

Wrath 791

Chapter 791:

Soon after, Prescott and Costello arrived one after another.

“Prescott, what’s going on with you? You look like you haven’t slept in days!” Janice exclaimed, her surprise evident at the sight of his disheveled hair, dark circles, and unshaven face.

Prescott managed a wry smile. “Janice, isn’t it all because I’ve been cleaning up the chaos you left behind?”

Janice blinked, her mind racing back through the flurry of recent events that had stirred up buzz online. She could see why he was so exhausted.

Essentially, while she had been causing chaos, Prescott had been relentlessly managing the fallout.

“Here, have some soup. It’ll help,” Glenn offered, serving a bowl of soup and passing it to Prescott.

“Glenn, you don’t have to go to the trouble. I can get it,” Prescott said quickly, standing to take the bowl. The warmth from the soup radiated into his hands and heart—it had been a long time since he’d savored something so homely, reminiscent of a family-cooked meal.

“C’mon, don’t be so formal with me.” Glenn chuckled, already ladling another bowl for someone else.

“Let me do it,” Janice said, rising to take the ladle from Glenn. “Glenn, you’ve worked hard preparing this entire feast without much rest. Let me handle the soup.”

“Alright.” Glenn agreed, settling back into his chair. He looked around at the four young people he had helped raise, his eyes filled with pride and contentment. His heart swelled with a sense of fulfillment. Today’s soup was a rich and flavorful fish soup, perfect for warming up and winding down.

Janice carefully served each person a bowl of soup, taking special care to remove the fish bones from Glenn's portion. She knew that older people often had difficulty with such things and wanted to ensure he enjoyed his meal without any risk.

"Janice, there's something I need to tell you," Glenn said as Janice took her seat.

Curious, Janice looked at him. "What's up?"

"It's nothing urgent," Glenn reassured, savoring a spoonful of soup. The fresh, sweet flavor seemed to lift his spirits. "A few days ago, a woman named Liliana Harvey came by asking about you."

"Liliana?" Janice paused, her mind flashing back to the woman who had once helped her save Stephen. "What did she want?"

"She spent a long time looking at the graffiti on the courtyard wall," Leah, overhearing the conversation, chimed in with a frown. "That woman was always challenging Janice on the show. Now she's poking around here? Sounds like she's up to no good."

Glenn shook his head slightly. "She didn't seem malicious. However, she appears very interested in you, Janice, almost to an obsessive extent. She wanted to know everything about you."

He looked at Janice and smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry, though. I only shared superficial details. With all the identities you've crafted over the years, each carrying significant influence, revealing too much could stir up trouble."

"Thank you, Glenn," Janice responded with genuine appreciation.

Glenn sighed. "I only spoke to her because she seemed stubborn, almost extreme. People like her, if misled, can become really troublesome."

"I understand, Glenn. I'll look into it," Janice replied.

Chapter 792:

Leah's lips curled into a dismissive smirk. "Janice, why waste your time with Liliana? I'll admit she has some talent, but she's leagues behind you."

"She's alright. If there's a chance, being friends with her wouldn't hurt," Janice responded, her lips lifting into an easy smile.

Despite Liliana's obvious hostility during the show, Janice understood the root of it. It sprang from a burning desire for excellence.

Liliana was desperate to stand at the summit of success. Anyone who threatened that position became her rival.

This consuming ambition, Janice mused, must have been what Glenn had warned her about.

Just as Janice was about to take a sip of soup, her phone chimed with a message notification.

Her eyes darted to the screen—Aiden's name flashed across it. Wasn't he busy right now? How did he have time to send her a message?

Intrigued, Janice opened the message to find what looked like an official proposal document.

"What's this about?" Janice replied. Why was Aiden sending her something like that?

Another message bubbled up on her screen. "Look closely."

Janice's eyes narrowed as she studied the image again, zeroing in on the title: "Approval for the new location of Generous Lives Orphanage." Surprise flickered across her features as she fired off a series of question marks to Aiden.

