

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren) 1321-1330

Looking closer, it was obvious that each gift bag alone appeared incredibly high- end and luxurious.

Esther hurriedly said, "Aspen, Mr. Lloyd, what are these? How could you spend so much money? This is too extravagant!"

Aspen snorted and replied, "Mom, Dad, Judith, please accept these gifts without worry! Besides, I didn't pay for these gifts. My boss here is the generous one who spends lavishly!"

This statement immediately caused Zephyr, Esther, and everyone in the Stevens family to look at Andrew in unison.

Andrew calmly picked up his tea and drank it, maintaining his composure without changing his expression. Being the most excited and active, Judith had already started rummaging through the gifts.

Esther was about to stop Judith, but the little girl suddenly exclaimed in shock, holding the receipt, "Oh my goodness, these things actually cost 198.88 million dollars..."

She turned to Aspen and Andrew, adding, "You guys are like next-level rich, aren't you?"

Esther asked in disbelief, "What did you say? How much did they cost?"

Zephyr was also somewhat alarmed and scolded Judith to put everything down, saying she was talking nonsense.

Oscar sneered. "Mr. and Mrs. Stevens, please stay calm! The little girl is still too young. She doesn't understand or recognize numbers properly. Gifts that cost nearly 200 million? There's no such outrageous thing in this world!"

While laughing disdainfully, he stepped forward to check for himself, not believing it. When he saw the numbers on the receipt, they were densely packed in a long string.

After carefully counting back and forth for a long time, Oscar's Adam's apple bobbed as his face filled with bewilderment. He asked, "They really did cost 200 million? Andrew, is this receipt fake?"

Andrew did not bother answering such a stupid question.

However, Aspen was somewhat displeased and said, "Oscar, these items did cost 200 million to buy! If you don't believe it, we can go to the stores right now and let them verify it!"

Oscar could not find further fault and chuckled dryly. "Aspen, look at you, I was just joking! Mr. Lloyd is truly wealthy and generous for spending 200 million dollars on these gifts!"

After reluctantly complimenting Andrew, he returned to his seat with a gloomy face. He thought bitterly, 'Damn it! Is Andrew here to propose a marriage? What's with all the gifts? Besides, there was no need to spend so much on a proposal!'

After all, Andrew had spent 200 million dollars, not two million or twenty thousand. Even if Oscar

really had the chance to marry

Aspen someday, the Hopkingsel

could not afford such an

extravagant gesture. Not just the Hopkings, but even the top-tier families in Blumedale would not

spend 200 million dollars on the first

meeting.

It was basically just throwing money at people.

Zephyr and Esther were also stunned into silence for quite some time.

Esther tentatively asked, "Well, Mr. Lloyd, it seems you and our Aspen are quite financially comfortable in Blumedale!".

Andrew smiled and replied, "Mrs. Stevens, you flatter me. I'm not capable of much, but your precious daughter has earned me quite a bit of money!"

Aspen could not decide whether to laugh or scream in frustration. She did not expect Andrew to be surprisingly modest and shockingly considerate. The way he effortlessly played along in front of her family gave her nothing short of a princess' treatment.

However, Aspen had her own pride and did not want to deceive her

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family, so she told the truth, "Dad, Mom, don't listen to him talking. nonsense. At most, I'm just an employee-the wealthy one is him. He opened a company in Blumedale that's now worth nearly 60 billion."

The Stevens family members collectively gasped when they heard the amount.

Each of them felt their heart skip a beat.

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Esther's gaze at Andrew had unknowingly turned cautious. Just as Zephyr had warned, Andrew was not just a small fish in a pond—he was a monster in the deep sea.

Zephyr's thoughts ran even deeper. He quickly ran the numbers in his mind, comparing Andrew's assets to those of the Bridgefields' Stevens family.

The Stevens, an established family in their own right, had a combined net worth of around 20 billion. Yet, when stacked against Andrew, it was barely a third.

Sighing, Zephyr raised his glass and offered a toast. "Mr. Lloyd, you're truly remarkable. Even without Aspen as a factor, I'd still have immense respect for you."

Andrew lifted his glass with a relaxed smile. "You're too kind, Mr. Stevens. I've said it before, I owe my success to your precious daughter."

After Zephyr's toast, the rest of the Stevens family quickly followed suit, standing one by one to raise their glasses. None dared be left out, each exchanging warm words and friendly banter with Andrew.

Meanwhile, Oscar, an outsider to this family gathering, sat alone at the edge of the table, his face darkening with each passing moment. He silently cursed, 'Damn it, this isn't how tonight is supposed to go. Andrew was supposed to be the one left humiliated and out of place!'

