

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

1055-1060

"Seth, what the hell are you doing?!"

Aspen had not expected the Haywoods to show up at their company, let alone that Seth would bring the family's private security team to block the entrance.

Furious and stunned, she shouted, "Get your people out of here right now-we're done! From this moment on, there's nothing between us!"

Seth let out a cold laugh. "Aspen, I gave you my heart, and this is how you repay me? Don't you see? Everything I've done, I did it for you. Just trust me I'll save you from that devil and set you free!"

Aspen's voice turned ice cold. "Seth, you've got this all wrong. Maybe I didn't exactly choose to become Andrew's slave... but I'm sorry, I don't need rescuing either."

Seth's face twisted, and he ground his teeth as he snapped, "I saw it last time, Aspen. You've got some twisted feelings for Andrew, don't you? You act like you're trapped, but deep down, you like it, don't you?"

Aspen's cheeks flared red-part rage, part something she could not quite name. She shouted, "You're out of your damn mind! That's complete garbage! Do you think I want to be like this? If he didn't have dirt on me, do you really think I'd put up with any of this?"

Seth sneered. "Garbage, huh? Please. Aspen, stop lying to yourself. That's classic Stockholm Syndrome-you've caught feelings for your captor. Honestly, it's pathetic."

Ignoring Aspen's mortified, furious expression, Seth softened his tone and pressed on. "But don't worry. I'll still save you from him. I know none of this was your choice. And soon, I'll give you real freedom-and love, unconditional and all yours."

Panicked, Aspen turned to Andrew. "Andrew, you need to go. He brought the Haywoods' security squad! You can't take them on alone. I'll hold them off-just go!"

Yet, Andrew did not move. The so-called Haywood guards and Seth were nothing more than a circus of clowns in his eyes. Instead, he just stared at Aspen with an odd look in his eyes.

Annoyed, she snapped, "What? Why are you just standing there? Go already!"

Andrew raised an eyebrow and asked, "So, what he said about you having Stockholm Syndrome is it true?"

Aspen's heart skipped a beat as an overwhelming wave of shame hit her, but she scoffed. "Do you think it's true? If you really believe that, then you're giving yourself way too much credit.

"Andrew, I hate you-hate you more than anything. You think I'd admire you? Or have feelings for you? Keep dreaming."

With that, she let out a mocking laugh, like the very idea of loving him was beneath her.

Andrew exhaled deeply. "Good. That's a relief."

Somehow, seeing how he looked so relieved and satisfied by her denial made Aspen's blood boil. She was pissed.

Seth snarled, "Fine! Since you won't leave, then you can die right here. Let's see how you handle this many of Haywoods' men!"

Andrew spoke slowly, completely

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unfazed. "No need to rush. I already messaged the governor's office. I told them our company's under attack by a group of violent thugs-emergency level, critical situation.

"This is the capital-in broad daylight. Peace and order are sacred here. And Supreme Capital Group? We just became the governor's official partner. So tell me, in his territory, when someone dares to lay a hand on one of his own what do you think the governor's going to do?"

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Aspen was speechless.

Andrew had shamelessly milked Derek for all he was worth, then turned around and declared himself the man's loyal sidekick like it was nothing. She honestly had to admit even she could not compete with that level of shamelessness.

"Even if you did call Mr. McCormick for backup," she said uncertainly, "do you really think someone that high up would bother helping us?"

Andrew stayed calm. "If he does, great. That saves me the trouble of handling this myself. If he doesn't, then it's no big deal. I'll just kill every single one of these Haywood thugs myself."

Aspen opened her mouth, but no words came out. This was the Andrew she knew -the devil himself. Ruthless, cold, and always ready to shed blood.

Nonetheless, these were not just any thugs. This was the elite private force of the Haywoods, one of the Five Apex Families.

Could Andrew really take them on alone?

Just then, Seth sneered and stepped forward. "Andrew, last time you smashed a bottle over my damn head! You humiliated me in front of Ms. Sinclair and all those heavy hitters!"

He added, "Today, you're paying for that in blood! Unless you drop to your knees and bark like a dog, I swear I'll change my last name to yours!"

Andrew replied flatly, "Last time, you were asking for it. You picked the wrong guy to mess with, so yeah, you got what you deserved. As for changing your name to mine? Please. I don't need another useless guy sharing my surname."

Seth's eyes flared with rage. "Shut your mouth! I'm giving you one chance! First, hand Aspen over and make her my woman! Second, transfer your company, Supreme Capital Group, to me! If you play nice and do both, maybe I'll let you crawl back to Jayrodale with your life."

Andrew laughed out loud. "So that's what this is really about-my multi-billion dollar company, huh? And you want my woman and my money. Damn, Mr. Haywood, your wish list is something else. Tell me... you think God would sign off on this plan?"