"I missed you and thought I'd surprise you," came his reply.

Janice's heart skipped a beat. He really knew how to please her these days. Was this his way of showing how much he missed her?

Janice typed back, "Aiden, the orphanage is perfectly fine where it is. There's no need for relocation."

"The current location is too isolated. It lacks visibility. Moving to the west suburban development zone would increase its profile and give these children better chances at finding families."

Aiden's simple words struck a deep chord in Janice's heart.

Her thoughts drifted to Freddy, and suddenly the idea of finding a better location for the orphanage didn't seem so far-fetched.

"Janice, does this make you happy?" Aiden's message appeared on her screen.

She responded with a smiling emoji, a perfect reflection of the warmth spreading through her chest.

Looking up from her phone, she took a breath and announced, "I've been considering moving the orphanage to a new location."

Her words fell like stones into still water, sending ripples of surprise around the table.

"Janice, why are you suddenly bringing this up?" Leah's brows knitted together in confusion. "Didn't Glenn always say this place is our home and shouldn't be moved?"

Janice nodded, acknowledging the weight of those words. True, with their current resources, relocating wasn't a logistical challenge. The real hurdle lay in Glenn's deep emotional connection to this place—these walls held years of memories he'd crafted into a home.

“Glenn, I understand what this place means to you. Your dedication has made every child here feel cherished and loved. But I’m not suggesting we abandon our roots. Instead, we could preserve this place as our true home while opening a new chapter. The new location would be a bridge, connecting these children to families waiting to welcome them with open arms.”

Chapter 793:

Glenn sat in thoughtful silence before releasing a heavy sigh. “I understand. I’ve been set in my ways, too stubborn to change. It breaks my heart watching these children grow up without families to call their own. Truth be told, even if you hadn’t mentioned it today, I’ve been mulling over similar thoughts.”

The table fell silent, everyone staring at Glenn in disbelief. Had he really changed his mind?

“That generous donation we received recently? I was already planning to renovate this place and expand to a new location to help more children,” Glenn revealed, his face radiating the kindness that defined his character. His entire life had been devoted to these children, his heart pure in its dedication.

“Glenn, you’re going to make me cry,” Leah declared with theatrical sniffles, dabbing at imaginary tears. “Now I can offer that piece of land I’ve been eyeing for the new orphanage without feeling guilty.”

“That won’t be necessary, Leah,” Janice interjected with a gentle shake of her head. “I already have something better in mind.”

“Huh? Janice, you’ve found a better location?” Leah blinked in surprise, looking at Janice.

“Yes, the west suburban development zone. The orphanage will have its place there.”

Understanding dawned on Leah’s face. This had Aiden’s fingerprints all over it. “Well, well! Who knew the mighty head of the Green family could be such a romantic? Setting aside prime real estate in such a prestigious project, all for you, Janice.”

The implications weren’t lost on anyone. The orphanage was a nonprofit venture, while land in the west suburban development zone was premium property meant for profitable enterprises. Aiden’s decision would surely ruffle some feathers.

“Ah, I’m not as young as I used to be,” Glenn said with a tender smile.

“I’ll leave this in your capable hands.”

“Rest assured, Glenn.” Janice’s voice rang with conviction. “I’ll help make these children’s dreams a reality. Even as they grow, this place will remain their sanctuary, a true home for all of us.”

Glenn’s heart swelled with profound relief. These children had always been his greatest concern, but now, with Janice and the others at the helm, he could finally find peace. Even when his time came, he knew they would be in good hands.

Janice paused as she looked at her phone’s chat box, hesitated briefly, then sent a message to Aiden.

“Thank you very much. Glenn was truly delighted.”

Aiden quickly texted back, “My main concern is your happiness.”

Janice responded sharply, “Enough with the flattery, and get back to work.”

Aiden replied playfully, “As you wish, madam.” A soft, warm smile spread across Janice’s lips.

Leah noticed her expression and playfully elbowed Prescott. “Look at that! Such a tender, glowing smile!”

