

## Love Spell 271

### Chapter 271

Francis thought he had misheard Daniel and glanced at the two young men in the backseat.

Carlisle nodded in confirmation and repeated Daniel's words, "Gale's Hair Salon on Whitebox Avenue.

Without asking any more questions, Francis backed his car up before shifting his gear back into drive and speeding off.

At that moment, Daniel's phone rang with a call from the number earlier.

"Give me the phone," Carlisle said as he reached for the phone and put the call through.

"Hey there, handsome. I spoke to the first client who booked the young lady and he refuses to let her go. Sorry," the madam said on the other line.

"What was his price?" Carlisle demanded.

"I told you, this isn't just about money. The client runs in underworld circles and we can't afford to cross him," the madam explained, sounding frustrated.

"Do you know which underworld organization he belongs to?" Carlisle pressed.

"The man's name is Luke Carlson. Whitebox Avenue is his territory."

Hearing this, Carlisle probed further, "Carlson. Is he related to Ian Carlson?"

The madam replied, "Yes. Ian is his older brother."

"Got it," Carlisle said, ending the call. He was in deep thought for a moment before he dialed Heath's number.

“Hey, Mr. Zahn,” Heath greeted.

“Rally up the gang and meet us at Gale’s Hair Salon on Whitebox Avenue, Carlisle instructed.

There was a long silence on Heath’s end.

Whitebox Avenue was Luke’s territory, and until Heath had fully established his forces, he didn’t have the numbers to face the former in conflict.

However, he couldn’t ignore Carlisle’s orders, either. Without Carlisle, Heath and his subordinates would likely starve on the streets.

Having considered his options, Heath said, “We’ll be right over.”

When the call ended, Heath walked up to Wade’s poker table and kicked it over. “Rally up the gang!”

In the car, Francis couldn’t keep his curiosity at bay anymore as he asked, “What are you both up to anyway?”

At first, he thought Carlisle and Daniel were heading to the hair salon to indulge in whatever vice it had to

offer, but it didn’t seem likely.

Carlisle filled him in on the situation, after which Francis felt a newfound sense of admiration for the

former.

The fact that Carlisle was willing to risk his neck and go into a viper’s den just to save his roommate’s girlfriend spoke volumes of his character.

“Carlisle, who did you call earlier?” Daniel asked.

“Heath.”

“Damn, you know Heath, too?” Daniel felt a chill run down his spine. The infamous Prince Heath had been active recently, and anyone who knew anything about the underworld knew of him.

“Yeah, we’re pretty close,” Carlisle said with a nod.

“But Prince Heath’s forces aren’t strong

ugh to take

on Luke and his men!” Daniel countered in

despair. “Also, I don’t think this is worth our effort...”

“What do you mean?” Carlisle rolled his eyes, clearly disagreeing with Daniel.

Daniel explained gravely, “We’re not that close to Shane, and it’s not like we stand to gain anything by being friends with him. I don’t see why we should get into trouble with Luke because of Shane’s girlfriend.”

Carlisle asked, “If you were in Shane’s shoes, do you think I should help you?”

“...” Daniel faltered.

“Do you think you’re worth more than Shane?” Carlisle cut him off brusquely.

“No...” Daniel lowered his head in shame.

His family business had been sold to Carlisle. In addition, his father was Carlisle's employee now, no longer the chairman who enjoyed the glory of running Xenos Factory.

As things were, Daniel was just the son of a man who reported to Carlisle.

Daniel could very well be of lesser standing than Shane in terms of how close they were to Carlisle.

Carlisle clapped Daniel's shoulder. "With friends, it's always quality over quantity. I think of you and Shane as my buddies, and I would help if either of you ever run into problems like this."

Daniel quietly said, "We should've brought Shane alone. He should know how much you're sacrificing to save his girlfriend's virtue."

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Carlisle smiled, but before he could say anything else, his phone rang.

This time, it was a call from Leon. "Mr. Zahn, I'll be going abroad tomorrow. I could deliver the photos to you if you're too busy to pick them up."

Only then did Carlisle remember it had been four days since he came back from Yearning Island. He said apologetically, "I'm sorry, I was so caught up with work that I completely forgot about the photos. I'll have someone pick them up for me right now."

After that, Carlisle sent Cameron a message through MSN messenger.