Seth folded his arms and snorted. "I don't care what God thinks. I only care about your answer. So, tell me-are you handing over the girl and the company, or do you want to die right here, right now?"

His eyes turned murderous. If Andrew said one wrong word, he would give the kill order immediately.

Andrew tilted his head. "Fine. I've made my choice."

"What is it?"

"I choose... for you to eat shit!"

Rage exploded across Seth's face, and he roared, "Take him down! Break this bastard-cripple him on the spot!"

He truly could not understand where Andrew's confidence came from. The Haywoods' guards were not nobodies-any one of them was at the junior grandmaster level, and there were dozens of them.

With dozens of elite fighters, all going in at once, Seth wondered if Andrew was just in a hurry to die.

Andrew's expression turned ice cold,

and

and killing intent surged in his gaze. Sure, he had already sent the emergency alert to the governor's office. However, his favorite method had always been the same-brute force.

Swift. Simple. Violent.

He never had any beef with the Haywoods until now. However, Seth had made it personal. He wanted Aspen, he wanted the company, and he saw Andrew as just some small-town nobody he could stomp on.

Well, if they all thought a guy from Jayrodale was easy prey, then Andrew was about to teach this capital trash a lesson they would never forget.

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

At the last second, a government-issued sedan screeched to a halt beside them. "Stop right there!"

A woman in a perfectly tailored business suit stepped out, her presence immediately commanding attention. Though her clothing was modest and loose-fitting, there was no hiding her striking figure-an impossibly full chest and legs that seemed to go on forever.

Still, what stunned people most was not her body, but her face-icy cold, flawlessly beautiful, and chilling to the core. She had the kind of beauty that made jaws drop at first glance, but the longer you looked, the colder your spine felt.

It was a strange contradiction-stunning and unapproachable—but on her, it somehow blended perfectly.

The moment she appeared, Seth's expression shifted. He stepped forward immediately, respectful and even a little nervous. "Ms. Garcia..."

Yet, Chantelle Garcia did not even look at him. She walked straight toward Andrew, her face emotionless as she said, "You must be Mr. Andrew Lloyd from Supreme Capital Group?"

Andrew nodded calmly. "That's me. And you are..."

She gave what sounded like a faint snort through her nose. "You really don't know who I am? Your company just accepted a major government project assigned by Mr. McCormick himself. Yet, you don't even recognize his chief secretary? Mr. Lloyd, your standards... are a little underwhelming."

Andrew raised a brow. From her tone and posture, she did not seem like someone who came to help. Instead, she acted like someone here to lay down the law.

Aspen saw it too and quickly stepped in with a polite smile, worried Andrew's temper would spark. She said sweetly, "Greetings, Ms. Garcia. I'm Aspen Stevens from Supreme Capital Group. Mr. Lloyd just arrived in the capital recently, so there's still a lot he's unfamiliar with.

"But please rest assured, both you and the governor-we'll handle the project with full dedication and responsibility."

Chantelle gave a soft hum in response. Then, she turned her cold gaze toward Seth. "Remove the Haywood security team. Now."

Seth's face turned stiff with disbelief. "Ms. Garcia, you can't seriously be defending Andrew. Look at the bandage on my head-that's his doing!

"Not only that, he's a manipulative scumbag! He's got that poor

woman, Ms: Stevens, trapped in an abusive relationship-she's under psychological control! My actions today were about two

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things-revenge and rescue. I came to free Ms. Stevens and help recover her dignity!"

Chantelle remained unfazed. She said, "I don't care what personal drama you all have going on. I only care that you immediately withdraw the Haywoods' private force from this property.

"This is outrageous. The capital is not your personal playground-this entire region is under the governor's jurisdiction!"

Seth clenched his jaw, frustration rising. "Ms. Garcia, are you really going to push the Haywoods aside over something like this? And

Andrew? How did he manage to get you involved?"

seriously, what's so special net

Chantelle's expression did not change. "Everything I'm doing is in line with orders. And in case you didn't know, Mr. Lloyd is someone the governor personally values. So, either call off your men right now, or I'll lose my patience—and trust me, you don't want that."

Seth's jaw dropped. He could not believe that Andrew, the same guy he was about to cripple, had already gained Derek's attention in just a matter of days.

What the hell kind of luck—or power—was that?

"Fine," Seth muttered bitterly. "If this is coming from Mr. McCormick, then I won't push it."

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Seth glared at Andrew, his face twisted with hatred. He growled, "This isn't over, Andrew. I swear, one day, you'll be the one crawling at my feet!"

He had stormed in like a king, ready to crush his enemy, only to leave humiliated and powerless. The sting of defeat burned deep in his chest.