Yet now, the tables had turned. He, the so-called Hopkins heir, had become invisible—a ghost in a room where Andrew was the center of every conversation, constantly surrounded by clinking glasses and admiring smiles.

No one even bothered to glance his way, leaving Oscar to stare blankly into his glass. His mind drifted to a line from a Green Day song: "I walk a lonely road, the only one I have ever known..."

Of course, it was not that dramatic. Nonetheless, at that moment, he felt every bit like a forgotten figure in a crowded room, walking a lonely road that no one bothered to follow.

Forcing a strained smile, Oscar seized the moment and approached Aspen.

"Hey, Aspen, how about a drink? It's been ages since we last caught up. You've lost some weight since moving to Blumedale. It pains me to see you like this."

Since everyone was ignoring him, he might as well be proactive. Besides, he believed that Aspen might have actually liked him a little back when they were in Bridgefields. So, he rose to his feet, slipping effortlessly into that "boy-next-door" charm.

Aspen offered a polite smile, shaking her head. "Thanks, Oscar, but I think I'll pass."

Oscar pushed a little harder. "Come on, Aspen. We're like family. We should celebrate your upcoming return to Bridgefields. Just one drink for old times' sake."

Aspen's smile remained, but her tone grew firmer. "I might have considered it, but Mr. Lloyd has already had a few. I'll need to drive him home later, so I really can't."

Oscar felt his heart twist, the sharp

sting of rejection cutting deeper than he expected. Aspen was once the untouchable golden girl of Bridgefields, the woman who could outshine every man in the room without breaking a sweat. Yet, she was now playing the perfect,

obedient servant to Andrew.

He downed his own drink in one bitter gulp, his jealousy and resentment turning into a barely contained rage.

Oscar wondered why such a beautiful woman cared for Andrew and not him.

Why was all her devotion and grace wasted on this arrogant bastard?

After downing a large glass of strong liquor by himself, Oscar could not hold back anymore. He needed to see Andrew on his

knees begging, humiliated, reduced to a pitiful clown. He wanted to show Zephyr's family that he was the one who really commanded respect.

Rising from his seat, Oscar went to the restroom to make a phone call. "Hello, is this Mr. Elon Golding? This is Oscar!

"Yes, that's right, the 'bucket boy' from Bridgefields, Mr. Golding. Thank you for remembering me!"

On the other end of the phone, Elon responded indifferently, "Oh, it's you. What's up?"

Oscar gritted his teeth and said, "It's like this, Mr. Golding. I'm currently in Blumedale, at the Veridian Hotel."

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Oscar said, "There's a lowlife strutting around like he owns the place, and I can't stand it! So, I figured I'd ask you to swing by, Mr. Golding, and show this clown what real power looks like. Help me put some respect on my name, you feel me?" Elon replied, "Alright, since you've served me well before, I'll come over!"

Oscar was overjoyed, grinning so wide his face almost twisted. "Great! I'll be at the hotel waiting for you, Mr. Golding! That little punk tried to steal my girl! Mr. Golding, don't hold back when you see him! I want him humiliated so bad he'll wish he never showed up!"

Elon scoffed. "Got it. Just showing up is enough to make anyone back off. Whatever effect you want, I'll make it happen!"

After hanging up, Oscar sneered, rubbing his hands together. He just needed Elon to show up, and his moment to shine would finally begin.

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In the private room, they were well into the meal, with multiple rounds of drinks and various dishes served. When Oscar returned and saw the scene, his face turned green. He could not believe that no one bothered to call him.

The dishes were mostly leftovers, and the drinks were almost finished, leaving Oscar feeling both hungry and unsatisfied.

Meanwhile, Zephyr and Andrew were still engrossed in conversation.

"Mr. Lloyd, tomorrow is the highly anticipated Grand Medical Summit. We just arrived in Blumedale and aren't fully caught up on the news. Who are the frontrunners this time? Advanced Medical Institute? Mosby? Or maybe the Traditional Medicine Association?"

Andrew answered calmly, "From what I've gathered, it's a heated rivalry between Blumedale Hospital on one side, and Mosby and the Advanced Medical Institute on the other. These two sides are the most likely to come out on top!"

Zephyr sighed, "Those who can participate in the Grand Medical Summit are all top figures in the medical field. Any single one of them would have countless powers scrambling to build connections!"

Aspen suddenly chimed in, "You guys probably don't know this yet, but Mr. Lloyd is also attending the Grand Medical Summit."

That statement left Zephyr and the others stunned.

"Mr. Lloyd, you too?" one of the Stevens family members asked, visibly shocked.

