

# Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

## 1081-1090

In the blink of an eye, all of the Goldings' people scattered and disappeared. Sherilyn and Kenny were taken away, and anyone could imagine what kind of miserable fate awaited them.

The Rhodes family stared at Andrew like he was some sort of freak, completely speechless. The guy had just watched the Goldings retreat, and instead of being satisfied, he actually shouted at Elon, asking if the man looked down on him.

They could not help but think his arrogance was off the chart. Tiana rolled her eyes and snapped, "You little punk, will you only be happy if Elon drops dead from rage?"

Andrew sighed dramatically and said, "Exactly. If I could piss him off to death right then, that would've been perfect."

Jameson gave a bitter smile. "Andy, sure, you're safe for now... but picking a fight with the Goldings like that is not smart."

Andrew shrugged and replied, "I didn't have any beef with the Goldings to begin with. Elon's the idiot who decided to back Kenny's family and got dragged into this mess. In fact, Fatty should be thanking me."

Jameson's face twitched. "The Goldings should be thanking you?"

Tiana scoffed, "Andrew, don't push your luck. The Goldings are your sworn enemies now. You really think they should be grateful?"

Andrew answered confidently, "Why not? If it weren't for me, Fatty never would've found out his girl was cheating on him. You all saw how wild Sherilyn is-partying like that? Running around with eight male escorts?"

"If Elon kept living in the dark, he'd be raising someone else's kids and playing dad to a bunch of brats that weren't even his. Is that supposed to be a good life?"

The Rhodes family was struck speechless once again.

Jameson shook his head. "Alright, fine, I'll give you that. You did him a favor in a twisted way. But expecting gratitude? Andy, that's just wishful thinking."

Andrew turned the topic. "Mr. Rhodes, Mrs. Rhodes, I want to see Lauren."

Jameson answered without hesitation, "Go ahead. She's in the guest loft behind the house. Because of the situation earlier, I had guards keep her inside."

Tiana paused but did not stop him. Still, she warned sharply, "You can see her, but Andrew, you'd better not do anything inappropriate."

Andrew frowned. "Inappropriate? What are you implying, Mrs. Rhodes?"

Tiana gritted her teeth. "Lauren must stay a virgin, do you hear me?"

Andrew nearly facepalmed, sighing with a wry smile. "Mrs. Rhodes, what do you take me for? Relax, I know my limits."

Tiana huffed. "What do I take you for? A punk. A pervert. A hormonal creep. don't trust guys like you. If I weren't watching, you'd probably already have taken full advantage of Lauren, wouldn't you?"

Jameson looked irritated. "Tiana,  
enough already. I trust Andy. Howet  
got character. He's a decent  
els

man just like me. He wouldn't do any of that nonsense."

Tiana gave a dry laugh and sneered, "You? A decent man? Then why did you spy on me while I was taking a shower back in the day?"

Jameson was stunned, speechless.

Andrew made his way to the guest loft behind the Rhodes residence. On the second floor, he found Lauren.

She immediately called out, "Andrew, what are you doing here?"

They had not been apart for long, but her eyes lit up the moment she saw him. Without a second thought, she jumped into his arms and pressed her soft, fragrant lips right onto his.

Andrew wrapped his arms around her slender waist, enjoying how warm and soft she felt in his embrace.

He murmured, "You're such a tease. Mrs. Rhodes repeatedly warned me not to do anything unspeakable with you."

## Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Andrew leaned back slightly and dodged Lauren's kiss with a teasing smile.

Lauren pouted in frustration and said, "It's just a kiss, not like we're sleeping together. Come on, it's been days. Do you know how much I missed you?"

Andrew gazed at her flawless face and murmured, "You can have it... but only when I'm the one in control."

Then, before she could react, he leaned in and bit her gently, making her squeal in surprise. The two lingered in their intimate bubble for a while before finally, and reluctantly, pulling apart.

Lauren's skin was flushed, and her eyes sparkled. "You jerk, you kissed me for so long I could barely breathe! Fran was right... Andrew, you might look like a classy gentleman, but you're just a total perv underneath!"

Andrew's face turned red, and he coughed a few times to hide the awkwardness. It had only been a short time apart, but with Francesca gone, no one was around to keep the atmosphere in check.

So now, caught up in this moment with Lauren, he had let himself get carried away. He gave Lauren a playful smack on her firm behind and chuckled, "Damn, the bounce is perfect!"