Whitebox Avenue was about a 30-minute drive away from Riverland University. It was home to an

obscene number of arcades and disco bars.

Within the more remote parts of the city were alleyways lined with hair salons.

The hair salons looked like legitimate business joints. They even had their facade down to an art form by including the proper upholstery like barber chairs and mirrors in their decor.

The only thing amiss was the row of young women dressed in skimpy clothes who looked like life had beaten them down one too many times.

Gale's Hair Salon was one of the more famous salons in the remote city, having made its name specializing in young ladies who were still in school.

The madam of the hair salon was on a phone call at the counter, nodding eagerly and looking like a simpering fool as she agreed with the person on the other line.

Just then, Carlisle appeared outside the shop with Daniel and Francis in tow.

A few of the alluring young ladies immediately slinked out the door and purred, "Hey, big guy. Looking for a haircut?"

Daniel suddenly felt parched at all the skin on display, the woman's tank top doing little to cover her modesty. He swallowed.

Even Francis, who had never touched a woman before, gulped.

Carlisle was unaffected as he asked, "I'm here to see your madam."

The woman licked her crimson lips and said in a soft, high voice, "Beth is on the phone right now. Why don't you come inside?"

The three men stood at the door, looking dubious.

The woman's hand fluttered to her mouth as she giggled. "Come in. We don't bite."

Daniel glanced at Carlisle and Francis for help.

Carlisle drew a slow breath and said, "Fine, then."

The trio headed into the hair salon, which smelled like cheap perfume. The young ladies on the couch greeted simultaneously in their suggestive voices, "Welcome to Gale's Hair Salon...."

“Wow, color me happy! Aren’t you two hot studs?” one of the women crooned.

“So hot, I might just give them a free hair wash,” another one purred.

“Come with me, old man, I can teach an old dog some new tricks...”

The whispers and sultry promises stirred up Daniel’s urges. He had been wanting to visit a hair salon for the longest time, but he could never find anyone to come with him.

Unfortunately, he doubted he was getting a hair wash today, which was a shame.

Francis had to light a cigarette and take a long drag of it just to calm down.

Beth Kowalski, the owner of the hair salon, finally ended her phone call and came out from behind the counter. She eyed Carlisle inquisitively as she asked, “Here for a hair wash?”

Carlisle said, “I called you earlier. I was the one who offered five times the price you named for one of the ladies.”

Recognizing him, Beth gave him a wide smile and said, “Lucky for you, we’re getting two young ladies in later,”

Carlisle shook his head. “I only want the one in the MMS message.”

“For heaven’s sake, handsome. Didn’t I already tell you that she’s been booked?” Beth said impatiently. “The two young ladies who are coming in later are new and just as good.”

“What is it about my request do you not understand?” Carlisle countered sharply, his brows knitting together.

Beth froze. A tight smile tugged on her lips as she remarked, “You’ve got quite a fuse for someone so young.”

“Wow, he’s even hotter when he’s demanding! I’m swooning,” one of the ladies gushed.

“Look at that height and those shoulders! Do you think he’s still a virgin?” another mused.

“Hey, handsome. How about you and I go to the back and I’ll give you a free hair wash?”

“That’s a good idea! We could all wash your hair for free!”

The women on the couch enjoyed a spot of drama every now and then. They flashed Carlisle meaningful smiles as they teased him.

Normally, they were made to perform their services on oily, middle-aged men. It was understandable that they were starved for better company, and they couldn’t help drooling over the handsome men now standing in their parlor.

At that moment, a fleet of black Santanas pulled up outside the shop and honked.

A man who looked to be in his 30s got out of one of the cars, his black wifebeater tank showing off the

tattoos that ran up his skinny limbs and every patch of exposed skin.

He had a slight build and dark shadows under his eyes, his face sallow, and his steps light. There was sheer nonchalance—or boredom—written on his face.

Seeing this, Beth hurried to greet the man with a smile. “Welcome, Mr. Carlson.”

“Good day, Mr. Carlson. The young women in the hair salon stood up at once.

Daniel’s heart dropped to his stomach while Francis and Carlisle stepped to one side.

Beth whispered something into Luke’s ear, prompting the latter to narrow his eyes as he surveyed Carlisle viciously. “You’re trying to steal my woman

Carlisle hissed, “Do you know how much work Shane takes on in the dorm just to make enough money for you? He runs our errands for 50 cents and does our daily laundry for a dollar!”