Andrew smiled modestly. "Just tagging along to see what it's all about."

Oscar took the chance to mock, "Well said! Honestly, going to the summit really is just to broaden your horizons, especially for someone like you. Just make sure you don't embarrass yourself by being eliminated right away!"

Andrew's smile did not falter. "Being eliminated immediately? I don't think that'll happen."

Oscar sneered. "Oh, really? You think you can compete with heavyweights like Mosby and the Advanced Medical Institute?"

Aspen frowned. "Oscar, it seems you really don't know much about Mr. Lloyd's medical skills. He's representing Blumedale Hospital this time! Both its hospital directors and even Governor McCormick are backing him!"

Once again, the Stevens family members were left speechless, staring at Andrew like they had just seen a ghost. They all wondered if there was anything this guy couldn't do.

After all, he was rich and skilled in medicine. Even Derek, a powerhouse figure, was supporting him. It was beyond impressive.

Oscar's face burned with embarrassment. Instead of humiliating Andrew, he boosted his reputation even more, earning him newfound respect from the Stevens family.

He silently grumbled, 'Damn it! Andrew, you won't get to stay smug for long! Once Elon arrives, your true colors will be exposed!'

The longer Oscar waited, the more restless he became. Finally, Elon arrived. Before even stepping inside, they could already hear the man's boastful voice from outside the room.

"I'm Elon Golding, the epitome of money, glory, and power!"

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

The private booth's door swung open, and the overweight Elon barged in, flanked by two burly bodyguards.

Oscar's face lit up, and he quickly stood, his tone dripping with flattery. "Mr. Golding, you're here!"

Elon barely grunted in response, not even sparing a glance at the Stevens family. To him, they were just a bunch of small-town nobodies, not worth his time.

Oscar turned to the Stevens family with a smug grin. "Mr. and Mrs. Stevens, Aspen, allow me to introduce someone. This is Mr. Elon Golding, of the Goldings, one of the Five Apex Families!"

Zephyr quickly stood up, eyes wide with a mix of surprise and disbelief. "Oscar, Mr. Golding is your friend?"

Oscar's grin stretched even wider. "Mr. Stevens, you flatter me!"

Then, he turned to Elon and added, "Mr. Golding, you're so kind to drop by! Please, have a seat."

Zephyr also quickly gestured to an open seat. "Please, Mr. Golding, have a seat!"

The other Stevens family members scrambled to make room, fully aware that an heir from the Five Apex Families was no small guest.

However, Elon simply waved a hand. "No need. I have other matters to attend to shortly."

He glanced at Oscar. "Didn't you say there was some small-time punk here that needed to be taught a lesson? Who is it?"

Oscar immediately pointed at Andrew, flashing a fawning smile. "Mr. Golding, it's this guy. He rolled in with 200-million-dollar gifts and pulled up in a LaFerrari! You're the king around here in Blumedale, so I figured you'd know if he's the real deal or just a poser!"

Without a second thought, Elon scoffed. "He's 100% a poser. I've seen his type a thousand times. Some small-town kid renting a luxury car and flashing fake luxuries just to impress girls."

Hearing this, the Stevens family members could not help but look uncomfortable. They could not help but doubt that Aspen was just parading Andrew around to show off in front of them.

Oscar burst into laughter, pointing at Andrew. "Hey, Andrew, didn't you say you're a big shot in Blumedale? Surely you've heard of Mr. Golding, right? In front of him, you're nothing! Your true colors are finally showing!"

Before Andrew could respond, Aspen shot back, clearly fed up. "Oscar, what the hell is wrong with you? We were just trying to enjoy a meal, and you had to drag someone in here for this?"

Oscar's tone grew defensive. "Aspen, I'm doing this for you! This bastard has been ordering you around and fooling Mr. and Mrs. Stevens. I'm exposing him for the fraud he is!"

Andrew could not hold back a smirk as he stood, locking eyes with Elon. "Fatty, let you off the hook for a while, and now you're getting bold, huh? What, you here to teach me a lesson?"

Elon's blood ran cold. He recognized the voice, the posture, the sheer presence.

The name 'Andrew' had already sent alarm bells ringing in his head, but now,

seeing the man up close, the realization hit him like a freight train.

This was not just any Andrew. This was the same Andrew that the Goldings had once put a hit on, a man their family's most ruthless assassins failed to take down. A man whose reputation had only grown stronger in Blumedale, a figure feared and respected by even the most powerful.

Elon's throat tightened, his Adam's apple bobbing visibly. Before long, a cold sweat broke out on his back.