Chantelle glanced at Andrew and said coldly, "Mr. Lloyd, favors from Mr. McCormick aren't something you can just use at will. Let me give you a piece of advice: a man needs to be strong on his own.

"If you keep hiding behind connections, always clinging to others to survive, this little streak of good fortune you're enjoying will run out fast. Mr. McCormick is upright and fair. He takes care of his people.

"But if you turn out to be a spineless liability, someone who can't stand on his own... he'll lose patience with you sooner or later."

Aspen's expression shifted. She thought, 'What was that supposed to mean? Was Ms. Garcia calling Supreme Capital Group a burden?'

Andrew, however, smiled. "I actually agree with you, Ms. Garcia. If someone really is a useless coward, then of course Mr. McCormick would kick him to the curb

eventually."

Chantelle paused, caught off guard. Then, she gave a cold chuckle. "If you understand that, Mr. Lloyd, then why were you so desperate for me to come save you?"

Andrew shook his head. "That's where you're wrong, Ms. Garcia. I didn't ask Mr. McCormick for help because I needed saving. I only wanted someone to bear witness."

Chantelle did not understand what Andrew was getting at. She scoffed, "A witness? Wow, you really know how to dress up cowardice as nobility. How do you even manage that with a straight face?"

Even Aspen was confused. After all, the whole point of calling for Derek's support was supposedly to avoid this exact kind of trouble.

So, what the hell was Andrew up to now?

Andrew suddenly let out a cold laugh and stopped wasting words. He took two slow steps forward, walking straight toward Seth.

Seth sneered, "What now, you little mutt? Finally come to your senses? Ready to get on your knees and pay your dues? Hand over the girl and the company like a good little boy? Ms. Garcia, you're seeing this, right? He's the one admitting fault-it's not like the Haywoods were forcing him!"

He stood tall, smug, already striking a winner's pose, as if preparing to receive an ovation.

Suddenly, two brutal slaps landed square across Seth's face like thunder. The sound echoed across

the street, and in an instant, his six-foot, 200-pound frame flew backward through the air.

Blood burst from his mouth and nose as he hit the ground like a sack of bricks. He screamed in pain and fury, "You son of a bitch! I'm gonna kill you!"

Aspen stood frozen, completely stunned.

Had Andrew just lost his mind?

They had finally gotten a lifeline with Chantelle being there, sent by Derek himself. Yet, this maniac had voluntarily lit the match again.

Was he begging for death?

Even Chantelle blinked in shock, visibly thrown off by the sheer savagery of Andrew's attack. Then

ssion turned cold again as

her

she said, "Well, at least you've got a spine. But what you just did? That's pure suicide."

Seth, helped up by his guards, staggered to his feet, his face a mess of blood and rage. "Andrew, I swear I'm gonna rip you apart! All of you-kill him! Tear this bastard into pieces!"

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Andrew's eyes turned icy as a cruel grin curled at the corner of his lips. "Ms.

Garcia, you saw it yourself. It was the Haywoods who started this mess. When I kill every last one of them, I expect you to testify to Mr. McCormick that I acted in self-defense, and I'm completely innocent."

Chantelle's face darkened. "Hold it. No one moves a muscle. Mr. Lloyd, what the hell are you talking about? Why would I testify for you when you're clearly the one provoking this fight?"

Andrew snorted. "Provoking? How am I the one looking for trouble? You saw it too. That Haywood moron brought an armed squad to corner me he started all this."

Chantelle clenched her jaw. "Yeah, I know they came here first. But they didn't touch you-you hit him first. How does that make sense?"

Andrew flashed a mocking smile and replied calmly, "Sure, I struck first. But I acted out of instinct. To put it bluntly, their presence posed a serious threat, and I couldn't control my response. I reacted on impulse, for my own safety."

He added, "Legally speaking, that qualifies as a stress-induced act of self- defense. I'm not only innocent-I might even get sympathy for it."

He spoke so seriously, so confidently, it left Aspen completely blank. She had never seen someone twist the truth so shamelessly, and still sound so righteous doing it.

Seth, on the other hand, looked like he was about to explode from sheer fury. This was beyond insulting-it was outright mockery.

This bastard was driving him insane.

Chantelle stared at Andrew, stunned by his words. She asked coldly, "Mr. Lloyd... are you trying to play me for a fool? Or do you just think I am a fool by default?"

She was seconds away from losing it. This man had assaulted someone in front of witnesses, then had the audacity to demand she cover for him?

She wondered if Andrew was dropped on the head as a child.

Andrew remained composed. "I've made myself very clear, Ms. Garcia. Either you stand by as I wipe the floor with the Haywoods-then testify afterward that I acted in self-defense and am not guilty... Or, you make them back off right now."