At first, Carlisle thought Shane needed the money to help out his family.

However, after discovering Olivia was trying to sell her virginity to the highest bidder, Carlisle figured she must be desperate. In other words, Shane had done all that cheap labor to help her.

Tears welled up in Olivia’s eyes when she heard Carlisle’s admonishment. She closed her eyes as the tears streaked past her cheeks, saying, “Then please tell him I don’t like him anymore and to leave me

alone from now on.”

Carlisle sighed in exasperation. “Come with me. I can help you if it’s money you need...”

She shook her head. “I owe Shane far too much already. I can’t bring myself to put more burden on him..”

Before Carlisle could speak, Olivia reached for Luke’s arm and said, “Come on, let’s go.”

Luke wrapped an arm around Olivia’s slender waist. She stiffened at his touch, and her tears did not stop.

Carlisle pulled Daniel back just as a loud thud resounded through the room.

Francis charged forward like a bolt of lightning toward Luke and his lackeys.

One of the lackeys next to Luke cursed, “Damn it, this guy’s just asking for a beating!”

He lifted his leg to kick Francis, but the latter dodged it and slammed his elbow into the lackey’s chest.

The lackey fell onto the ground, his eyes rolling into the back of his head.



Luke blanched at this and turned to make a run for it, but Francis moved faster. He stuck a foot out and tripped Luke, who staggered forward and fell flat on his face.

The other lackeys had gotten out of their cars, armed to the teeth with baseball bats and steel batons they grabbed from their trunks.

Francis grabbed Luke by his collar and lifted him like a helpless pup.

Unexpectedly, Luke produced a dagger that he must have kept hidden. He twisted the weapon, aiming for Francis' chest.

Francis reacted quickly enough to grab Luke's wrist and twist it.

"Ow!" Luke cried out, dropping the dagger as his voice reached a wailing pitch.

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"Fuck, let go of Mr. Carlson!" one of the lackeys warned outside. Some of them even pulled out their phones to call Ian.

Francis eyed them icily and growled, "Step aside or I'll snap his neck!" He then turned to Carlisle. "Grab her and we'll leave now!"

Carlisle tugged on Olivia's arm, leading her forward so they could leave the place.

Olivia struggled as she cried, "Forget about me and go!"

"Shut up!" Carlisle snapped at her irritably. She quieted at once and let him pull her out of the hair salon with Daniel following closely behind.

Luke's men had blocked their exit.

Stomping on the hilt of the fallen dagger and flipping it into the air, Francis grabbed it and pressed the blade against Luke's throat. "Get them to move," he growled viciously.

"Kill me if you dare," Luke threatened with a feral grin.

"You wanna test me?" Francis pressed the blade further into Luke's skin until he drew blood.

Luke was unfazed as he mocked, "Go on, slice my throat open..."

Francis' brows furrowed. He couldn't very well kill a man even if the latter asked for it, could he?

Daniel trembled as he asked, "C-Carlisle, what do we do?"

Panicking, Carlisle looked at Francis and ordered, "Think you could pave the way?"

Without another word, Francis hit the side of Luke's head with the hilt of the dagger and knocked him out. After he cast Luke's limp body aside, he turned the blade forward and charged into the crowd.

"Damn it. Kill him!"

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Luke's men rushed forward and swung their steel bats at Francis. There was a loud clang as Francis blocked their attacks with the dagger and kicked the man before him down.

Before the lackey could get up on his feet, Francis brought the dagger down and sliced through the man's ankles in one swift move.

"Aargh!" the lackey shrieked in pain while the rest of his comrades exchanged hesitant looks.

Francis brandished the dagger from left to right as he charged forward, forcing Luke's men back. At that moment, Carlisle yelled, "Daniel, run!"

In the blink of an eye, Francis subdued another lackey and reached for the fallen baseball bat. He tossed it to Daniel and shouted, “Catch!”

Daniel’s eyes lit up. He raised his hand to catch the baseball bat but missed. The bat struck him on the head instead, and his vision blackened momentarily as he struggled to stay upright.

When Luke’s men surrounded him, Daniel quickly picked up the baseball bat and swung it wildly, cursing as he did so.

Conversely, Francis gripped the dagger tightly as he walked up to the lackeys who approached him, forcing them back.