Meanwhile, Oscar, completely oblivious, kept pushing. "Mr. Golding, don't let him get away with this! He just called you 'Fatty'! This punk is clearly asking for it!"

Zephyr and the rest of the Stevens family were just as baffled.

Why did Andrew seem completely unfazed by the presence of one of the most feared heirs in Blumedale?

The next moment, their jaws collectively hit the floor.

Elon, his face twisted in rage, suddenly spun around and slapped Oscar so hard his head snapped to the side. His cheek instantly turned red, blood dripping from his nose and mouth.

"Mr. Golding, w-what are you doing?" he stammered, clutching his burning cheek, his eyes wild with confusion.

He asked, "Why are you hitting me?!"

Elon's chest heaved, his eyes blazing. "You damn idiot! How dare you set me up! Are you trying to get me killed?"

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Elon growled, "Get over here, you idiot! I'll beat you to death!"

He was too terrified to face Andrew directly, so he took out his fear on Oscar instead, slapping him repeatedly. Not satisfied with just his fists, he started stomping on Oscar as well, his heavy shoes driving into Oscar's already battered face.

Before long, Oscar lay curled up under the table, his head a swollen mess of bruises and cuts.

"Stop, please, Mr. Golding, stop hitting me! W-What did I do to deserve this? Why are you treating me like this?"

His breaths came out in ragged gasps. Only when he managed to scramble further under the table, just out of Elon's reach, did he dare to whimper for mercy.

Zephyr finally spoke up, his voice steady but firm. "Mr. Golding, please, there's no need to take it this far. Let's talk this out."

Elon wiped the sweat from his face, ignoring Zephyr completely. He forced a stiff smile as he turned to Andrew. "Andy, I'm sorry for interrupting your meal. Look, this punk disrespected you, so I've already taken care of it for you. Well, I should get going then."

Elon took a step back, eager to escape, but Andrew's cold voice cut through the air. "Leaving already? You think you can just walk out after all this?"

Elon froze mid-step, a wave of dread washing over him. He turned back slowly, forcing a grimace that barely passed for a smile. "Andy, is there... something you're still unhappy about?"

Andrew leaned back, his eyes sharp and unyielding. "First, who gave you the right to act like we're on the same level? Who said you could call me 'Andy'? Second, I'm having a meal with Mr. Stevens, and you come barging in, ruining the mood. "You disrupted us, and you think you can just walk away without making it right? Fatty, did you think I was some pushover, that I'd just let this slide?"

The chill in Andrew's voice made Elon's entire body tremble. He quickly stammered, "Y-Yes, of course! Mr. Lloyd, I'm so sorry! I've clearly overstepped! I- I'll pay for this meal as an apology!"

Elon, who had been trying to play the big boss just moments ago, now bowed his head like a scolded child, shifting his tone to a humble, desperate plea.

Andrew waved a hand dismissively, clearly losing patience. "At least you know how to read the room. Now, get out."

Elon felt a wave of relief as he stumbled back toward the door, his shirt soaked with sweat, his round face pale and shiny.

Meanwhile, his two bodyguards, visibly shaken, scurried after him without a word. They silently cursed at their luck, knowing that Andrew was ruthless and even the Goldings could not deal with him.

If a conflict broke out, those bodyguards would inevitably be the first

to charge in. The result was obvious they would be the first to be buried six feet under.

Just like that, Elon and his men left. He had strutted in like a king, full of arrogance, even reciting grand lines at the door. Now, he slinked out pathetically, leaving behind a trail of sweat and shame.

The Stevens family members watched this dramatic

reversal in

stunned silence, their hearts still pounding. It felt like they had just ridden a rollercoaster, each emotional drop hitting harder than the last.

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Oscar slowly crawled out from under the table, his face a swollen, bloody mess, his eyes filled with terror as he looked at Andrew.

Andrew's mere existence could nearly scare the shit out of Elon. To think that he was dumb enough to provoke Andrew made Oscar's blood run cold.

Aspen glanced around at her stunned family members and explained, "You all should know by now that in Blumedale, Mr. Lloyd isn't someone the Goldings or any of the Five Apex Families can just mess with.

"Logan, the heir to the Keller family,

is sworn brothers with him. If

anyone from the Five Apex Families wants to pick a fight, it'll take

someone at the level of a family patriarch, not some spoiled brat."

The Stevens family members gaped at her, their minds reeling. Back in Jayrodale, they had already known Andrew was impressive, directly crushing their family.

However, he had just come to Blumedale with Aspen for a short time. So, how had he managed to build such influence in Blumedale so quickly?

