

Chapter 2

Right in front of ~~them~~, I declined the call and blocked Cedric's number.

The officer looked at me in surprise. "Are you sure you don't want the child's father to see her one last time?"

My voice came out raspy and broken. "Officer, would you let a murderer see your child?"

As I stumbled into the ambulance with Stella in my arms, the doctor told me that Stella had not instantly died from the fall. She had died slowly from internal bleeding. Her pain must have been unbearable.

Before her death, Stella had dug into the earth with her hands, breaking her nails in the process. All ten of ~~her~~ fingers were bloodied. But no one came to save her. She died in despair, alone.

I sat in the hospital's morgue the entire night until the sun began to rise. The medical staff gently urged me to lay Stella to rest soon. Not wanting my Stella to stay in that cold, lifeless place, I contacted a funeral home and arranged for her body to be taken away. I then returned home to prepare for her burial, clutching the family portrait she had drawn.

The moment I stepped inside the house, I froze. Toys were scattered across the left behind in the rush. Stella's drawings were still up on the walls and her schoolbooks lay on the table.

For a moment I thought I saw Stella running toward me, smiling and signing, "Mommy, I love you."

Oh, my sweet Stella. You promised to stay with me forever. Why did you leave this Earth before me?

As I sat on the sofa, clutching Stella's toys and crying, Laura sent me a message. It was followed by a picture.

[I'm so happy! He's really good with kids. I always knew he'd make a great dad.]

Seeing a portrait of Laura in the background, I surmised the picture had been taken at her house. In it, Cedric was sitting at the dining table and holding Laura's daughter, Tina. He was spoon-feeding her some food.

The scene was so warm and tender, and it made my chest ache deeply. In the years of Stella's life, Cedric had never fed her like that. He had never even changed her diaper or comforted her to sleep.

There was a time when Cedric and I were in love. Before Stella was born, he would kiss my stomach and talk about our future, saying our child would be his little star. That was why we named her Stella.

But on the day I gave birth, Laura returned to the country with her child. She called Cedric crying, and he left to see her. He was gone for days, and when he came back and learned that Stella's vocal cords were abnormal, that she was mute, he looked at me with disgust.

"There were no problems during the prenatal checkups. If something's wrong now, it must be because you ate something you shouldn't have while pregnant. This is all your fault," he said. "I don't want a broken child. Send her to the countryside to live with your parents. We'll have another one."

But Stella was my baby whom I carried for months. I could not possibly send her away.

I got on my knees before Cedric and begged him to let me keep Stella. My C-section wound started bleeding, staining the tips of his shoes red. Only then did he reluctantly agree to let me keep Stella.

[I'm so sorry, Rachel. I meant to send that to a friend. Sent it to you by mistake.]

Laura's message pulled me back to reality, and I saw that she had deleted the photo. In the past, I would have immediately called Cedric and meekly asked why he was with Laura again. But my precious daughter was now gone, and my heart was cold.

I did not reply to Laura and simply blocked her.

Not long after, Cedric came rushing back home. As soon as he stepped inside, he slapped me across the face.

"You declined my call and blocked me? Who gave you the courage?!" he shouted. "Laura sent you that picture by mistake, and you cursed Tina saying she should die? You have a daughter yourself, Rach. How could you be so heartless?"