Carlisle seized the opportunity to flee the scene, pulling Olivia along with him.

Behind him, Daniel rushed out of the melee with the baseball bat still in hand.

Francis kept the lackeys back, the dagger glinting menacingly as he held it out toward them like a silent threat. None of the three dozen men before him dared to step forward even though they were itching for a fight.

When the men had backed off and left Francis with enough distance to make a break for it, he bolted. He

didn’t think he could take on all three dozen men if they were to charge forward all at once.

The man whose ankles had been cut cried out angrily, “Don’t just stand there gawking! Go after them! Mr.

Carlson will have our heads if he finds out we let them get away!”

The men snapped out of their daze and hurried to catch up with Francis and the others.

Once Carlisle and the others were out of the remote city, they were greeted by a motley crew who were

dressed in black..

Daniel felt his knees go weak as he wailed, “Oh, crap. They’ve got us surrounded!”

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Olivia was badly shaken as well. She took in the large group of men and reckoned there were about 180

of them.

She began to regret her decision. Not only had she caused Shane trouble, but she had also put his roommates’ lives in danger.

“Go on without me,” she said to Carlisle, her voice breaking. “Run!”

Carlisle sounded nonchalant as he said, “Don’t worry. Those men are on our side.”

Daniel scrambled to his feet when he heard this. “What? They’re on our side? We’re saved!”

At this point, Luke’s lackeys had caught up to them. They skidded to a halt when they saw the large group of men across the road and asked among themselves, “Are those Mr. Carlson’s men?”

“Shit. T–Those are... Prince Heath’s men! Damn it, we’ve got to get out of here!”

Luke’s men turned around and fled into the alleyways.

Just then, the rumbling of motorcycles and screeching tires from approaching vans came from the other side of the road. When the vehicles pulled up, about 180 more men came out.

“Mr. Ian Carlson’s here,” one of the lackeys whispered in relief.

“Damn it, let’s go back and kill them all!” Now that their morales were boosted, Luke’s men turned around and charged in Carlisle’s direction.

Meanwhile, Carlisle and the others came to a stop in front of Wade.

Wade grinned at Carlisle and said, “Sorry we’re late, Mr. Zahn.”

“Good day, Mr. Zahn,” the hundred–something strong men greeted in unison, their voices deafening.

Daniel’s jaw dropped open so wide, it was a wonder it hadn’t hit the sidewalk. He couldn’t believe the men were addressing Carlisle with such respect. He could only assume Heath was working directly under Carlisle.

It was at that moment that Daniel realized how little he knew about Carlisle. Whatever he had learned about the latter was but the tip of the iceberg.

Presently, Carlisle led Francis and the others through the crowd.

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Heath, Benjamin, and Owen were standing in front of a BMW parked nearby, Heath’s arm was in a sling, and Owen was sporting bruises on his face. The latter also looked like he had lost weight since a week

ago.

Benjamin gave Carlisle an earnest smile as he said, “Hey, Carlisle. It’s been a while.”

Carlisle returned his smile. “Tell your men to fall back.”

He had only just said this when the sound of fighting broke out behind him. Carlisle shook his head in exasperation as he made his way to his Mazda.

“Carlisle,” Owen called out, catching up to him. “I’ve given it some thought, and I figured I’m better off

working at the studio.”

Carlisle slid into his car and asked Indifferently, “Why the change of mind?”

Benjamin laughed as he interjected, “Because he almost died.”

Assessing the bruises on Owen’s face, Carlisle asked, “Who did that to you?”

Owen flushed red. “It doesn’t matter. Can we talk about something else?”

Carlisle’s lips curled. “I saved you a spot at the studio. You can go back anytime.”

After exchanging pleasantries with Heath and the others, Carlisle had Francis drive away.

They had driven quite some distance before Daniel snapped out of his daze and exclaimed, “I can’t believe you’ve got Prince Heath working for you! You’re amazing, Carlisle!”

Carlisle ignored him and instead turned to ask Olivia, ‘Do you need money that badly?’

Olivia pursed her lips and nodded. “My mom’s suffering from late-stage uremia and requires dialysis to stay alive. The medical expenses pile up every month.”

“I doubt 1800 dollars is enough to cover them,” Carlisle pointed out after a beat of silence.

“It covers two months’ worth of medical bills,” Olivia retorted, her voice breaking as tears streaked down her face and dropped onto the backs of her hands.