It was simply unbelievable for the Stevens. Or rather, even with their wildest imagination, they could not fathom how Andrew had accomplished this.

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

With the meal finally over, the Stevens family walked Andrew and Aspen to the hotel entrance. Oscar followed timidly behind them, practically blending into the background.

Aspen waved them off, saying, "Mom, Dad, you should head back now. Tomorrow is the Grand Medical Summit. I'll come pick you up to watch the competition."

She felt a swell of satisfaction because the dinner had gone well. After all, Andrew's performance had been perfect the entire night. Though she prided herself on being independent, he had fed her ego by giving her a chance to shine in front of her parents.

However, Esther still appeared concerned. She waved Aspen over and said, "Aspen, come here. I want to have a word with you."

Aspen glanced at Andrew, who nodded slightly. Once received her approval, she stepped aside with Esther and asked, "Mom, what's wrong?"

Esther hesitated for a moment, choosing her words carefully. "Aspen, do you believe that Andrew will actually let you go when the time comes?"

Aspen fell silent, then finally gave a small nod. "Yes, he promised me. He said he'd give me my freedom."

Esther let out a long, relieved breath. "That's good to hear. From what I saw today, Andrew seems polite and thoughtful, not at all the kind of person I feared."

Aspen pouted a little, mumbling, "He's not a bad guy at all. In fact, he's been really nice to me."

Esther sighed deeply, her expression turning complicated. "Hearing you say that just makes me worry even more."

Aspen was surprised. "Huh? Why?"

Esther hesitated, looking her daughter in the eyes. "Aspen, have you... developed feelings for Andrew?"

Aspen froze, her face first turning a deep shade of red, then quickly paling. She stammered, her voice small and unsteady. "Mom, I-I haven't!"

"You're lying!" Esther shouted sternly, "Even at this point, you're still trying to fool me?"

She added, "I'm your mother-you can't hide it from me. Your father and I both saw the way you looked at him during dinner!"

Aspen's neck flushed pink as she lowered her head, unable to find the words to defend herself.

Esther let out a long, weary sigh, her frustration clear. "What a mess... what a complete mess. Aspen, you and Andrew aren't meant to be together, you know that, right?"

"Don't forget how you ended up with him in the first place you were forced into becoming his servant!! And now, you're telling me you've developed feelings for him? How did things get so twisted?"

She pointed a trembling finger at Aspen, her emotions a chaotic swirl of worry and disbelief.

Aspen suddenly lifted her head, biting her lip. "Mom, if... and I mean if... I really did fall in love with Andrew... would you, Dad, and the whole family support me?"

Esther shook her head, her face a mix of worry and disbelief. "Sweetheart, this isn't just about whether we support you or not. It's about the fact that Andrew has become someone far beyond our reach.

"I know you're proud and strong-willed, never one to bow to anyone, but you and him... just don't belong together. To put it bluntly, our family isn't in his league. We can't even hope to match him. No matter how you feel, your father and I will take you back to Bridgefields."

Aspen's face fell, her tone turning stubborn. "But what if I don't want to go back?"

Esther's brows furrowed, her voice

sharp. "What nonsense are you talking about? He's finally letting you go, and you're telling me you still want to stay with him? Are you out of your mind? And even if you've fallen for him, don't you see? To him, you're just a passing interest. He obviously has many other women."

That last sentence hit Aspen like a bucket of ice water dumped straight over her head.

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Aspen thought, 'Mom's right. I have feelings for Andrew, but he might not feel the same. In the end, it's probably just my one-sided wishful thinking. To him, I'm just a tool, a servant he can command at will.

'Maybe he wouldn't refuse if I offered myself physically, but in his heart, I doubt he ever saw me as anything close to Lauren or Francesca. Wait-No, I'm not even hoping for a place like Lauren or Francesca.

'I'd be content with just a position like Natasha's, but it seems even that is too much to ask for.'

Feeling resigned, Aspen finally said, "Mom, just tell Dad that after the Grand Medical Summit, I'll return to Bridgefields with you."

Her heart felt cold and heavy.

Esther noticed her precious daughter's obvious sorrow and tried to comfort her. "Don't worry, Aspen. Once we're back in Bridgefields, your father and I will introduce you to the finest young men from the best families. You're not getting any younger. Once you're back, focus on settling down and don't worry about other things."

Aspen's tone turned frosty. "I'll go back with you, but as for marriage, forget it. I grew up in Bridgefields. I know better than anyone what those so-called heirs are like. In any case, I've decided I won't marry. I'd rather spend the rest of my life alone."

Esther bit back her frustration, her heart filled with worry. She feared Aspen had already sunk too deep, too far gone to pull back.

