

If they were our nightmare, then it was only fitting that we became theirs as well.

"No more running..." I cradled Steven's face and planted a kiss on his lips.

Steven pulled me closer, intensifying the kiss...

It seemed I wasn't very good at kissing. I struggled to find the right moments to breathe and almost suffocated myself.

Steven tenderly kissed the corner of my eye, wiping away the tears on my face. His breath was scorching. "Stephie... I need you." He sought my consent, making it clear he wouldn't take his next step without it. Now I remembered... When we were young and driven by hormones, we would indulge in kisses like this, our bodies consumed by desire.

"Mutual consent is crucial in lovemaking. Without it, it would turn into rape," I recalled telling Steven.

Back then, despite being easily swayed by desire, Steven always restrained his urges and primitive instincts for Stephanie's sake.

Even though Steven had been like a caged beast, Stephanie had always served as his sole motivation to overcome his violent instincts. It was a testament to his love for her.

"Stephie, we're legally married," Steven reminded me, his gaze intense as if he was proudly declaring his status as my husband.

Stephanie and Steven were no longer the young couple forced to suppress their desires due to their inability to take responsibility for their actions. Now, we were a married couple with the legal freedom to express our love physically.

I paused for a moment, locking my eyes with Steven's innocent yet eager gaze. I felt as though his eyes could alleviate all my worries.

An inner voice urged me to hold him tightly, to trust him completely, and to fulfill all his needs.

A blush crept onto my cheeks. I suddenly realized I had been sitting on his lap since my earlier episode. With his arms encircling my waist, our posture exuded a suggestive intimacy...

Chapter 458

Feeling the chilliness on my fingertips as I touched Steven's cheeks, I gently planted another kiss on his lips.

I wanted to forget everything... to leave it all behind. I wanted to lose myself once more.

"Steven..." Unbuttoning my blouse, I slipped it off and unhooked my bra from behind.

Taken aback by my boldness, Steven's face flushed instantly as he averted his gaze in embarrassment.

"Look at me..." I pressed my forehead against his, picking up where we had left off.

Sensing Steven's attempt to regain control, I used my blouse to tie his hands behind his back.

"Where... did you learn this?" Steven asked, stuttering. His tone was tinged with intimidation despite his flushed cheeks.

"Online," I responded truthfully.

"Don't delve too deeply into that.... frivolous stuff." Steven cleared his throat uneasily, seemingly taken aback by my swift learning.

"Hold on..." As my fingers brushed his waist, Steven halted me. His voice was hoarse from suppressing his desire. "In the left drawer... Condoms."

I narrowed my eyes, grasping his throat as I questioned him, "Why are there condoms here in your secret hideout?"

He'd better give me a good explanation.

Steven averted his gaze, answering honestly, "I... I wanted to hide you here."

I knew he had hidden intentions all along. He'd been plotting to confine me in this basement and fulfill his fantasies with me, hence the condoms!

"I-It's legally allowed..." Steven muttered softly.

"Without my consent, you have no right to imprison me, even if you are my legal husband..." I chuckled, deliberately pressing against him on his lap.

As Steven's breath grew heated, he argued while suppressing his desire, "You begged me to..."

He was referring to the time when I pleaded with him to hide me away from those people.

Perhaps that was the reason he insisted on marrying me, to legitimize his imprisonment of me and to indulge in our intimacy.

I lowered my head, pecking his lips as I said, "Steven Lincoln... help me to forget, even if only for a moment."

"Okay..."

I wasn't sure when he had freed his hands from my blouse. But before I knew it, he had pinned me beneath him and was kissing me with both intensity and tenderness.

"Steve..." I called his name, as if it could momentarily whisk away all my worries.

Indulging in desire was the only time I could escape from all my concerns. I didn't have to think or suspect

anyone.

When Steven finally released me, it was already two in the morning.

"Untie me..." My voice was hoarse as I pulled at my wrists, my eyes reddened from exhaustion.

Clearly, Steven had caught on to the trick I used on him earlier. He ended up tying my hands with rope.

"No." Steven grunted, pulling me into his arms. "You'll run away if I untie you..."

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"Steven Lincoln..." I called his name through gritted teeth.

He remained still, his hands exploring my body.

"Stephie... I want more..."

"Don't even think about it!" I declined immediately, completely drained after our earlier escapades. Steven let out a displeased grunt, holding me tightly in his arms.

