

## The Ashes 671

### Chapter 671

Aspen slammed her coffee down and strode toward the front hall. She wanted to see who had the guts to call her by name so brazenly.

In the front hall, Leroy clutched his stomach, his face twisted in rage. He spat, "Andrew, you barged into the Stevens mansion and still had the nerve to hit me? You better believe Christie will make you pay for this!"

Irene shrieked hysterically, "Andrew, you're nothing but a heartless bastard! No matter what, Christie was with you for so long, and this is how you repay her? How could you go after Leroy like that? Do you even have a conscience?"

Andrew cast them both a cold glance and smirked. "Leroy, you know damn well why you got hit! The second I walked you charged at me like a mad dog. What was I supposed to do, just stand there and let you take a free shot?"

Leroy gritted his teeth, seething. "You've gotten real cocky, Andrew. Don't forget, everything you have today exists because of the Stevens family!"

Irene shouted, "Exactly! You owe us! You should be giving us half of everything you have. If it weren't for Christie and the Stevens family giving you a chance, do you really think you'd be where you are today?" Andrew let out a mocking laugh. "Give you half? You've got some nerve to say that! What exactly did the Stevens family give me? The only thing you two ever did was stick your hands out for money!" Irene was livid. "I don't care! If you dare refuse, Andrew, I swear I'll make your life a living hell!" Andrew did not even bother responding. This greedy, money-hungry woman meant nothing to him now. In fact, the entire Stevens family was insignificant. If he wanted, he could make them disappear from Jayrodale with just a single order, and no one would even know how it happened.

At that moment, Christina and Aspen stepped into the hall. One wore an icy expression, while the other looked amused and taunting.

"Andrew, you've got some guts," Aspen sneered, crossing her arms. "Instead of hiding, you're out here strutting around. Aren't you afraid Mr. Woods will find you and make you regret it?"

Andrew's face remained expressionless. "I'm here for one reason. Where is that old bastard Gordon?" Aspen's face twisted with anger. "Andrew, do you have a death wish? You're actually looking for Mr. Woods? You must be tired of living!"

Andrew's eyes narrowed. "I'll ask one more time-where is Gordon?"

Aspen smirked. "You want to find Mr. Woods? Too bad, I'm not telling you. What are you going to do about

it?"

A mocking grin played at Andrew's lips. "Aspen, you really shouldn't test my patience-especially when I'm already boiling with rage."

He took a single step forward,

moving like a streak of lightning.

Before Aspen could even react, she felt a gust of wind by her ear. If the next instant, his hand was wrapped around her throat.

"Let... go... of me!" she choked out, struggling desperately. "Andrew... if you lay a finger on me... I swear I'll kill you!"

Her face turned red as she gasped for breath, but Andrew's grip was unyielding. For the first time, fear gripped her.

She was not weak-far from it. She was a junior grandmaster in her own right, unlike Christina, who was just a helpless woman.

And yet, in Andrew's hands, she could not even put up a fight. He had taken her down effortlessly.

She wondered how strong Andrew actually was. The realization sent a chill down her spine. After all, not even Gordon could subdue her from several feet away with such ease.

"Talk," Andrew's voice was icy. "Where is Gordon? This is your last chance. If I don't get the answer I want, the Stevens family will be holding a funeral tomorrow."

His tone was not loud or aggressive, but to Aspen, it sounded like the whisper of the devil himself. Faced with the possibility of death, Aspen finally caved.

She gasped, "Mr. Woods is at the... Northside... the Bamboo Hill Estate!"

Andrew scoffed and shoved her away before turning to leave. He had moved so fast that the Stevens family was still frozen in shock.

Christina finally snapped out of it and rushed forward, blocking his path. She yelled, "Stop right there! You think you can just walk away after attacking someone? Andrew, you're completely out of control! How could you do this?"

Andrew's voice was devoid of emotion. "Move."

"I won't! What are you gonna do-hit me? Kill me?"

Andrew smirked. "If you want to talk about killing, maybe you should ask Aspen what she's been up to. You're lucky my people are unharmed, so I'll let this slide today. But if anything happens to them, Aspen won't be walking out of Jayrodale alive."