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The Ferrari's engine roared to life, and the sleek car sped off, its taillights vanishing around the street corner. Only then did Zephyr turn to Esther, asking, "So? What did she say?"

Esther hesitated, struggling to find the right words.

Zephyr's frown deepened. "Just say it. Whatever it is, I'm ready to hear it."

Esther finally sighed and whispered, "Aspen has probably fallen for Andrew."

Zephyr nearly jumped out of his shoes. "W-What did you just say?"

This news hit him harder than the thought of his precious daughter being physically taken advantage of.

Esther's face grew complicated. "Zephyr, I'm out of ideas! Aspen has always been stubborn, never one to bow to any man. In Bridgefields, there wasn't a single guy among her peers who could keep up with her.

"Unfortunately, she ran into this Andrew, someone who completely overwhelms her in every way, leaving her no room to resist. In that kind of situation, feelings are bound to grow, even if you try to guard against them. So now, even if we drag her back by force, her heart's already his."

Zephyr gritted his teeth, his expression dark. "This is a twisted, unhealthy kind of affection, you know that, right? Being enslaved and oppressed, yet still falling for him? Aspen is in too deep!"

Esther could not help but whisper, "But I'm not so sure it's entirely a bad thing since Andrew treats our daughter quite well."

Zephyr let out a bitter laugh. "Yes, I

can see that he treats her well. But so what? Do you really think our family can handle the fallout if

things go south? If he uses her and then discards her, who's going to pick up the pieces? You? Me? Who? Think about it. In our entire family, is there anyone who can stand up to someone like Andrew?"

Esther let out another heavy sigh, her worries only deepening. Meanwhile,

Zephyr's face twitched as another thought crossed his mind.

He glanced at his wife, his tone awkward as he asked, "D-Did you ask Aspen if...

if she and Andrew have, you know..."

Esther's face flushed crimson, and she snapped, "Are you crazy? How could I possibly ask her something like that? Besides, the way Aspen acts around him... It's clear her feelings are deep. For all we know, they might already be sharing a bed every night!"

Zephyr's scalp tingled, and he turned away abruptly. "Forget it! Forget I even asked! Let's just get back to the hotel!"

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

On the drive back, Andrew, sitting in the passenger seat, smiled and asked, "What did your mom say when she called you aside?"

Aspen stared straight ahead and replied coldly, "She wants me to return to Bridgefields with them. She also said I'm not getting any younger, and once I'm back, I should get married."

Andrew nodded, "Indeed, you are at a marriageable age."

Aspen sneered. "Whether I get married or not is my business. It has nothing to do with you, so you don't need to worry about it."

Andrew's face immediately twitched. He thought Aspen's temper was getting worse by the day, and she was becoming more defiant.

After a brief pause, he said, "If you really don't want to go back to Bridgefields, I can talk to your parents for you."

Aspen responded flatly, "No need. Who said I don't want to go back? After being your workhorse for so long, it's about time I returned to my life as a proper heiress."

Andrew frowned. "Aspen, are you seriously throwing a tantrum right now? Being a workhorse? Is that really how you see it?"

Aspen gritted her teeth, her pale cheeks twitching with suppressed anger. However, she stayed silent.

Andrew continued, "Alright, after tomorrow's Grand Medical Summit, I'll ask you again where you really stand. If you still want to leave, I'll make sure you return to Bridgefields in style."

Aspen let out a mocking laugh. "And what's that supposed to be? A grand farewell for your discarded servant? A case of 'use and discard'?"

Andrew chuckled. "Use and discard? You really like to twist words, don't you? You're not some heartbroken girl I toyed with and then threw away."

Aspen snapped, "Andrew, you've spanked me, groped my chest-and you say that's not playing with me? What's next? You want to go all the way before it counts as 'playing'?"

Her sudden outburst caught Andrew off guard. He did not expect her to suddenly explode on him out of nowhere. Moreover, what was with those bold words?

Eventually, Andrew conceded and said, "Alright, fine. Yes, I did spank you, and I might have copped a feel once or twice. But I swear, I never touched your chest!"

Aspen let out a derisive snort. "Like there's a difference! It's all the same-you're a certified pervert!"

Andrew's face turned serious. "Of course there's a difference! If I haven't touched, then I haven't touched. But if you want me to, pull over into that little grove up ahead, and I'll make it official. I'll make sure you never say I haven't touched you again."

What kind of twisted logic was that?

Aspen burst out laughing despite herself, her cheeks flushed. She hissed, "Get lost!"

She stomped on the gas, the Ferrari roaring as it sped back to Serenity Villa.