Prescott looked over and noticed the smile too, his expression turning into a pout. “See! Janice has never given me a smile like that. Aiden is really fortunate.”

“Hey, Costello, check this out! Janice’s smile is absolutely glowing,” Leah continued, directing her tease at Costello, who was quietly focusing on his meal.

Costello gave a brief glance, then continued eating, his expression becoming more intense.

Chapter 794:

If Aiden managed to keep Janice happy, that was fine. However, should he ever harm her, Costello was ready to step in and set things right. Just as Janice was about to put away her phone, a new message arrived — this time from Kenneth.

“Janice, are you back in town? Can we meet for a meal tomorrow? I have something important to discuss with you in person.”

Janice frowned, puzzled by what Kenneth could possibly need to discuss. Nonetheless, she politely declined. “I’m sorry! My schedule is full for tomorrow.”

Kenneth asked, “How about the day after?”

Janice paused for a moment, letting out a sigh. Sensing his persistent need, she finally agreed to meet, uncertain but careful that it might be something important.

“Okay. Once you’ve confirmed the time, just let me know.”

After finishing her chat with Kenneth, Janice took a moment before sending a message to Stephen.

Meanwhile, in the luxurious setting of a VIP suite at an exclusive club, Stephen, dressed in a flawless white suit, radiated a mix of elegance and vulnerability that instinctively made others feel protective of him. Leonie, dressed in an elegant gown, lounged on a sofa, a glass of wine in hand. Her eyes, filled with longing and intensity, were fixed on Stephen as if he were a stunning work of art.

“Stephen, how do you manage to be so utterly enchanting?” she murmured softly, her voice heavy with longing as if she were on the verge of pouncing onto him.

Still, Stephen’s expression remained unreadable. His detached attitude seemed to only spark Leonie’s curiosity even further.

"Mrs. Ramirez, I think you've had enough wine," Stephen said, pouring a glass of water and extending it towards her. "Please, have some water instead."

Leonie looked at the water and smirked mischievously. She leaned forward slightly, whispering, "I'd rather you feed it to me."

Stephen paused, a slight smile showing his discomfort. "Alright, Mrs. Ramirez. If that's what you prefer, I'll indulge you. But regarding Mrs. Chadwick's request..."

"Don't worry. As long as you keep me happy, I'll ensure she's content too."

Stephen gave a nod and moved closer, reducing the distance between them. Their breaths mixed, filling the air with a charged, unmistakable tension.

Perhaps it was the wine, but Leonie's cheeks turned a deep shade of red. Despite her age, she couldn't help but feel as shy as a teenager in love.

"Stephen, I want you," Leonie whispered, her eyes clouded with emotion as she pulled Stephen closer.

Just as their lips were inches apart, her eyelids fluttered shut, and she fell limp in Stephen's arms, unconscious.

The slight smile on Stephen's face disappeared instantly. With a sigh of irritation, he carefully positioned her on the sofa. His expression showed only contempt and annoyance with the situation.

Knock, knock.

The sound echoed, breaking the silence.

Stephen glanced at the door but didn't approach it.

He briefly thought about ignoring the knock.

But he understood the serious consequences that would follow.

“Stephen, what took you so long to answer the door?” Wendy stood at the doorway, her face cold and her gaze sharp, as if it could slice through the air.

“Mrs. Ramirez had a little too much to drink. It took some effort to get her to calm down,” Stephen explained, his gaze dropping to avoid the intensity of Wendy’s sharp stare.

Chapter 795:

Wendy moved closer, quickly reaching out to tilt Stephen’s chin upward, forcing him to look at her. “Stephen, it seems like you are getting more and more afraid of me. In fact, it feels like you’re avoiding me more than ever.”

She stepped in closer to Stephen, her presence overwhelming as she closed the door behind her.

Outside, her bodyguards positioned themselves strategically, ensuring no interruptions.

“Don’t think that just because you have Janice on your side now, you dare challenge me,” Wendy said, her face twisted in anger, her eyes blazing with a fierce intensity that could intimidate anyone.