Daniel sighed. “I have a cousin-in-law who has uremia. It’s not exactly curable. Unless the patient undergoes a kidney transplant, dialysis is the only way for them to stay alive.”

Olivia wiped away her tears. “After my mom was diagnosed with uremia, my dad divorced her and left the family.

“The money from Shane and thy wages from my part–time job aren’t enough to cover the cost olmy mom’s dialysis.”

Carlisle had assumed responsibility over Olivia the moment he stepped into that hair salon to rescue her. You should focus on your studies. Let me worry about your mom’s treatment costs.”

1800 dollars was equivalent to two months‘ worth of medical bills, then Olivia’s momte dialysis would cost just over ten thousand dollars a year. Carlisle could afford to help.

“You... Olivia gaped at Carlisle. “Are you serious about this?”

“Do I look like I’m joking?” Carlisle’s lips twitched into a smile.

Olivia shook her head in disbelief. This man before her had risked his life to save her–she doubted he was the type to joke about these sorts of things.

“Thank you! I promise to pay you back after I graduate and get a job!” Olivia lowered her head and let her tears fall. The thought that she nearly sold her virginity filled her with shame.

She owed Shane far too much, and now, she was indebted to his roommate as well. Carlisle wouldn’t have offered to help her if he weren’t Shane’s friend.

“Where to, Boss?” Francis asked from the driver’s seat.

\*A1 Seafood Restaurant,” Carlisle answered. “Daniel, call Shane and have him meet us there for lunch.”

“Roger that!” Daniel pulled out his phone and gave Shane a call.

Olivia felt uneasy as she said, “Could you guys let me off at that corner over there? I need to go to the hospital to see my mom.”

Carlisle said nothing, and as such, Francis kept driving.

Olivia gave Carlisle a pleading look. “I want to get off.”

Carlisle smiled at her humorlessly and questioned, “You’re afraid of seeing Shane, aren’t you?”

“I can’t ever make it up to him for what I did.” Olivia sobbed. “How am I supposed to face him?” “He doesn’t know about this. Besides, it’s not as if you actually sold yourself,” Carlisle reminded. “Wait, he doesn’t know? How did you guys find out about it then?” Olivia asked.

Neither Carlisle nor Daniel offered her an explanation.

Upon arriving at A1 Seafood Restaurant, Carlisle was told by the receptionist that the private dining rooms were all occupied.

With two universities recently finishing their orientation programs, many students had gathered at the restaurant to blow off some steam,

As such, Carlisle had the staff set up a table outside.

Meanwhile, Wanda was dining with one of her clients in a private dining room on the second floor.

The client was a man in his 40s, and next to him was a plump woman.

Christine couldn’t stop staring at them. The man looked somewhat familiar to her, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on it.

Wanda suddenly looked up and asked him, “Is your surname Zahn?”

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Wanda pressed, “Do you happen to know Carlisle?”

Recognition flitted across Gerard’s features as he asked, “He’s my nephew. Do you know him?”



Phoebe and Christine were taken aback by this sudden Information: Christine, in particular, finally understood why she found Gerard so familiar.

She had never met Gerard before, but he shared a lot of resemblance with Carlisle's father, hence the elusive similarity.

"Carlisle and I went to the same high school, and now we're classmates in college," Christine explained frankly. She then gestured to Wanda and began to say, "And she's his-"

"I went to high school with him as well. We're in the same college now, but we're in different classes," Wanda interrupted.

She knew Christine intended to introduce her as Carlisle's girlfriend, and she would have allowed it if they were dining with Carlisle's father instead of his uncle.

Wanda had missed out on Carlisle's college entrance celebration due to being abroad, but she had Lily take photos and send them to her. If she remembered correctly, Gerard hadn't been present at the celebration.

More importantly, Gerard didn't seem like he had taken care of the rest of his family despite owning a construction company. This alone hinted at some sort of family rift.

If that were the case, Wanda wouldn't treat Gerard any differently than she did her other customers.

Gerard and Maria brightened up when they heard that Christine and Wanda were friends of Carlisle's.

Maria grinned as she said, "Well, what a coincidence! Seeing as you're both Carlisle's classmates, could you waive the loan interest for us and extend the repayment period by a year? Oh, make that three years!"