Lauren let out a soft hum, her eyes sultry. "Feels good, huh? I'll have you know... When it comes to curves, I'm no less impressive than Fran. Sure, she's got that plush softness, but me? I'm toned, athletic, and all about definition."

Andrew asked, "You didn't have a hard time while staying here, did you?"

Lauren shook her head. "Not really. The only drama was during Michael's funeral got into a huge fight with my family, and he swore he'd wipe us all out. Other than that, it's been calm."

Andrew's eyes turned cold. "You don't have to worry anymore. From now on, Kenny and his family won't be able to stir up anything."

Lauren blinked in surprise. "What exactly happened out there? I've been locked up in here and couldn't check on anything. I've been so anxious!"

Andrew gave her a quick rundown of everything that had gone down outside, and as he spoke, Lauren's eyes widened in shock.

"You saved the entire Rhodes family? Andrew, I swear, you're

becoming more and more

impossible to figure out. Back in net

Jayrodale, you were just a

nevernet

heartbroken guy who got dumped by Christina... but now? You're

someone I can't help but look up to."

Just then, a mocking voice came from outside the room. "Oh, he's become such a

big shot now. Not only do you look up to him, even I have to look up to him!"

Jameson and Tiana stepped into the room together.

Lauren frowned. "Dad, what are you two doing? Just barging in without knocking?"

Jameson looked a little

embarrassed and gave Andrew an

apologetic smile. "Andy, sorry about

that...really didn't mean to

interrupt, but Tiana was worried sick, and well..."

Tiana cut in bluntly, "That's right. I didn't feel comfortable letting you two stay in a room alone, so here we are."

Andrew just smiled and said calmly, "Mrs. Rhodes, if you've got something to say, go ahead."

Tiana looked him square in the eye. "Andrew, I'll be honest. At this point, if I tried to fight you, I doubt I'd win And in every other way, you've

probably got me beat too. Su ne

be clear. Lauren-yes, you're more

me

than worthy of her. You're more than enough."

Lauren clapped her hands and cheered, "Yes!"

However, Tiana gave her a sharp look and added, "Don't celebrate too soon. Even

if I agree to let you two be together, you've still got the Driscolls to deal with.

"Compared to them, Kenny and Sherilyn are nothing-not even a threat. So Andrew, if you really want to be with Lauren, you'll have to handle the Driscolls- completely."

## Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Jameson's voice turned serious as he said, "How is this fair? This whole thing should've been the Rhodes family's responsibility. We can't just dump it on Andy. Tomorrow, I'll bring a generous gift and head over to the Driscolls to make things clear."

Tiana scoffed coldly. "You really think you can just explain it away? Joe's proud and stubborn-he won't listen to a word. Back when he came over with a proposal, we gave a subtle refusal, remember? But did it work? He left the engagement gifts anyway, completely airtight in his approach."

Lauren sneered, "You can call it airtight, or you can call it what it really is- coercion. The Driscolls are one of the Three Titans. They think that just because they've got power, they can do whatever they want in the Gabo Creek region."

She continued, "And Joe? He only met me a few times before deciding he wanted to marry me. The whole thing reeks of dominance, of bullying families like ours just because they can."

Tiana let out a long sigh. "You're right, sweetheart. It is bullying. It is coercion. But your dad and I had no choice. And at the time... I'll admit it—I hesitated. I thought maybe this wasn't such a bad thing.

"If Joe married you, our entire Rhodes family would be lifted up, and you'd never have to struggle again. But then Andrew showed up. And today, he saved me, saved your dad, and saved this entire family. And even this stubborn old heart of mine began to waver."

Lauren said firmly, "Andrew has already done too much for me. I don't want him to be the only one fighting. I'll talk to the Driscolls about the proposal myself."

Tiana frowned. "Nonsense. You're just a young woman. What makes you think you can make a family like the Driscolls back off? Besides, your dad and I would never let you take that risk alone!"

Andrew gave a helpless smile. "Mrs. Rhodes, you barged in here and said all this just to get me to step in, right? Fine, I won't hold it against you. For Lauren's sake, I'll deal with the Driscolls."

Tiana beamed with satisfaction. "Now that's what I like to hear. Guess we really did get to know each other by fighting. I couldn't stand the sight of you at first, but now... I don't know, I kinda like you. Feels like I've got another son."

Jameson rolled his eyes. "Yeah, right. You like him now because he's powerful. If he didn't show what he could do today, you'd have kicked him out the door without a second thought."