## Chapter 672

Christina turned to Aspen, her expression uncertain and her voice trembling. "Aspen, did Mr. Woods... really kill someone?"

Aspen clutched her throat, her eyes filled with resentment. "Mr. Woods' actions are beyond my control. All I can say is that Andrew brought this on himself!"

Christina's face twisted with anger. "Andrew, all of this happened because you provoked Aspen in the first place! I told you long ago-if you'd just apologized to her and returned the money, this whole mess would've been over. But you just had to be stubborn, didn't you? Who do you have to blame but yourself?" Andrew sneered. "Christina, I swear, you've gotten even dumber these days. Can you even tell right from wrong anymore? How the hell are you running Stevens Corporation when you can't see the truth right in front of you?"

He let out a cold laugh, shaking his head. "Then again, I shouldn't be surprised. I helped you and Stevens Corporation more times than I can count, but you never appreciated it. Instead, you chose to trust idiots like Shawn and Harvey. How did that work out for you?"

Christina's face flushed with embarrassment and rage. She shot back through gritted teeth, "What help? What did you ever do for me? Don't act like you were some savior. I know exactly what you're trying to do -you just want me to feel guilty, to be grateful to you!"

She continued, "Well, forget it. I, Christina Stevens, don't need your help, and you are certainly not worthy of giving it!"

Her chest heaved with each angry breath, her emotions spiraling out of control.

Andrew chuckled and shook his head. "Christina, look at yourself. You're no longer the poised, elegant CEO you pretend to be. Right now, you look like a bitter woman too scared to face reality."

He added, "Fine. Since you're so determined to stay blind, let me break it down for you. The South City Orphanage project? I handed that to you on a silver platter. That time you went to Jayrodale Bank for a loan and nearly got assaulted? I was the one who saved you.

"Mark stepping in to defuse the situation? Yeah, that was because of my connections-not Harvey's pathetic attempts to impress you. You chose to believe Harvey's lies and turned your back on me. In the end, you paid the price for that decision."

He took a step forward, his voice sharp and cold. "And let's not forget your whole family fawning over Shawn like he was some golden boy while treating me like garbage. Your mom and your brother both looked down on me like I was nothing. Well, guess what? The Stevens family is nothing to me. Shawn? He's been lying low because he's scared that I'll go after him."

Andrew did not stop there, saying,

"Remember when your family poured all that money into that doomed East Side project? I warned you about it beforehand, didn't? But you all thought you were smarter than me.

"Meanwhile, Lauren, Fran, and I made a killing because I knew exactly where the city planned to develop

next. While you were busy kissing up to the Weller family, I was already ahead of the game."

His eyes glinted with satisfaction as Christina stood there, her mouth slightly open, speechless.

"One more thing," Andrew added

with a smirk. If it weren't for Mr. Stevens Senior helping me when I first arrived in Jayrodale, I wouldn't have lifted a single finger for the Stevens family. So let me make it crystal clear for you, Christina. The success Stevens Corporation is enjoying today? It's because of me.

"You've been living comfortably off the empire I built, and not only did you never thank me, but you also had the audacity to call me unambitious, someone who couldn't keep up with your grand vision.'

Andrew's eyes were cold and sharp. "That's why I say you're an idiot, Christina. You just don't see it. I've said my piece. You and the Stevens family? Good luck-you're gonna need it.'

With that, Andrew turned around and walked away without looking back.

Christina stood frozen, her mind swirling as memories from the past flooded in One by one, the moments Andrew mentioned resurfaced,. fitting together like puzzle pieces. Her face grew pale, and a cold wave of dread washed over her,

"No... no, it can't be. He's lying," she muttered, shaking her head. "He's just a doctor... a nobody. How could he have pulled all of that off?"

"This has to be a lie... it has to be!" Tears streamed down her face as she bolted toward the front door. She ran outside, her heart racing, only to see the taillights of Andrew's car disappearing into the night. Her voice cracked as she screamed after him, "Andrew, stop! You need to tell me the truth! You can't just leave it like this!"