"Steven Lincoln, I'm warning you... Hurry up and untie me now..."

Seeing that he was ignoring me completely and I was too tired to protest further, I decided to give in. I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep.

When I woke up in his arms after a sound and secure sleep, my hands had been untied.

I had to admit... Steven was like my antidote. Despite spending the night in his windowless basement with only a ventilation system, I found a sense of security I had never experienced before when I was with him.

"Sir, there's a woman at the door claiming to be Peter Jones' daughter." Ewan's voice echoed through the door as he knocked.

Narrowing my eyes, I shot a glance at Steven, who was still feigning sleep. I tugged on his ear. "Stop pretending,"

Steven reluctantly peeled open his eyes, his voice tinged with a pitiful tone, "Sorry, honey..."

"Peter's daughter?"

I recollected that Peter's eldest daughter, afflicted with congenital cerebral palsy, had passed away. Our guest had to be his younger daughter, born to his current wife. She was also the granddaughter of the director of the asylum.

"Michael is accompanying her," Ewan added.

Furrowing my brows, I pondered the unusual pairing.

"Oh, and Yasmin too," Ewan added swiftly.

Steven sat up begrudgingly. "Next time, summarize it in one breath. And tell Michael and Yasmin to scram as far away as they can."

Chapter 459

When I left the basement, my lower back felt stiff... Glancing back at Steven, he quickly averted his gaze with a tinge of guilt. He then explained softly, "Stephie, the mattress isn't good. I'll talk to Joel about getting it replaced."

"Why don't I just get you replaced?" I said through gritted teeth.

Steven grabbed my hand and rejected the idea. "No. We're married now. I can't be returned or replaced."

I lowered my head and observed Steven's hand, but I chose not to pull away. Instead, I allowed him to hold my hand as we walked out together.

Although it was raining outside, we were completely unaware of it in the basement. I found solace in the total seclusion, which provided a sense of security. It was unlike anything I had experienced before.

Being completely isolated from the outside world was strangely comforting. I had no way of knowing whether it was day or night, or even if it was raining or sunny.

Michael saw me coming out and anxiously ran over to me. "Stephie! Are you okay?"

"Are you expecting me to not be okay?" I stood in the rain while Steven shielded me with an umbrella. Michael was drenched in the rain, and a tinge of sadness flickered in his eyes. "I apologize to you on behalf of Yasmin..."

I sneered. "On behalf of Yasmin? What right do you have?"

"Stephie, why do you constantly misunderstand my intentions? I admit that I failed to watch over her properly, and as a result, she almost caused you harm. I'm sorry." Michael appeared distraught, his expression filled with remorse.

I remained silent, my gaze fixed on the umbrella above me. Whenever Steven held an umbrella for me, it was always tilted toward my direction.

However, when I thought of Michael, he never once offered to hold an umbrella for me. Not only did he fail to do so, but he went as far as tearing my umbrella into pieces.

He was aware of my fear of thunderstorms, yet he intentionally tried to punish me by exploiting this fear. It was his way of seeking revenge for something I had done as a child. Delayed affection was worth nothing. This was the undeniable truth.

In the car, Yasmin lowered the window, her face already wet from the rain. She looked at me with a vicious gaze, her pale face seemingly filled with hatred toward me.

I gazed back at her with deep pity. It dawned on me that she would have to depend on Michael's so-called "conscience" to live for the rest of her life.

"Mike, you might get sick if you stay out in the rain," Yasmin warned, her voice hoarse with concern as she urged Michael to get in the car. However, she refused to leave the car herself.

Yasmin's selfish nature extended even to her love. She feared that falling ill would worsen her HIV infection, so she refused to leave the car. Although she was concerned about Michael, her primary worry was for herself.

"Stephie, something has happened to Peter, and my clues were cut off." Michael glanced at his car where a young teenage girl was sitting in the passenger seat. Her face was pallid and devoid of color, and her hair was damp. She had to be Peter's daughter from his second marriage.

Michael's hands tightened into fists. "Every time I'm on the verge of a breakthrough, someone always

manages to sabotage it. Peter offered to share everything he knew, but it's unfortunate..."

It was unfortunate that he was killed.

Although Peter was not dead yet, the chances of him waking up were very slim, which was essentially the same as being killed.

"What does his daughter know?" I asked, looking at the teenage girl in the passenger seat.