Before Andrew could say another word, Aspen stormed out of the car, slammed the door, and retreated to her room, locking the door with a resounding bang.

"Dammit!" Andrew cursed under his breath, his mood soured.

The Grand Medical Summit was only a night away. Just then, Andrew's phone rang—it was Malcolm and Francesca, both calling

to remind him to rest up and give his best performance tomorrow.

"Once the summit is over, I'll come over and stay with you. I can't wait any longer!"

Francesca whispered, hanging up with a teasing giggle.

After a cold shower, Andrew felt a bit calmer. However, his phone rang again—this time, it was Derek and Chantelle.

Derek's call was brief, just some small talk and words of
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encouragement, telling him to teach the people at Advanced Medical Institute a lesson. He even praised

Andrew for the recent project

completed by Supreme Capital Group, hinting at more high-profile collaborations to come.

Then, came Chantelle. She said, "Mr. Lloyd, I wish you a triumphant victory tomorrow!"

For once, she seemed sincere.

However, Andrew was not in the mood. He replied coldly, "Ms. Garcia, if there's nothing else, I'm going to rest."

Chantelle's tone turned sharp. "Mr. Lloyd, are you taking your frustrations out on me just because someone else pissed you off?"

Andrew's patience snapped. "Why do you talk so much? I'm hanging up."

Chantelle sneered. "Wait! You didn't get into a fight with that little servant of yours, did you?"

Andrew barked back, "Mind your own damn business!"

He hung up without another word.

On the other end, Chantelle raised an eyebrow, a wicked grin spreading across her face. She opened her laptop and quickly sent a video call request to Aspen.

Aspen lay sprawled on her bed, utterly exhausted. Having kicked off her heels, her flawless legs, wrapped in sheer stockings, shifted restlessly on the sheets as she rolled back and forth, trying to calm her racing thoughts.

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Aspen grumbled, "Ugh! This is so annoying! Andrew, you bastard! Just go to hell already..."

She pounded her fists into the cartoon pillow in front of her, venting her frustration.

Her small but perfectly shaped chest pressed against the mattress, bouncing slightly with each hit. It was just too bad Andrew was not here to appreciate the view.

Just then, her laptop on the desk chimed.

Aspen pushed herself up, straightened the hem of her tight skirt, and walked over to check the screen. She mumbled, "A video call? And it's from Ms. Garcia? What could this be about?"

Puzzled, she clicked 'Accept.'

Chantelle's face immediately appeared on the screen. "Ms. Stevens, I hope I'm not disturbing you!"

Aspen leaned closer, her tone wary. "Ms. Garcia, is there something urgent? Just get straight to the point."

Chantelle shook her head. "Nothing urgent. I just wanted to encourage you to give Andrew a little boost."

Aspen frowned. "Give Andrew a boost? How exactly am I supposed to do that?"

Chantelle smiled, her eyes glinting behind her glasses. "Tomorrow is the Grand Medical Summit, and Mr. McCormick is placing a lot of hope on it. To give you a little insider info, Mr. McCormick has higher expectations for Mr. Lloyd than for Blumedale Hospital."

Aspen's eyes widened in surprise. "Mr. McCormick has that much confidence in Andrew?"

Chantelle chuckled. "Exactly. That's why I thought you might want to cheer him up tonight, maybe help him relax a bit."

Aspen let out a cold snort. "I don't know how to 'cheer him up.' Right now, all I feel toward him is pure annoyance!"

Chantelle's grin grew even more wicked. "Ms. Stevens, stop lying to yourself. I've known for a long time that you have feelings for Andrew, don't you?"

Aspen's eyes narrowed. "You're wrong."

Chantelle's smile did not falter. "Come on, Aspen, your Stockholm syndrome is practically textbook at this point. Don't rush to deny it. I've told you before I'm not just Mr. McCormick's secretary.

"My understanding of psychology is far beyond the average person's. Your every word, every movement, even the look in your eyes, all scream classic Stockholm syndrome."

Aspen clenched her fists. "Go on then. I'd love to hear your so-called psychological analysis."

Chantelle adjusted her glasses, her smile sharp. Alright, I'll be blunt. Your condition is getting worse, but Andrew's attention toward you hasn't increased. In fact, it might you

have decreased. That's while

deliberately pick fights with him, throw little tantrums, trying to force him to pay attention to you, right?"

Aspen's face flushed with a mix of shame and anger. "Ms. Garcia, you're full of crap!"

Chantelle's grin only grew more twisted, a hint of excitement flashing in her eyes. "Am I really? Deep down, you know I'm right. You can't face

your own feelings, so let me face

drag

them out into the open, letting me strip away all your pretenses and expose you completely.