“How could I?” Stephen replied with a forced smile, his voice steady yet hollow. “I’m your slave. No one can change that. I’ve just been a bit exhausted recently. I didn’t want to cause you concern, so I’ve kept to myself a bit. That’s all.”

“Really?” Wendy’s eyes narrowed, her suspicion clear for anyone to see.

Stephen raised his hand and grasped Wendy’s wrist, pulling her close before leaning in for a kiss.

Wendy's pupils dilated in shock. Stephen's sudden move caught her completely off guard.

He had always been reserved, rarely initiating such bold actions. This kiss left her spellbound.

"Now, do you believe me?" As their lips parted, Stephen looked at her with hazy eyes full of deep affection.

Wendy's cheeks turned a deep crimson, her heart fluttering under his intense, tender gaze.

Just as Wendy was about to respond, a troubling thought flashed through her mind, prompting her to push Stephen away abruptly.

Stephen stood frozen, confusion painting his face.

"Stephen, you've truly disappointed me," Wendy said, her voice tense, her expression darkening. "You would go this far all for Janice?" A subtle change in Stephen's expression didn't escape Wendy's notice, confirming her suspicions.

"You've misunderstood," Stephen insisted, his brows knitted together, his voice firm.

Wendy scoffed coldly, pushing Stephen back onto the sofa. "Stephen, let me tell you something."

"What?"

"This time, when Janice went to Cloverhill, I took advantage of her unfamiliarity with the place and sent someone to kill her." Wendy pulled out her phone and showed Stephen a photo.

The moment Stephen saw the image, his face drained of color. A torrent of rage engulfed him.

In the photo, Janice lay in a pool of blood, her clothes in disarray, her eyes wide with a haunting expression of fear, capturing the agony she suffered.

The image tore at Stephen's heart, each detail a brutal strike to his emotions.

"Wendy Chadwick!" Stephen bellowed, overcome with fury, as he lunged forward, pinning Wendy down on the sofa.

If Leonie hadn't been drugged into unconsciousness, the tumult between the two would have undoubtedly woken her by now.

Wendy's lips twisted into a sinister smile. "What's wrong? Does seeing Janice's tragic end leave you heartbroken? Do you want to kill me to avenge her?"

Chapter 796:

Stephen's eyes blazed with fiery rage as his hands clenched tightly around Wendy's neck, squeezing gradually tighter.

Wendy gasped for air desperately, her face contorted, yet she continued to laugh. Even as veins bulged across her forehead, her eyes remained wild and mocking.

"Yes, kill me! That way, you can avenge Janice. Plus, you'll free yourself from me and gain your freedom. Come on, do it! Kill me!!" Her taunts shattered Stephen's last restraints.

"Ah!" With a primal yell, Stephen pushed Wendy forcefully away. Wendy gasped, her breaths ragged as she glared at Stephen, her expression a blend of ridicule and contempt.

"I thought you'd finally stand up for yourself, but you're still just as pathetic!" She rose, her eyes icing over. "Stephen, don't delude yourself into thinking Janice will save you. You are my slave. You'll never escape me."

With a heavy thud, Stephen collapsed to his knees. His complexion was ghostly, his gaze empty, as though life had been sucked out of him.

Perhaps death was his only escape from this torment.

Only death seemed a final respite.

A flicker of determination ignited in Stephen's eyes, a glint that sent a shiver down Wendy's spine.

"Wendy, you're right. As long as I live, I'll never be free of you."

"Stephen, what are you thinking?" Wendy's pupils dilated with fear. The man before her now seemed deranged, a stranger.

Ding!

A notification sound cut through the tension.

The crisp chime acted like a splash of cold water, briefly dispelling the turmoil in Stephen's mind.

Almost by reflex, he pulled out his phone. His eyes widened as he saw the sender's name, a name that always stirred deep emotions within him. Janice?

It was a message from Janice.

The message read, "Stephen, how have you been lately? How's the progress on your new movie?"