Even if she was unaware, she would be in grave danger as long as she was involved. If those with wealth and power behind this plot intended to eliminate everyone involved, she would surely be a target.

"Linda." Michael opened the car door and held an umbrella for the teenager.

Linda was wearing a black dress, her skin unusually pale. As she stepped out of the car, her small leather shoes touched the water. She hastily withdrew them as if she were afraid. When she noticed Michael by her side, she carefully placed her feet on the ground once more.

Michael explained softly, "She's in 12th grade this year, the same age as Joel. She's about to take the college entrance exam. She has autism..."

I probably guessed correctly. The way she exited the car revealed her strong resistance to the outside

world.

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This condition typically occurred in infancy and early childhood.

In a solemn tone, I asked, "Peter's first daughter was born with congenital cerebral palsy, and she passed away soon after. The second daughter has autism... Does he have a genetic defect?"

Michael nodded. "That's why he works for Genome Society. He's a victim of a genetic disease, and it's difficult for his children to be born healthy, so he..."

I understood that Peter's motivation for all his actions was driven by his desire to possess perfect genes to prevent any genetic defects.

After a long moment of silence, Linda finally said in a hushed voice and timidly looked up at me, "Dad is a good man. He's helping you..."

I shifted my gaze at her with a frown.

She took out a photo album from the small schoolbag she was holding tightly. Inside the album, there was a photo of Peter and my parents when he was young.

"His classmates." Linda pointed at the people in the photo.

Stephanie's parents were classmates of Peter. They were talented individuals in the medical field and held important positions within Genome Society.

"They shared the same ambitions," Linda struggled to speak.

She pointed to "Stephanie" in the photo. "Eventually, they developed an emotional connection with the experimental subject and yearned to help her escape..."

I knew that my parents were members of Genome Society and that I was merely an experimental subject. I realized that they did not love me from the beginning and were only using me for research purposes.

However, I didn't hate them. Later on, it seemed like they cared about me too. They wanted to take me with them, but they died in a car accident.

The members of Genome Society would not tolerate any escape attempts of their experimental subjects. Any employees who refused to obey should be promptly removed too.

As Jimmy pointed out, I was an extremely valuable experimental subject. The wealthy behind Genome Society had invested hundreds of millions, if not tens of billions, in cultivating these experimental subjects. This had greatly advanced the fields of science and medicine.

Furthermore, as the subject of the experiment, my personal value far surpassed their initial investment. The wealthy were primarily interested in the rate of return. Once they witnessed my success, I had the potential to generate immeasurable wealth for them.

"They begged my dad to protect you and allow you to live a normal life," Linda continued, her eyes red as she pointed at Stephanie. But she was looking at me.

Hence, Stephanie's amnesia was not a mere coincidence or an unfortunate accident. Rather, it was a deliberate act planned by Peter.

"My dad entrusted you with the Ford family because he trusted them." Linda sobbed, struggling to articulate her words.

I knew she was making a great effort to convey that Peter was a good man, and he believed in the Ford family.

Michael also gazed at me intensely. "Stephie... My mom was your mom's best friend, someone Peter could trust. You can also trust me and believe me..."

Michael wanted me to trust him and Lois, but Jimmy claimed that the Ford family was completely untrustworthy. Hmm...

Linda suddenly lifted her head and gazed at Steven behind me. Then, she recoiled in fear and sought refuge behind Michael. "Stephany, don't believe him. Never... trust him."

She clutched Michael's clothes tightly, her voice trembling. "Don't trust him."

Her emotions appeared to be uncontrollable, and she continued to retreat in fear. "Stephany..."

Suddenly, Linda rushed up and firmly grabbed me. She was strong and pulled me aside. Then, she cast a wary glance at Steven before whispering in my ear.

"I've seen him with the bad guys... I've seen him... with the researchers. They were studying... immortality and the connection between souls and genes. I really saw him..."

Linda didn't appear to be lying. The fearful look in her eyes as she glanced at Steven was unmistakable.

I glanced back at Steven. He stood there with a solemn expression on his face. He was staring at the teenage girl named Linda, deep in contemplation.

"Stephie, don't believe him. If he has no problem, why is he so certain you're Stephanie? The correlation experiment between the soul and genes, also known as reincarnation, is an experiment he began researching when he was in the advanced class."

Michael also grabbed my wrist and begged me to believe him.