She was smiling so much that her plump face dimpled with the effort. She was starting to regret the cruel way she spoke about Carlisle and his family.

But just because Carlisle was useless to her, it didn't mean the same was true of his classmates.

Christine faltered when she heard Maria's ridiculous requests. She parted her lips to protest, but no words

came out.

She owed Carlisle for saving his life, and she couldn't very well repay him by being so uptight with his family.

Phoebe lowered her gaze and took a sip of her drink, knowing it wasn't her place to get involved in this

matter.

Wanda was silent for a moment before she said slowly, "We can't waive the interest, but we'll gladly

extend the loan repayment by two months."

She had set up this company to make a profit.

She doubted she had anything to gain from getting into Gerard's and Marla's good books. This was especially true if they were on bad terms with Carlisle and his family.

SwiftFunds Financial Investment gave out short-term loans with repayment periods that ranged from

week to a month.

In other words, Wanda was already doing Gerard a huge favor by extending the loan repayment by two

months.

Maria's face fell when Wanda refused to budge. She snapped, "What's a two-month repayment period going to do for us? The money for our project wouldn't even come in by then!"

"You're Carlisle's friend from high school, and this is the best you can do for us?"

Gerard took a sip of his wine and then asked, "Did Carl pick on you at school?"

Christine and Wanda shook their heads in unison.

"I can only assume that he had a bad streak at school and you both hate his guts, then," Gerard said flatly.

Wanda retorted, "I think that's enough conjectures from you, Mr. Zahn. Carlisle was an excellent student, and everyone wanted to be his friend."

Gerard froze. He was about to say something when Wanda continued, "That aside, let me reiterate that I'm granting you the one-month extension because you're Carlisle's relatives."

Maria sneered, "How is that doing us a favor? Other loan companies could offer up to two or three months of extension without making a fuss over it. Some of the extensions even go up to a year!"

Jenny, who was silent the whole time, couldn't help pointing out defiantly, "Then why don't you go and ask for a loan from those companies?"

The interest rates for loan companies were naturally higher than those offered by the banks. The interest that came with a short-term loan extended by two or three months or even a year—was terrifying at best.

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Maria glowered at Jenny icily and snapped, "I was speaking to your boss, not you! Don't act so high and mighty when you're just a subordinate!"

Jenny was made of tougher stuff, so she smiled and kept quiet.

“We’re not the ones asking for a loan here,” Phoebe said angrily, her patience running thin. “What gives you the right to talk down to any of us?”

Maria did not back down. “Who the hell do you think you are? Is this the way you speak to your elders? Didn’t you ever learn basic manners at school? With that attitude, I’m surprised you’re on the honor roll at Riverland University at all!”

“You...” Phoebe was so furious that she was shaking, her eyes brimming with tears.

“What? Cat got your tongue? It’s not like you own this loan company or anything!” Maria carried on viciously, extremely pleased to see how riled up Phoebe was. “Keep quiet, your opinions aren’t wanted.”

Maria had never lost an argument before. She had far too much pride to let some young lady speak to her so condescendingly.

As the vicious words rang in Phoebe’s ears, she looked down and let her tears fall.

Christine gently squeezed Phoebe’s hand and said soothingly, “Don’t cry, Phoebe. We won’t be doing business with them!”

Maria raised a brow. She was about to admonish Christine when Wanda said, “I believe we’re done here. We won’t be doing business with you, and that’s final.”

“Fine, then! See if I care! It’s not as if you’re the only loan company in Riverland, Maria spat, emboldened by her temper as she smacked her palm on the table.

“Will you tone it down?” Gerard snapped, glaring at Maria.

There were plenty of loan companies in Riverland, indeed, but the loans they offered came with an extremely high interest. SwiftFunds Financial Investment offered loans at half those rates.

Besides, the other loan companies were only willing to approve loans of up to 200 thousand. Gerard

would have to seek out multiple loan companies if he wanted to make up the remaining 300 thousand he

needed.

More importantly, these loan companies were run by those in the underworld. One of Gerard's friends had jumped off a rooftop after failing to repay the high-interest loans taken out from one of those companies

SwiftFunds Financial Investment was a licensed moneylender, and the interest rates it offered were lower than those offered by the loan sharks.

Windex Corporation was in desperate need of funds. If Gerard didn't improve his own company's financial situation in time for the upcoming project, he would have to kiss a huge business opportunity goodbye.