Such a simple, everyday greeting, yet in that dark moment, it felt like a beam of light piercing the shadows surrounding Stephen's heart. Without realizing, a slight smile crept across his lips.

Wendy saw the change in his expression, and her face instantly hardened. "Stephen!"

Her voice was sharp and biting, her eyes shooting daggers. "Whose message are you reading?"

Hearing her tone, Stephen snapped back to reality and, as though shielding a precious secret, quickly pocketed his phone. "You lied to me."

"I lied to you?" Wendy frowned in confusion before she grasped the situation. Her eyes narrowed menacingly. "It was Janice who messaged you, wasn't it?"

"Wendy, you're despicable. To test my loyalty, you stooped to faking a photo? Have you really become this desperate?" Stephen's accusation ignited a fire in Wendy.

In a swift motion, she unbuckled her leather belt and whipped it through the air with a sharp snap.

Stephen's pupils contracted as painful memories of past wounds inflicted by that belt surfaced. Yet, this time, his gaze held steady, free from the grip of fear.

Chapter 797:

"Stephen, you've pushed me too far. Today, I'll ensure you learn the price of your defiance."

Driven by jealousy, Wendy's face twisted malevolently, the belt in her hand now a weapon fueled by her rage.

A sharp crack reverberated through the room.

Wendy's leather belt viciously lashed across Stephen's body.

In the past, Stephen would have silently endured the pain, his head bowed in submission, quickly admitting fault.

But now, he stood firm, his gaze locked on hers, the intensity in his eyes sending a chill down Wendy's spine.

“Do you understand what you’ve done wrong?” Wendy demanded through clenched teeth, striking him again with even more force. The blow was so severe that blood began to seep through Stephen’s white suit, staining it with a vivid crimson streak.

Yet Stephen remained silent, his eyes steady, his stance resolute. Wendy tightened her grip on the belt, her fear evident in the growing ferocity of her expression.

“Stephen, are you really going to defy me? Don’t forget our agreement. I am your queen, and you are my slave.”

The belt whistled through the air once more.

This time, however, as Wendy swung at Stephen, he raised his hand and caught the belt mid-swing.

Wendy’s pupils dilated in disbelief, her glare intensifying. This was the first time he had ever resisted her.

“Wendy, I’ve had enough.” Stephen’s voice was deep and resolute. “I thought that by yielding to you, I could protect Janice. But I was wrong!” Stephen’s gaze dropped, his hand trembling as he held onto the belt. “You’re nothing but a selfish tyrant. No matter how much I compromise, no matter how much I give in, it only serves to fuel your insatiable greed. You push me, step by step, into utter despair.”

“Stephen, what are you saying?” Wendy’s voice broke, her eyes wide with panic. She tried to conceal her turmoil, but the storm of emotions was too intense to hide.

“Wendy, thank you for the protection you’ve given me over the years. But I’ve been your slave for long enough, sacrificing everything for your ambitions.” At this, Stephen glanced at Leonie, who lay unconscious on the sofa. “What I owed you, I’ve repaid today. From now on, we go our separate ways. Our paths will never cross again.”

A deafening silence enveloped the room.

Wendy stood frozen, as if a bomb had exploded within her mind. Shock etched across her face.

The man before her, once meek and subservient, now stood with unwavering determination to leave her.

She had dismissed his earlier words as a mere scare tactic, but the resolve in his voice shattered any illusion of bluff.

Looking at him, Wendy was abruptly transported back to when he was just a six-year-old boy, consumed by hatred and profoundly broken. Back then, he was fragile and pitiable.

Over the years, he had grown into her obedient slave, enduring her cruelty without a word of protest. No matter the pain she inflicted, he bore it silently, like a lifeless shell.

But now, the man before her had awakened. The shell had been shattered. He was no longer numb to the world.

Chapter 798:

He appeared as someone who, after being lost in utter darkness, had finally glimpsed a guiding light.

With a decisive whoosh, Stephen flung the belt to the floor and turned to leave.