Tiana snapped, "Jameson, what did you just say?"

Jameson looked up at the sky and smacked his lips. "Andy, the weather's great today. How about we grab a drink later, just us guys, and celebrate?"

Tiana clenched her teeth. "No drinking! I don't care if Andrew becomes part of this family-this house still answers to me!"

Once again, Andrew got a full taste of Tiana's fiery temper. Poor Jameson was totally whipped. Sometimes, being under the wife's thumb was a curse.

"Andrew, come with me for a moment. Jameson, you take Lauren to get something to eat," Tiana said, then turned and strode out.

Andrew was

not sure what the most

cunning, unpredictable, and

dangerous woman in the Rhodes

family wanted now, but he was not worried. He gave Lauren a

reassuring nod, then followed Tiana out without hesitation.

They walked in silence, one after the other, through the estate until they reached a hidden garden nestled deep in the back. Towering hedges and lush flowers surrounded them on all sides, making the space completely secluded.

Tiana finally stopped in the center, turned around, and smiled. "You know why I brought you here, don't you?"

Andrew shook his head. "No idea."

Her smile vanished. In the blink of an eye, a dagger slipped into her hand, and like a striking viper, she lunged at Andrew's throat. Her move was sharp fast, and deadly. It was obvious that she was not back.

wning

She growled, "Sorry, Andrew... but I have to kill you!"

Her sudden betrayal came so quickly that it felt surreal, faster than flipping a

page. For the first time in a long while, Andrew felt a surge of deep, burning anger rise from his chest.

With a cold snort, he stomped down hard, his body sliding backward in a controlled retreat.

"Tiana, you insane woman! I saved your family-saved you-and this is how you thank me? You still want more?"

When she could not land the strike, Tiana's expression twisted in frustration. She gritted her teeth and chased after him with even more force.

She uttered, "Andrew, I know you're furious, but I had no choice. If I kill you now, Lauren will stop clinging to you. She'll marry into the Driscolls peacefully and live a life of luxury and safety.

"Moreover, Jameson won't be dragged into your mess either!"

She had missed her first strike, but she did not stop. The dagger came slashing again, faster and fiercer than before.

## Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Andrew raised his knee, blocking her incoming strike with ease. A sharp glint flashed in his eyes as he threw a punch without hesitation. The air itself trembled, bursting with a sound like a roar.

Tiana's face twisted in sheer terror. It felt like an ancient beast-a primal force- was crashing down on her, unstoppable and overwhelming.

It was like a helpless insect facing a natural disaster. With a sickening crack, blood filled her mouth and splattered across her chest and blouse. The dagger in her hand snapped, leaving only the hilt as she was thrown violently backward, crashing onto the stone path of the garden.

Andrew strode over with a cold, unreadable expression, towering over her. "Talk. Give me one good reason not to kill you right now."

Tiana tossed aside the broken hilt and wiped the blood from her lips. To his surprise, she actually laughed.

"Impressive. Seriously, that was incredible. Go ahead. If you want to kill me, then do it. But before you strike, let me explain why I came at you like that."

Andrew snorted. "Make it count. It better be a reason worth sparing your life."

Tiana smiled bitterly. "There's no other reason. I did it because I'm terrified of what you are. I'm afraid you might drag Lauren and Jameson into your mess. So, I had to get rid of you."

Andrew frowned. "Then what was all that earlier, in front of Lauren and Mr. Rhodes? What was the point of those kind words? I already told you I'd handle the Driscolls myself, didn't I?"

Tiana scoffed. "That was all just to trick you. Andrew, you're smart, but even you fell for something so simple? Yes, you beat Aidan. You're stronger than me by far. But against the Driscolls, you're still way outmatched. That gap is massive- nearly impossible to close.

"However, you're not in a place where you can say you're unafraid of the Five Apex Families, are you? So, I pretended to believe in you. I gave you my approval, just to get Lauren and Jameson out of the way."

She added, "But deep down? I still didn't think you were enough. It's a shame I failed. If I had succeeded, the Rhodes family would've been in the clear. Once Lauren married Joe, we'd be sitting pretty-no worries, no threats. Just wealth, power, and peace."

Andrew's blow earlier had been brutal, enough to take down a rampaging bull.

After speaking so much, her internal injuries flared up again, and she coughed up more blood.

Andrew hesitated, unable to finish her off. He thought this woman was a walking headache. From the moment they met in Jayrodale, she had tested every inch of his patience.