But the only response was the roar of the engine as his car vanished into the distance.

## Chapter 673

"Christie, don't listen to that loser's nonsense. He's just making stuff up to mess with you-none of it is true!" Irene said hurriedly, noticing her daughter's shaken expression.

Leroy snorted. "Christie, you're not actually buying Andrew's crap, are you? Come on, he really stood there and claimed he built Stevens Corporation from the ground up. What a joke!"

Christina did not respond. Her face had gone pale, her expression hollow and exhausted as her entire worldview began crumbling.

Aspen stood quietly, her eyes filled with contemplation. She had always considered Stevens Corporation's rise from a small, struggling workshop to the powerhouse it was today an anomaly.

For the longest time, she had assumed Christina was some kind of prodigy, a brilliant businesswoman who single-handedly made it happen. However, after working closely with her for a while, Aspen realized Christina was not as extraordinary as everyone believed.

Sure, she was smart enough to handle her CEO duties, but to single-handedly build an empire? Aspen had always been skeptical.

Then, there was Irene and Leroy-one was a greedy, self-absorbed woman obsessed with money, while the other was a spoiled, arrogant, rich boy with neither brains nor work ethic.

All they ever did was beg Christina for money while prancing around in public like they were business royalty.

Aspen shook her head. Two useless parasites like that could never have contributed anything meaningful to Stevens Corporation's success.

The only other family member of note was Douglas, but the old man had retired long ago and barely paid attention to the company anymore. Hence, all signs pointed to one thing: the company's rise had been driven by someone working in the shadows.

When Aspen connected the dots, there was only one logical candidate-Andrew. The company's golden era coincided perfectly with the time when Andrew was still with Christina.

In fact, it was during that peak that Christina dumped him.

And what happened afterward? The company did not crash, but the rapid growth slowed to a crawl. Aspen was certain now-Andrew was the invisible hand behind Stevens Corporation's success.

However, she kept these thoughts to

herself and put on a reassuring smile, saying, "Christie, don't let Andrew's words get to you. It's just empty talk. Think about it. He didn't

show a shred of pro didn't

right?

"And you know better than anyone-success isn't built on stories. You're the one who turned Stevens Corporation into what it is today And breaking up with that freeloader was the smartest decision you ever made."

She added, "If you let his lies mess with your head, you'll just end up falling into his trap. You're too smart for that, Christie.

Christina forced a faint smile, but the storm inside her did not calm. Andrew's words echoed through her mind like hailstones, sharp and icy, impossible to ignore.

Whether he was lying or telling the truth, she had to find out. Taking a deep breath, she pulled out her phone.

She murmured, "Let's start with the first thing he said. I'm going to find out if the South City project really came from Andrew-or if Marvin gave it to me on his own."

Irene rolled her eyes with a scoff. "If Andrew really had that kind of influence, I'd light a candle for him

out of shock. That man's gotten way too full of himself. Christie, you need to expose him for the fraud he is!"

## Chapter 674

Leroy snorted. "Christie, go ahead and get to the bottom of it. I can't wait to see that bastard's face when you expose him for the fraud he is."

Not wanting to get dragged into the Stevens family's drama, Aspen slipped away to her room and dialed Gordon's number. She warned him, "Mr. Woods, you should be careful. Andrew might come looking for you."

Gordon's voice came through the phone, cold and dismissive. "If that kid wants to come die at my doorstep, I'll gladly help him with that."

Aspen replied, "Still, you should stay alert. I'm worried Andrew might show up with some of the underground forces in Jayrodale to ambush you."

Gordon scoffed. "Numbers mean nothing against someone at my level. If they come swarming like ants,

I'll just retreat and pick them off one by one later. It's nothing but a waste of my time."

Aspen's voice turned icy. "I'll wait for your good news, Mr. Woods."

Gordon chuckled darkly. "Relax. Once I clean up the mess here in Jayrodale, I'll be heading back to Bridgefields. Taking care of a bunch of small-time punks? It's hardly worth my attention."