“Stephen!” Wendy snapped out of her daze and reached out to him. She yearned to pull him back, to see him retract his declarations and prove they were just a ruse.

But Stephen did not look back. He did not hesitate. He simply continued walking, leaving the room without a backward glance.

“Ah!” Wendy collapsed to the floor, curling into a ball as a guttural scream tore from her throat.

“Stephen, how could you leave me? You and I are one. Our lives have been intertwined for twenty years. You can’t just leave me. You absolutely can’t!”

Madness flickered in Wendy's eyes, her jaw clenched so tightly that her gums bled slightly, though she seemed oblivious to the pain. "Janice! It's all because of you! You made Stephen betray me. If you're gone, everything will go back to normal," she murmured.

Janice couldn't help but worry about Stephen.

She had sent him a message earlier, but after a long wait, there was still no reply.

Considering Stephen had been under constant surveillance lately, even surviving several assassination attempts, her anxiety deepened.

"Glenn, I have something urgent to take care of. I'll head out first," Janice announced after dinner, as the group enjoyed coffee and relaxed conversation.

Glenn looked at Janice, his expression understanding as he noticed the worry creasing her brow. "Go ahead. We can catch up another time."

"Thank you!" Janice responded, giving him a quick, respectful nod before quickly exiting.

"Janice, where are you off to in such a hurry? Need a ride?" Leah called out, but before she could get a response, Costello had already sprinted after Janice, acting on his usual impulsiveness.

"With Costello on her tail, Janice should be fine," Prescott intervened, halting Leah's pursuit. "Let's stay here and keep Glenn company. Plus, we still need to discuss the plans for the new orphanage location."

Leah exhaled softly. With Janice's abilities, there was hardly anything she couldn't handle.

The situation would only grow more chaotic if they intervened. Besides, with Costello already accompanying Janice, there wasn't a single issue in Efrery that would prove too challenging.

"Janice, let me drive you," Costello offered, smoothly pulling the car to a stop before her.

Momentarily taken aback, Janice quickly composed herself and nodded, sliding into the passenger seat. "To White Whale Entertainment."

Recognition flickered across Costello's face at the mention of the newly established entertainment company.

The venture had been created with a singular purpose: to serve as Stephen's launching pad into stardom.

Something must have gone awry with Stephen—Janice's unusual anxiety spoke volumes.

Just then, her phone vibrated with an incoming message.

Her heart skipped a beat when she saw Stephen's name on the screen. Her eyes brightened as she hastily opened it, relief washing over her features before her brows knitted together in concern.

Chapter 799:

The message was brief but loaded with meaning. "I'm okay. Are you free now? I really need to see you."

Something in those simple words set off alarm bells in Janice's mind. She could sense the weight behind Stephen's request, as if he stood on the precipice of a momentous decision.

After careful consideration, she sent him an address in response.

Minutes later, they pulled up to White Whale Entertainment.

Janice found herself mesmerized by the imposing structure before her, recalling Aiden's casual mention of establishing an entertainment company as a mere "passion project."

She'd expected something modest—who could have anticipated he'd acquire an entire skyscraper?

“Passion project” seemed like quite the understatement.

While most entertainment companies leased office space, owning an entire building was practically unheard of in the industry.

“Aiden provided the funding, while Leah oversees operations. Being newly established with limited resources, Stephen is currently our sole artist,” Costello explained, noticing the astonishment on Janice’s face.

“I see.” Janice shook off her initial shock, a knowing smile playing at her lips. “Leah’s a prodigy in this field. Once she sets her mind to something, success is inevitable. White Whale Entertainment is destined to become an industry leader.”

Her thoughts drifted to Freak Design, which had become a powerhouse second only to JE Consortium under Leah’s operation.

“Janice, is that you?”

A trembling voice pierced the silence as Janice crossed the company’s threshold.

From the shadows of the dimly lit lobby emerged Stephen, his eyes gleaming with newfound purpose that cut through the dim light.

Something stirred deep within Janice’s heart at the sight of him. Those eyes that had once been vacant pools of despair now blazed with unwavering determination.