Even someone like Aidan, who once acted untouchable, had nearly fallen for her trick.



In fact, Tiana was the first woman Andrew truly found difficult to handle. "For Lauren's sake, no matter how angry I get... I won't kill you."

With a cold stare, Andrew crouched beside her. "Come on, I'll take you back. The Rhodes family can treat your injuries."

Tiana winced in pain. "Your punch did a number on me. My lungs are damaged...

I can't even stand. Come closer. Just pick me up."

Andrew did not think she would try to pull the same trick again, so he reached out and wrapped his arm around her waist. However, just as he did she summoned strength out of nowhere, grabbed the front of his shirt with both hands and then yanked hard.

With a loud rip, Andrew's designer suit—worth more than a month's rent for most people—was torn right off. His shirt was shredded with it, leaving his upper body completely exposed.

Andrew's expression twisted in fury. "Tiana! Have you lost your damn mind?!"

Yet, she did not respond. Her eyes widened in a mix of awe and eerie satisfaction, fixed on the center of his bare chest.

She gasped, "I knew it... I knew it! You're from the Lloyd family from Chetvine. Not just a member—you're the last direct heir. You're the Dragon Prince..."

"That totem on your chest is called the Blood-Eyed Black Dragon, and it's one of a kind. It exists nowhere else. That man had exactly the same totem—no difference at all."

She muttered like she was in a trance, her arms suddenly wrapping around Andrew's exposed torso in a tight, desperate hug.

'Oh hell no!' That was the only thought that blasted into Andrew's mind. He immediately pried her arms off with force.

There he was, standing shirtless before this woman—a flirtatious, manipulative, still-stunning cougar who was clinging to him like a lovesick teen.

Except this was not just any woman, she was supposed to be his future mother-in-law!

And she pulled that move?

What kind of madness was this?

## **Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)**

Fortunately, the garden remained empty the entire time-no one passed by, and no one noticed a thing. If someone had seen what just happened, Andrew felt like even jumping into a river of bleach would not be enough to clear his name.

He quickly gave Tiana a healing pill, wiped the blood from her lips, and helped her sit upright on a nearby bench. Only then did he finally exhale, tension easing just a little.

"Thanks," Tiana murmured, her eyes reluctantly dragging away from his bare chest. She seemed to realize how reckless and inappropriate her behavior had been, and her cheeks flushed a deep pink.

Even though she was well into her 40s and the mother of two daughters, Tiana had kept herself in peak condition. Thanks to her years of martial arts and rigorous discipline, her figure and presence still radiated strength and allure.

If one looked past the iciness in her demeanor and the maturity in her gaze, there was no denying—Tiana was the epitome of a seductive, dangerous beauty.

Andrew's tone remained cold. "You recognized the mark on my chest. You mentioned another man. Who was he?"

Tiana's blush deepened, reaching all the way to the corners of her eyes. "His name... was Reginald Lloyd. He was my first-the first man I ever loved, and I loved him so much it nearly destroyed me.

"Before I married Lauren's father, Reginald and I were completely wrapped up in each other. He took my virginity, and I fell for him hard-so hard I never really came back from it. And on his chest... there was a totem, exactly like yours. No difference at all."

She added, "That's how I knew. That mark belongs to the Dragon Prince-the one true heir to Chetvine's royal Lloyd bloodline."

She paused then, eyes distant, caught in bittersweet memories. Her gaze flicked toward Andrew's chest again, her hand twitching as if she wanted to reach out- but she held back.

Andrew felt his scalp tingle with discomfort. "Reginald... yeah, I know him."

Tiana's eyes widened. She leaned forward, breath catching. "You do? Then do you know where he is? After he left me, he vanished.

"No letter, no call-he just disappeared from the world. I

searched for him for three years... three years, Andrew! And when

nothing came of it, I finally gavel

Out of rage, I married Jameson instead. Even now, I don't know

where that bastard went

Her face, once soft with longing, contorted into bitter resentment. The shift was instant—jaw clenched, eyes burning.

Andrew watched her, his own face twitching in disbelief. He gave a stiff smile. "Yeah... so, the guy you're looking for? That would be my dad, and as for where he is now? I've got no clue either."

His own father had messed around, broken a woman's heart, and dipped. Now, that woman was standing in front of him, ready to burn the world down—starting with the guy's son.