Aspen smirked. "Don't worry, Mr. Woods. I won't let you make this trip in vain."

Meanwhile, at the Bamboo Hill Estate on the north side of the city, Andrew stepped out of his car and strode toward the wooden cabin ahead.

Standing in the clearing in front of the cabin, he called out in a calm, unyielding voice, "Gordon! Get out here and face your death!"

The wooden door creaked open with a low, eerie groan. Then, a man stepped out-Gordon, his back hunched beneath a grotesque lump of muscle, his face sharp and sinister. He let out a twisted, raspy laugh.

Gordon laughed, "Kid, you've got some balls. Tell me how many people did you brought along? Go ahead and call them out. I'm not afraid.

Andrew shook his head. "I didn't bring anyone. It's just me."

Gordon's eyes narrowed. He let out a cold chuckle. "Yeah, right. Like you'd dare come alone. I know your game you're trying to bait me into some kind of ambush, aren't you?"

Convinced he had unraveled Andrew's supposed trick, Gordon threw his head back and laughed hoarsely.

"Andrew, you're still green. If you

want to outsmart me, you've got a long way to go," he taunted. "So why don't you just call out your little backup squad? It makes no

difference to me. Killing one or killing them all-it's all the same!

Andrew's expression did not change. In two long strides, he closed the distance between them. He said coldly, "I already told you-I came alone. Or are you really so paranoid? Always scared of being ambushed."

He mocked, "You should've thought this through. For me to deal with a hunchbacked coward like you, why the hell would I need backup?"

Without warning, Andrew launched a punch straight at Gordon's face. The move was simple, direct, and brutal.

Gordon's face twisted with rage. "You arrogant punk! You've gone too far! You're digging your own grave!" He threw up both palms to block the punch and twisted his body to counterattack.

With a guttural snarl, Gordon unleashed his signature technique-Plaguebringer's Palm.

It was a deadly strike, one that had earned him a reputation as a martial arts legend. He could not believe Andrew dared to take him so lightly.

Who the hell charges in without a plan? Was this kid really so reckless, or just plain suicidal?

Before long, the two palms collided with a deafening impact.

A sharp, pulsing shockwave rippled through the air. Gordon's eyes widened as a strange, piercing force surged through his arms. Soon, a dull pain crept along his veins, like something was trying to burst them apart from the inside.

He exhaled through clenched teeth and quickly stepped back, his face tight with disbelief.

"You actually dared to block my Plaguebringer's Palm head-on?" he rasped, eyes locked on Andrew. "Do you have a death wish? Don't you know that even a single touch could poison your bloodstream, destroy your organs, and weaken your strength?"

## Chapter 675

Andrew glanced at his palm, where a faint black mark had appeared-the toxic imprint of Gordon's Plaguebringer's Palm. However, with a slight shift of his internal energy, the venomous mark dissolved into nothing, as though it had never existed.

"Your so-called Plaguebringer's Palm feels more like an itch," Andrew stated coldly. "It's not even worth mentioning."

With that, he lunged forward. His voice dropped to a frigid growl as he taunted, "That was just a warm-up, Gordon. So what if you're a peak senior grandmaster? Killing you will be child's play!"

In the blink of an eye, the two of them exchanged over a dozen ferocious blows.

"You insolent brat!" Gordon bellowed, enraged. "I swear I'll crush you under my palm!"

However, Andrew pressed the attack relentlessly, forcing Gordon to retreat with every strike.

On the other hand, Gordon's anger flared. He was supposed to be the dominant one here, the predator toying with his prey. He had expected Andrew to cower, maybe beg for mercy-but instead, this young punk came at him like a battering ram, with no fear and no patience for games.

Gordon's pride, his identity as a peak senior grandmaster, took a massive hit. He was a warrior who had terrorized the northern region for decades. Being treated like an afterthought by a younger man was something he could not stand.

Yet, no matter how he tried to regain control, Andrew's attacks crashed down like relentless waves, each strike heavier than the last. The power was monstrous-like an unyielding tide, growing stronger with every move.

"You little bastard!" Gordon roared, desperation creeping into his voice. "Die already!"