“Stephen...”

Before she could finish her greeting, Stephen closed the distance between them in swift strides and enveloped her in a fierce embrace.

Janice's eyes widened, pupils contracting with shock and bewilderment. She stood frozen, her mind struggling to process this sudden turn of events.

"I'm sorry. As your brother, I should've protected you."

Those words melted away all of Janice's uncertainty like morning frost in sunlight. Her rigid posture softened as understanding washed over her.

Nearby, Costello observed the intimate moment with quiet discretion before silently retreating to stand sentinel at the entrance.

"You've regained your memory?" Janice asked.

Stephen drew back, meeting her gaze with affection. "I never lost my memory. I just didn't want to drag you into my mess."

A flicker of surprise crossed Janice's features before dissolving into a bitter laugh. "Stephen, you underestimate me. In all of Efrery, only a handful of people could pose any real threat to me."

Shadows of bitterness darkened Stephen's face as he shook his head. "Wendy is dangerously unhinged. No one caught in her crosshairs emerges whole. Even Leonidas, who orchestrated my kidnapping, fell prey to her clutches."

Chapter 800:

Janice's eyebrow arched as pieces clicked into place—Leonidas' mysterious disappearance suddenly made sense.

She recalled his last phone call, his voice a symphony of barely contained rage and hatred.

Whatever horrors Wendy had inflicted during his captivity had clearly left wounds deeper than flesh.

For someone of Leonidas' fortitude to be marked so profoundly, the torment must have bordered on the unspeakable.

"Stephen, what changed? What made you decide to reach out to me?"

The words had barely left her lips when her eyes caught two crimson trails staining Stephen's pristine white suit. Her expression hardened like frost.

"Is this Wendy's doing?"

Stephen glanced down at the bloodstains, embarrassment coloring his features. In his rush to see Janice, he'd forgotten to change.

Now that she had seen it, he knew she would worry.

"I'm fine," Stephen said with a lighthearted smile, as if the bloodstains were nothing more than casual blemishes. "If a few wounds can buy my freedom, then they're a small price to pay."

Despite his casual tone, his words pierced Janice's heart like shards of ice, fueling her already burning hatred for Wendy.

"I couldn't risk reaching out to you before—I didn't want to drag you into this nightmare. Wendy's a madwoman, consumed by jealousy.

With the White family's destruction, I was meant to be the sole survivor. Your appearance as another survivor might have sparked even greater dangers."

The shadowy figures who had orchestrated the White family's downfall still lurked in the darkness. If not for Wendy's twisted form of protection, Stephen would have likely met his end long ago.

"But then I realized I was terribly wrong!" Stephen drew in a deep breath, his eyes burning with newfound resolve. "Even if I pretended not to know you, Wendy—that lunatic—would still come after

you. So why should I keep up the act? Why should I endure the agony of ignoring my own sister when I could fight instead?"

His voice carried a quiet ferocity, a determination that sent a shiver through her.

Before coming to this decision, Stephen must have battled despair so profound that it nearly crushed him. Perhaps it was that very darkness that forced him into clarity, pushing him to this moment of resolve.

"I've had enough of being powerless. And I don't want you to look at your brother and see a failure. Janice, I swear no matter what happens, no matter the cost, I will protect you, even if it means laying down my life."

There was no doubt in Janice's mind. He meant every word.

For so long, Stephen had believed himself to be the last of the White family, a man stripped of purpose, trapped in a world drained of light. But now, he had found her. A sister. A piece of his past that still remained, a truth that ignited something deep within him—something he thought was lost forever. Hope.

That single ember in the darkness was enough to pull him from the abyss. He was no longer lost; he had a reason to fight, to step out of the shadows and reclaim his place in the world.

Janice didn't speak. Instead, she threw her arms around him, holding on as if she could fuse the broken pieces of their past back together.

An overwhelming warmth flooded her chest, wrapping around her like a cocoon. Was this what it felt like to be protected? To have family who truly, unconditionally cared?