Andrew could not help cursing silently. What kind of messed-up, soap opera-level crap is this?

Tiana froze. "Reginald is your father? You're the son of that heartless bastard? That two-faced, cold-blooded..."

Andrew rubbed the back of his neck, trying to stay calm. "Yeah, unfortunately, that's exactly what I am."

"Mrs. Rhodes, you should know... the Blood-Eyed Black Dragon totem can only be inherited by the Dragon Prince of the royal Lloyd family. My father was the last one. Now, it's me."

Tiana's jaw clenched as she

growled, "No wonder you're no better than him. Of course, you're cut from the same damn cloth—you're his

and Lauren? That can never happen!"

son! And that means never 4 msne

you

## Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

"I'm not just saying you and Lauren can't be together," Tiana snapped, her voice cold as ice. "I have to kill you, then hunt down that bastard Reginald and make sure he regrets everything!"

Andrew sighed, completely speechless. "Mrs. Rhodes, come on... that's a bit much, don't you think? If you've got beef with my dad for what he did back then, fine. But take it out on him, not me—I didn't do anything."

Tiana let out a dark laugh. "You're his son. Since I can't find him, of course, I'm going to take it out on you!"

Andrew watched her cycle from smug satisfaction to explosive rage, then fall into wounded nostalgia again. He could not even stay mad anymore—there was no point.

Honestly, she was not evil. She was just a woman trapped in the past, tormented by a love that never got closure.

He asked, "Mrs. Rhodes, when you attacked me earlier, you weren't really trying to kill me, were you?"

Tiana snorted. "I said it already—you saved our family; I'm not ungrateful. I struck first for two reasons: first, I needed to test just how powerful you really are. And two, I wanted to confirm a suspicion that's been nagging at me."

Andrew thought it over. "So, when you ripped my shirt open, you already suspected I had ties to the Chetvine Lloyds?"

Tiana nodded. "That's right. Marvin, the man who raised you, used to be a butler for the Lloyds royal bloodline. You've shown incredible strength and strategic brilliance—far beyond anything normal.

"The moment you killed Aidan, I began to suspect you were one of the Lloyds. But I didn't realize... you weren't just one of them. You're actually the Dragon Prince."

She finished her explanation, but her gaze drifted again toward his chest, her eyes flickering with heat. Her cheeks pinked slightly, and no one had to guess where her thoughts were going.

Andrew felt a wave of secondhand embarrassment wash over him. The way she looked at him looked like she might devour him on the spot.

He said flatly Mrs. Rhodes, please. You really shouldn't hang onto any hope when it comes to my dad. Before the fall of the Lloyds, he disappeared completely. I can still

sense that he's alive, but where he is or what condition he's in, have no clue."

Tiana hesitated for a moment, then nodded. believe you. Reginald was always a restless soul. No matter where he went, he couldn't sit still for long. I know he loved me back then. I'm sure of it.

"But the way he walked out without a word... it proves he was never the kind to stick around."

Andrew said softly, "Then let him go. Come on, I'll help you back. You need to rest."

Tiana tried to stand but staggered immediately. Thankfully, Andrew caught her again before she could fall.

"Andrew," she said, looking up at him, her voice lower this time, "Everything that happened between us today—I need you to keep it to yourself. Don't tell anyone, especially Lauren."

Andrew nodded firmly. "You have my word, Mrs. Rhodes. The past is the past. I won't say a word about any of this—not even to Mr. Rhodes. It wouldn't be fair to

him."

Tiana looked at him strangely, then muttered, "Actually... Jameson does know about Reginald and me."

Andrew froze. "Wait... What?"

He felt like the shocking news kept coming—one wave after another. He blurted out, "Mrs. Rhodes, are you telling me Mr. Rhodes knows you were involved with my dad?"

## Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Andrew took a deep breath, doing his best to stay calm as he asked, "So, you're telling me Mr. Rhodes knows about you and my dad?"

Tiana huffed. "I've never been the type to tiptoe around my past, especially not when it comes to love. I told Jameson everything before he married me— everything. In fact, he even knows I slept with Reginald. And get this—back in the day, your dad and Jameson were actually close friends!"

Andrew thought this was pure chaos. He rubbed his temples, feeling a pounding ache behind his eyes. His head throbbed-like, really throbbed.

"Please don't tell me..." Andrew said slowly, dread creeping into his voice, "...that Lauren isn't actually Mr. Rhodes' daughter, but my dad's?"