Maria was expressionless as she gritted out, "I'll leave you to talk to them in private. Excuse me while I

use the restroom."

Gerard heaved a sigh of exasperation. "I apologize for my wife's rude behavior, Ms. Thompson. I have no objection to the terms you proposed for the loan. Shall we proceed accordingly?"

Wanda repeated calmly but firmly, "Mr. Zahn, I've made it clear just now that we don't want to do business with you." She turned to Jenny and asked, "Ms. Robson, would you mind getting the check?"

"On it," Jenny said with a smile. She took her purse and made her way to the front desk to pay for the

meal.

"Allow me to get the check," Gerard said, hurrying to his feet to block Jenny's way.

“Oh, no, it’s bad form if we stuff you with the check after a deal falls through, Jenny said pleasantly. “The

meal’s on us.”

“No, I insist. These young ladies are my nephew’s friends, and I should be the one getting the check. I’m older, after all,” Gerard said.

He knew he wouldn’t stand a chance at getting his loan from SwiftFunds Financial Investment if he let these young women pay for the food.

“Well...” Jenny glanced over her shoulder at Wanda.

“Ms. Thompson, please give me another chance,” Gerard pleaded:

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Wanda couldn’t help softening at Gerard’s pleading gaze. “If you insist on getting the check, you may do so, Mr. Zahn.”

Jenny sat down in quiet reluctance.

Gerard gave Wanda a grateful look and returned to his seat.

He pulled out his phone and said with a sigh, “I’ve been so busy these days that I forgot to invite Carlisle to join us for a meal. How about I give him a call right now and you can have an impromptu get-together?” He decided to use Carlisle as his safety net. Surely Carlisle’s presence would make Wanda and the others more amiable.

Wanda saw through Gerard’s motives but did not stop him. She figured this was a good chance to assess if Carlisle was on good terms with him and Maria. If they were close, Wanda wouldn’t mind going easy on the terms of the loan.

Ten minutes ago elsewhere, Carlisle sat with Daniel, Francis, and Olivia at a table set up outside A1 Seafood Restaurant.

Shane had yet to arrive, and the dishes had yet to be served.

Olivia had told everyone the story of how she and Shane became a couple. As it turned out, they came from the same village.

Their parents also worked in the same quarry, but there was a terrible rockslide six years ago. Instead of taking accountability, the owner of the quarry ran off without offering any bereavement payouts to the families of those affected by the incident.

Shane's grandparents were so heartbroken by the loss of his parents that they ended up passing away from grief themselves. Shane had raised himself since then, making a living by tending to his family's orchard.

Olivia's father was a good-for-nothing philanderer who didn't bother looking for a job in the village. Her grandparents probably died out of anger and disappointment in him.

Olivia's mother, on the other hand, had to do all sorts of odd jobs to make ends meet. However, her measly income was barely enough to put food on the table.

When it came to harvest season, Olivia and Shane would take days off from school just to toil away on the farmlands and orchards. They would work through the day and study in the evenings by candlelight.

Shane had managed to get into Riverland University through his excellent grades and discipline, Olivia got into a second-rate university.

while

Just as Olivia thought things were looking up for her, her mother was diagnosed with uremia. She thought her life was falling apart the moment she read the lab report.

When she begged her father on her knees to save her mother, he beat her up and threw both mother daughter out of the house.

Burdened by astronomical medical bills and the expenses that came with lifelong dialysis, Olivia's mother had attempted to take her own life on a few occasions.

Shane took them both in before they were overcome with devastation, and he even brought Olivia's mother for her treatments. It was then that Olivia learned Shane had sold his family's orchard, the source of his livelihood.

He had only just turned 18 then. Having lost his only source of income, he worked through the summer to come up with his and Olivia's college tuition that year.

Daniel's eyes were filled with surprise as he asked, "You're telling me that he made ten grand in two months? How did he do it?"

Olivia said through sobs, "He never told me, but I saw needle marks on his arms. I suspect he might have sold pints of his blood to come up with that money."

Daniel handed her a couple of tissues. "I don't think so. He must have done something else to come up with that money, blood isn't worth that much."

Olivia wiped her tears with the tissues and said, "I don't know. Whatever it is he did, it couldn't have been

anything illegal. He's too good for that."

"Carlisle, Dan!"