"You want Andrew to whip you, humiliate you, torment you even take you, don't you?"

The sudden, blunt words hit Aspen like a lightning bolt. Her soft, alluring body froze on the spot, her breath catching in her throat.

Chantelle burst into laughter. "Ms. Stevens, this is classic Stockholm syndrome taken to the extreme! Honestly, finding someone as deeply afflicted as you is incredibly rare. This won't do. I have to dig deeper and uncover every dark corner of your mind.

"You fantasize about Andrew punishing you, overpowering you, breaking you don't you? In those countless lonely nights, you imagine him forcing himself on you, pushing you to your limits, until you're gasping for air, trembling at the peak of pleasure. Not just being conquered, but being completely taken, filled, driven to your breaking point..."

Chantelle paused, a faint blush coloring her cheeks. She cleared her throat and added, "Sorry, I might have gotten a bit too explicit there. However, as a psychologist, I have to be thorough in my analysis. I hope you can understand."

Aspen immediately slammed the laptop shut, her chest heaving violently. Hot, rapid breaths escaped her slightly parted lips, her face burning with a mix of rage and shame.

She shouted, "Shut up! You're all full of crap!"

She buried her fingers in her hair, her mind a chaotic storm of humiliation and twisted desire.

Chantelle's cruel words had left her feeling as if she had been stripped bare, standing completely exposed before Andrew. Yet, beneath the shame, a faint, dangerous thrill pulsed through her.

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Deep into the night, everyone in Serenity Villa had already gone to bed.

However, a faint yellow glow seeped through Aspen's window-she was still awake.

Aspen glanced at the clock. It was already past midnight, less than five hours until dawn. Yet, no matter how hard she tried, she just could not sleep.

Chantelle's words echoed in her mind like a cursed mantra, refusing to fade. And then, unbidden, her thoughts drifted to tomorrow's Grand Medical Summit. After that, she would be returning to Bridgefields with her parents.

Once they parted ways, she might never see the man sleeping in the next room again. The thought struck her heart like a sudden, sharp ache, leaving her chest tight and her mind restless.

Driven by a nervous, inexplicable urge, Aspen slipped out of her room. Her bare feet, pale against the cool, moonlit floor, moved quietly down the hallway. With each step, her heartbeat quickened until she found herself standing outside Andrew's bedroom door.

Taking a deep breath, she reached out and slowly pushed it open. She had long since figured out that this man never bothered to lock his door at night.

On the large bed, Andrew lay fast asleep, his breathing deep and steady. Aspen's bare feet moved silently across the cold floor as she approached his bedside.

Even though she moved without making a sound, the moment she drew close, Andrew's eyes snapped open. Their gazes met and stayed locked in the dimly lit room.

"What are you doing?" Andrew sat up, his voice low and alert.

Aspen stood there in nothing but a low-cut silk nightgown, her hair slightly messy. Her cheeks flushed a deep, burning red, and her chest rose and fell beneath the thin fabric, the pale curves of her cleavage just visible.

Andrew frowned, thinking that something felt off. He could not help but wonder if Aspen was running a fever.

Aspen mumbled, "Andrew, I can't sleep."

"Can't sleep? And?"

"Nothing."

Andrew chuckled. "If you can't sleep, go watch TV in the living room. You'll fall asleep soon enough."

"I don't want to watch TV. I just want to stay here with you."

Andrew froze, his mind briefly going blank. Then, without another word, he reached out and yanked the soft, delicate girl into his bed. At this point, if he still held back, he would be less than a man.

Aspen let out a startled yelp, struggling against his hold.

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Andrew just smirked, flipping her over and pressing her down beneath him. His hot, calloused hand slipped under her nightgown, sliding up along her smooth, bare skin until

it found her soft, trembling chest. His palm closed around the tender flesh, and Aspen gasped, her mind going completely blank.

Andrew brought his hand down hard on her perfectly round backside, making her flinch.

Aspen bit her lip, hissing through her teeth. "Pervert!"

Andrew's grin only widened. He slapped her bottom again, then leaned in, capturing her lips in a fierce, possessive kiss.

Aspen's mind exploded in a kaleidoscope of colors-red, purple, green, and a hazy, seductive pink.

Andrew's hands moved greedily, kneading her from one side to the other, not sparing an inch.

A hint of pain mixed with a strange, dizzying pleasure flooded her sense

Before she realized it, her

slender arms had wrapped tightly around him.

"Master... spank me..... harder..."

A soft, cat-like mewl escaped her lips, trembling with a blend of shame and desire.