The second the words left his mouth, Tiana spat to the side and snapped, "You little punk, what the hell is wrong with you? I may be crazy, but do you really think I'd let Jameson raise another man's kid and not tell him?"

"Relax. I know what you're thinking. You're worried Lauren might turn out to be your half-sister and boom-no more romance, right? Well, don't worry. Lauren has nothing to do with Reginald. She's mine and Jameson's."

Andrew let out a long sigh of relief. "Thank God. It's still a mess, but at least it's not that level of disaster."

Tiana gave a long, bitter sigh of her own. "Life really plays cruel jokes, huh? I fell for Reginald so hard back then. And now, all these years later, Lauren's fallen for you. It's like the universe is punishing me all over again."

Seeing the heaviness in her smile, Andrew straightened up. "Mrs. Rhodes, I'm not my dad. I'm serious about Lauren. I mean it."

Tiana shook her head gently. "Don't be so quick to promise things, kid. Reginald was the same way-brilliant, magnetic... utterly unforgettable. As the Dragon Prince, he was worshipped across the world. Women threw themselves at him without shame. Of course, he ended up with countless lovers, wives, soulmates, and god knows what else."

Andrew swore, "I'm not him. He's his own mess-I'm my own man."

Sure, he had inherited a few of Reginald's more impressive traits, like the ability to lie through his teeth while sounding completely sincere.

As the front steps of the Rhodes residence came into view, Tiana suddenly buried her face in her hands and muttered, "About earlier, when I hugged you... just forget it happened, alright? "

"I wasn't thinking clearly. I saw the totem on your chest and... I thought of him. I mistook you for Reginald at that moment. That's all."

Andrew nodded quickly. "Got it. Totally understand."

Tiana's cheeks flushed again, and she mumbled under her breath, "Honestly, you've got a damn fine figure, kid. Just as good as he was back then....."

Andrew grinned. "Well, technically speaking, that makes me your junior. So if you ever feel the need to reach outthey, as your future son-in-law, I won't say no!"

"Get lost!" Tiana yelled, scandalized. "You little brat, I swear, you so much as think another indecent thought, and I'll rip your face off, got it?"

Andrew wisely shut his mouth, wondering what Tiana was even imagining. All he wanted was to make peace and offer a little comfort for the heartbreak Reginald left behind.

Yet somehow, she had wisted that into something so wildly inappropriate he could not even wrap his head around it.

## Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Back inside the Rhodes residence's living room, both Jameson and Lauren looked utterly baffled by what they saw.

Jameson asked, "Andy, Tiana, what the heck happened to you two?"

Tiana's clothes were disheveled, her face pale, and there were traces of blood on her blouse.

Andrew looked even more outrageous-his entire upper body was bare, showing off lean muscle and perfect definition, while his arm still supported Tiana as they walked in. The way it looked... well, let's just say it could be wildly misunderstood. Tiana's cheeks flushed, and she said casually, "Jameson, are you just going to stand there? Help me to my room. My injury from when Aidan attacked me flared up again. Thankfully, Andrew helped me back."

Jameson blinked. "Oh... right. That makes sense. Alright, Andy, hand her over to me. I'll take her to lie down."

Andrew nodded and gently passed Tiana into Jameson's care. "Mrs. Rhodes, it's not too serious. With rest and a few days of care, you'll recover just fine."

Tiana gave a soft hum of acknowledgment and left the room with Jameson. Meanwhile, Lauren turned to Andrew with a sly smile, her eyes practically glowing with mischief.

Andrew blinked. "What's with that look?"

Lauren giggled and asked sweetly, "Andrew, what exactly happened between you and my mom in that garden? How did your shirt end up ripped?"

Andrew immediately waved his hands. "It's not what you're thinking! Lauren, don't jump to conclusions!"

She burst into laughter, clearly enjoying his flustered reaction. "Relax! I know nothing could've happened. My mom has a nasty temper and a sharp tongue. She hides a lot, but I know her better than anyone.

"There have only been two men in her life she ever truly loved. One of them was her first love-the one who broke her heart. She used to talk about him when I was little, but now she never mentions him. And the other man... is my dad."

Andrew really wanted to confess that Tiana's first love was his father. However, after some thought, he decided to keep that bombshell to himself.

No need to mess with Jameson's peace of mind-especially since Tiana had claimed Jameson and Reginald used to be friends. Still, after so many years, who knew how Jameson might feel about it now?