Seth roared, "Ms. Garcia, this is between us and that piece of trash. Please don't interfere. We'll settle this ourselves, whatever the

outcome. Live or die, we'll tanet

full

responsibility! I swear, I'm going to make sure this bastard dies without a grave to be buried in!"

After being humiliated again with those brutal slaps, Seth had completely lost it.

Chantelle's face turned stormy. "Enough. This ends here-today! Whatever happens afterward between the two of you, I don't care. The governor's office won't get involved again."

Seth opened his mouth to argue, but Chantelle cut him off sharply. "Seth, don't push it. I'm here under direct orders from Mr. McCormick. Or are the Haywoods ready to defy even him?"

Seth's eyes burned with venom as he stared Andrew down. Then, he turned and stormed off with his men.

However, the look he left behind was unmistakable-this was not over.

Not by a long shot.

Chantelle turned to Andrew with a

cold smirk. "Mr. Lloyd,

congratulations. Mr. McCormick

met

saved your life today. You got what you wanted. But next time... good luck. Thope you manage to stay alive here in the capital for as long as you can."

Andrew replied casually, "Don't worry, Ms. Garcia. I plan to live quite well. In fact, once I've made a name for myself here in the capital, I'm throwing a massive banquet. And I expect you to show up with a gift."

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Just as Chantelle started her car and was about to hit the gas, she suddenly stalled. She did not even get the car moving before she killed the engine—so pissed off by Andrew's parting shot that she nearly choked on her own fury.

Andrew chuckled. "Ms. Garcia, looks like your driving test didn't go so well, huh? If you've got time, I can teach you how to balance the clutch and hit the gas properly for a clean start."

Chantelle fired up the engine again, and the car shot off like a rocket. Through the rush of wind came her flat, icy voice.

"Get lost!"

Aspen could only shake her head with a helpless sigh. She said, "I really don't know why you keep provoking that woman. Ms. Garcia is known to be fierce in the capital-Mr. McCormick's personal chief secretary, personal bodyguard, and official enforcer."

She added, "She's also a beast in martial arts. Some say she's on par with Luna from the Phelan family."

Andrew scoffed. "And? Does that mean I should bow down to her? I don't care what title she holds. If she crosses me, she gets dealt with like anyone else."

Aspen gave him a sideways glance and sneered. "What? Let me guess-she's powerful, gorgeous, and a total mystery, so now you want to take her to bed?"

Andrew shrugged lazily. "Didn't even cross my mind. A woman just needs to be satisfied, that's all. Which reminds me tonight, go clean yourself up and wait for me."

Aspen's face turned red with rage and embarrassment. She mimicked Chantelle's tone and yelled, "Get lost!"

Meanwhile, Supreme Capital Group had just scored big, securing a major project assigned directly by the governor. Just like that, they had officially planted their flag in the heart of the capital.

From here on, the entire operation would revolve around that project. In the spirit of maximum efficiency, Andrew dumped nearly all the responsibility straight onto Aspen's shoulders.

He, however, had something more personal to take care of. It was time to pay a visit to the Rhodes family-and see Lauren.

He bought a few decent gifts, nothing too extravagant, and made his way straight to the Rhodes estate.

There were a few guards at the gate, all watching him with suspicion. "Who are you here for?"

Andrew raised an eyebrow. "What's going on here? Is the Rhodes family preparing for a siege? You guys look like you're guarding against an invasion."

One of the guards barked, "I'll ask again. Who are you here to see? If you're just some random nobody, leave now-or deal with the consequences."

That only confirmed Andrew's gut feeling-something serious was going on inside the Rhodes family.

"Could you let them know that Andrew Lloyd from Jayrodale is here to visit Mr. and Mrs. Rhodes?"

The guards exchanged a look, clearly surprised.

"So you're the pretty boy who ran off with Ms. Rhodes?" one of them said with a mocking tone.

Andrew's face darkened. "Lauren and I are in a mutual relationship—not some one-sided abduction. So, if you don't mind, maybe pick a better term."

The guards snorted but still stepped aside with a measure of respect. "You can go in. Mr. Rhodes gave instructions-if you ever show up, head straight to the main hall."

Andrew could not help but feel a little touched and thought, 'At least my future father-in-law still treats me decently.'

With that, he stepped into the Rhodes residence, walking confidently into the main hall.

"Andrew, you actually had the guts

to show up in the capital. Surviving a

public hit list from the Golding

family? You've got more lives than

cockroach."

Inside the grand hall sat 25 people, and it was Tiana who immediately broke the silence with a cold, mocking laugh.

Andrew calmly placed his gifts down and replied, "Mrs. Rhodes, you sound like you're not too thrilled to see me."

Tiana snorted. "Do you really need to ask? The answer's obvious."

Andrew shrugged without a care. "Then I'll just take that as a warm welcome."