Shane walked up to them at that moment. When he saw Olivia at the table, he was taken aback. "Olivia?"

Olivia looked up at him and her tears fell even more rapidly down her cheeks.

Francis rose to his feet and gave up his seat for Shane, who took it and asked, "Olivia, what are you doing

here?"

She couldn't help it anymore. She threw herself into Shane's arms and sobbed. "Shane!"



Just then, Carlisle's phone rang with a call from an unknown number. He put it through and asked politely, "Hello, who's this?"

"Carl, it's me—your Uncle Gerard," came the warm reply from the other line.

"Is there something I can help you with?" Carlisle asked flatly.

Gerard chastised good-naturedly, "Why didn't you tell me you were studying in Riverland? You could have at least given me a call after all this time."

One might think they were on good terms if one didn't know better.

However, Carlisle put all such conjectures to rest when he sneered, "Stop beating around the bush or I'll hang up."

Chapter 280

Gerard frowned. As displeased as he was at Carlisle's brusque response, he forced a smile and said amiably, "I'm in Riverland for a couple of days to oversee things at my construction company here. "Listen, I'm at A1 Seafood Restaurant with a few of your friends. Why don't you join us for a meal?"

"Friends?" Carlisle repeated, wondering if he meant Wanda.

"Yes. A certain Ms. Thompson. She said she went to high school with you," Gerard elaborated with a chuckle.

"Are you looking to take out a loan from her company?" Carlisle asked. This was the only reason he could think of as to why Wanda might be there with Gerard.

It was highly likely that Gerard phoned him because the deal was on the verge of falling through.

"Why don't you come over and we can talk?" Gerard suggested, worried that Carlisle might not show up if he gave too much away. He didn't want to admit Carlisle was right, either.

"I can't make it. I've got something lined up," Carlisle said.

“Gotten stubborn, have we? Do you want me to call your father and have him make you come over?” Gerard drawled in a hushed tone, implying that he would not hesitate to give Gordon a call.

“Which dining room are you in?” Carlisle spat out icily,

The last thing he wanted was for Gerard to bother his parents, and he only agreed to meet with Gerard because of Wanda.

Carlisle would never try and interfere in any of Wanda’s business matters.

“Room 302,” Gerard answered with a grin. He then added, “Remember, Carl, we’re a family no matter what. Be on your best behavior and don’t embarrass us, all right?”

“Sure,” Carlisle said before hanging up.

After that, he said to Daniel, “I’ve got to run an errand. Go ahead and eat without me.”

Daniel nodded.

Francis stood up and offered, “I’ll go with you.” He was Carlisle’s driver and bodyguard, after all.

“It’s fine. I know these people,” Carlisle said.

Meanwhile, in Room 302, Gerard returned to his seat after his call with Carlisle ended. He wore a pleasant smile as he said, “Shall we dig’in before the food gets cold?”

“Be my guest, Mr. Zahn, I’m not that hungry,” Wanda answered politely. Neither Christine nor Phoebe made to touch their utensils, either.

Gerard flashed them all a sheepish smile but remained unmoving in front of the food as well.

Outside, Carlisle walked down the corridor until he located Room 302. He was about to knock on the door when Maria saw him and cried out in surprise, “Carlisle?”

Carlisle turned to regard her with blatant disgust, which Maria did not miss. She glowered at him and seethed, “How dare you look at me that way! Don’t you know how to greet your elders?”

Carlisle ignored her and knocked on the door of the private dining room.

“I’m talking to you, you useless mongrell Are you deaf?” Maria screeched, giving Carlisle a hard shove.

Carlisle did not budge as he looked up at her. “Are you out of your mind?”

“Talking back, I see,” Maria snapped. She stared at him in disbelief. “Even your parents know better than to be rude to me, yet here you are being downright insolent!”

“Touch me again and I might just punch you,” Carlisle warned plainly. His parents were good and honest folks, which made them the target of Gerard and Maria’s constant bullying.

Normally, he would have ignored Maria if she were just running her mouth. He simply didn’t want to entertain her hysterics.

However, he couldn’t let her shove him and get away with it. He was no pushover.

Maria cackled. “You? Punch me?” She planted her hands on her hips like she had just heard the funniest joke.

At that moment, Gerard opened the door.

Maria saw him and sneered, “Listen to this, Gerard! Your nephew has grown a pair and wants to punch me!