Andrew could not imagine what would happen if Jameson found out the son of his former love rival was now dating his daughter. After all, that would piss any man off.

Andrew and Lauren cuddled a bit more before he glanced at the time and figured it was about time to

leave if he wanted to be with Lauren without complications, he had to resolve things with the Driscolls.

Still, this trip to the Rhodes estate had not been pointless. At the very least, he had pulled Lauren's family back from the brink. As for Kenny and Sherilyn-whether they could survive the fallout from the Goldings was still up in the air. Even if they lived, they would no longer be a threat to Jameson.

Rubbing his stomach, Andrew let out a dry chuckle. He had fought and bled through all that chaos, and he had not even gotten to eat dinner. Pulling out his phone, he dialed Aspen's number, hoping his loyal little assistant had dinner plans in place.

"We're sorry, the number you have dialed is currently unavailable." Andrew's brows furrowed the moment he heard the automated message. He had explicitly ordered Aspen to keep her phone on 24/7 for emergencies.

Even if she could not answer, her phone should never be off. A sinking feeling crept into his chest. Without wasting a second, he hailed a cab and headed straight for Aspen's rented villa.

When he arrived, the area was silent.

"Now that's interesting," Andrew murmured, a cold gleam flickering in his eyes as he stepped boldly toward the door.

This was a luxury villa, yet at this hour, no streetlight or exterior light was on. He did not need confirmation-his instincts screamed that someone had broken in.

More specifically-killers.

As Andrew stepped into the first-floor living room, he was greeted by pitch-black silence. However, his eyes were as sharp as a predator's.



Suddenly, he noticed that there were bloodstains on the floor.

## Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Scattered chairs, overturned tables, and shattered glass from the back window completed the chaotic scene.

Andrew's eyes sharpened as he stepped toward the staircase and barked coldly, "Come out."

After three seconds, a masked man stepped into view at the bend of the stairs. He was holding a gun in one hand, a combat knife sheathed at his waist, and eyes sharp as a hawk's.

"You noticed something was wrong, but instead of running, you walked right in like you owned the place. You must be real confident in your skills." The man sneered as he raised the gun, aiming directly at Andrew's head.

Then, he pulled the trigger without a hint of hesitation. He wasted no time on speeches, eager to end the situation. After all, unnecessary chatters were the reason many villains died.

Even so, deep down, the assassin was surprised. He was told that the target on the Goldings' hit list was supposed to be some minor nobody. Yet somehow, this guy had spotted him instantly-despite a perfect hiding spot.

Still, it did not matter. With his skill level and the cold precision of his pistol, it would be over in a flash. Even if the kid was some half-baked semi-martial king, a direct hit would slow him down.

Then, once injured, his teammates would descend like vultures to finish the job and collect the sweet, sweet 300-million-dollar bounty.

As he pulled the trigger, the assassin was already fantasizing about how to spend his share.

First stop: find a hot, mature woman. Then, he would disappear with her for a two-week escape to a treehouse resort in the mountain range abroad. There, he would finally release all the pressure he had built up as a killer.

No more silent nights or blood-stained targets just soft beds, smooth whiskey, and a woman who could bend without breaking. Not like those bratty college girls or fake-coy bitches who whimpered at the slightest touch.

No, mature women were different. They were broken in and more adventurous-a true professional's dream. In their little hitman circles, they called it what it was- the best of the best.

The pistol fired with a muffled pop. The bullet shot forward, slicing through the darkness.

The killer smirked, confident that it would hit Andrew. He pulled out his knife and rushed in to finish the job, but what greeted him was no bleeding target.

It was a monster hiding in the shadows, a beast that slammed straight into his chest like a wrecking ball.

He let out a sharp, strangled cry as his entire ribcage collapsed inward on impact. Blood and shredded organ matter burst from his lungs and sprayed from his mouth.

He stared wide-eyed in disbelief, wondering if he had actually missed his shot. After all, at a distance of less than ten meters, his aim should have been perfect. fo

Before he could process it, he saw his own dagger-now in Andrew's hand- slash across his throat with precision, and it felt like his neck had been split open.

Just like that, a peak senior grandmaster assassin died without even leaving a scar behind.

In the darkness, Andrew's voice rang out coldly, low and unbothered. "You thought a gun made you invincible? Real killers don't rely on

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weapons-they are the weapon."

He stepped over the assassin's body and mocked, "And weak assassins like you? You're the kind who always ends up getting killed instead."

Still murmuring to himself, he began walking up the stairs. At that exact moment, two other assassins-who had been hanging from the stairwell above-panicked.

With heavy breathing and a gust of wind, they flung themselves toward the second-floor window, desperately trying to escape. Their minds were blank with terror.

If even Vulture, who was stronger than both of them, had been killed that easily, it meant their target was bit someone weak. Instead, he was ridiculously strong.

Sure, the 300-million-dollar bounty was insane, but no payday was worth dying for.

## **Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)**

"Since you're already here, why not stay?" Andrew's voice was icy.

A chilling smirk tugged at the corner of his lips as he lunged forward, moving with ghostly speed.

The two assassins barely reached the second-floor window, desperately trying to break it open. Before their fists even made contact, Andrew's brutal punches smashed into their backs.

The impact was deafening-like lightning striking hard and heavy. The windows shattered instantly, exploding outward as the two assassins flew through them. Just like that, their bodies crashed onto the lawn below, shards of glass mixing with blood and flesh.

They lay lifeless, eyes wide with terror, frozen forever in their final moments.

Andrew's expression was terrifyingly cold. "Aspen, if you're still alive, you can come out now," he called out softly, his voice echoing through the silent villa.

Silence answered him. It seemed he was alone, the villa devoid of any other living soul.

A rare sense of urgency surged through him, and Andrew bolted downstairs, intent on searching the garage and basement. Yet, just as he reached the staircase, he heard the faintest noise from an upstairs closet.

In mere seconds, Andrew stood before the closet door and yanked it open. Dresses and coats hung innocently, hiding nothing at first glance. However, his sharp gaze quickly found the floor-blood seeped slowly from beneath the hanging clothes.

He pushed them aside roughly, discovering Aspen curled up, barely conscious. Her face was ghostly pale, drenched in cold sweat, eyes flickering weakly. A vicious knife wound gaped in her chest, deep enough to pierce both skin and clothing.

"You... jerk," Aspen breathed weakly, trembling with effort. "If you'd been a second later... you'd be finding my corpse."

She collapsed into unconsciousness, and Andrew caught her swiftly, his voice steady and firm. "Relax, you won't die on me."

Carrying her gently to the adjacent bedroom, Andrew flicked on the lights, illuminating the full extent of her injuries. Cuts covered her hands, clearly from struggling bare-handed against knives.

"You're one gutsy woman..." Andrew chuckled softly, admiration and worry mingling in his voice as he began tending to her wounds.

Half-conscious, Aspen weakly crossed her arms defensively, mumbling, "Don't... Just take me... to a hospital..."

"It's late. The doctors won't be available," Andrew replied bluntly. "Besides, why bother when you have me?"

Without hesitation, he tore open her bloodied blouse along the wound line. Beneath it, her bra was soaked in crimson, stubbornly difficult to unclasp.

Cursing under his breath about the complexity of women's underwear, Andrew finally just ripped it apart. Immediately, her modest curves sprang free, smooth and pale beneath the harsh bedroom lights.

Nonetheless, Andrew's focus remained purely clinical. He carefully cleaned the blood away and applied medicine, methodically bandaging the wound. Unfortunately, the wound's placement-just inches below her chest-made avoiding

contact impossible.

However, after finishing the bandages, he realized with a slight flush that the sensation had not exactly been unpleasant. Inwardly, he found himself

involuntarily comparing Aspen to Francesca.

Francesca was famously voluptuous, impossible to grasp fully in one hand, while Aspen's modest figure was smaller yet perfectly firm and alluring.

Andrew caught himself quickly, dismissing those thoughts. Taking advantage of a helpless woman was beneath him.

After thoroughly treating Aspen's injuries, Andrew gently carried her to the garage and placed her carefully into the back seat of his Ferrari. Then, he drove swiftly away from the compromised villa.

With assassins already aware of their location, staying would mean endless trouble. Andrew could handle himself effortlessly, but Aspen was vulnerable. Losing her would genuinely upset him.

Parking in front of an upscale hotel, Andrew carried Aspen carefully from the car. Tossing the keys casually to the valet, he strode into the lobby.

"Andrew, is that you?"

A familiar, cold voice stopped him in his tracks. Andrew turned expressionlessly, meeting the gaze of Christina and her family.

Irene sneered harshly, "Andrew, you really are shameless! Aspen is from the Stevens family from Bridgefields—she's practically family!"