Driven by humiliation, he threw both hands forward with a guttural shout. Two palms surged toward Andrew, both charged with his most lethal move-Plaguebringer's Palm.

Using the technique twice in quick succession drained him, but he was certain it would end the fight. Even if Andrew did not die from the impact, the toxins should ravage his body from within, turning his blood into poison and rendering him helpless.

The air cracked as the palms connected with Andrew's defenses. However, Andrew remained standing, completely unscathed. His expression did not even shift.

"Hunchbacked fool," he said with a mocking smirk. "Is that the best your so-called peak senior grandmaster status can do?"

He stepped forward and threw a single punch. The blow slammed into Gordon's chest with terrifying force. The sickening sound of snapping ribs echoed through the clearing.

Gordon's eyes bulged as a thick stream of blood surged up his throat and burst from his mouth. He staggered backward, both hands clutching his shattered ribs.

"This... this isn't possible," he gasped, his voice trembling with disbelief.

"You... you're not just a junior grandmaster... not even a senior grandmaster... you've gone beyond that... you're..."

His face contorted in horror as the realization hit.

Andrew's gaze remained icy. "Back

at Moonlit Apothecary, you thought I couldn't kill you, didn't you?

Hunchbacked fool, you were wrong. I could have killed you at any time. I just wasn't ruthless enough back then." ,

"But you made the one mistake you shouldn't have," Andrew continued, stepping closer with each word. "You followed that idiot Aspen's orders and went after my people. And for that... I'm sending you straight to hell."

Andrew rushed forward, his aura sharp and suffocating.

Cold dread gripped Gordon's heart. He had faced death countless times over his 30-year reign in the north, yet nothing had ever frightened him like this.

The icy sensation shot down his spine, raising the hair on the back of his neck.

"Andrew... I admit you're stronger than I expected," Gordon rasped, his voice shaking. "But I am Gordon Woods! dominated the northern underground for three decades I might be old... but I'm not defenseless!"

## Chapter 676

Gordon staggered backward, his eyes wide with fear as he gasped out, "Why don't we just end this here? Let's call it even. If you push me too far, I'll fight to the death and I guarantee you won't walk away unscathed."

He was retreating frantically now, his voice trembling beneath the bravado. Survival, not pride, was his priority. Facing Aspen's disappointment was one thing-but losing his life was another matter entirely. More than that, Gordon was struggling to process the reality in front of him. Jayrodale was

supposed to be a stagnant backwater town. How had a terrifying powerhouse like Andrew emerged from this place? He thought returning from Bridgefields after years in hiding would allow him to dominate this city easily. Instead, he had stumbled into a nightmare a young monster who dismantled him with brutal efficiency. The realization gnawed at his sanity. His entire worldview, built on decades of superiority, was collapsing. Andrew's voice cut through the tension, cold and unforgiving. "Now you want to call it even? Don't you think it's a little late for that?"

His eyes gleamed as he closed the gap in an instant.

Before Gordon could react, Andrew's hands blurred, striking multiple points across his torso with pinpoint precision. Each blow landed with a sickening crack, shattering bone and rupturing ligaments.

Gordon screamed, the sound raw and primal, as agony exploded through his body.

Andrew ignored the man's cries. He flipped his wrist, and three silver needles appeared between his fingers. Without hesitation, he drove them into the grotesque hump on Gordon's back.

The needles pierced deep into the swollen tissue. Immediately, three jets of foul, black blood shot from

the wounds, releasing a pungent, toxic stench into the night air.

Gordon howled in agony and turned to flee, relying on his legs, the only limbs still functioning.

Andrew did not move. He simply stood there, watching with cold indifference as Gordon hobbled away, desperate and broken.

"You can try running," Andrew said, voice calm and measured. "But you won't get far. I've already pierced your death node-you're living on borrowed time."

"And if you're wondering why it feels familiar," he continued, tilting his head slightly, "it's because I tampered with it back at Moonlit Apothecary. It was a warning. One you were too arrogant to heed." "You should've left my people alone. But you didn't. And now you'll pay for that choice."

As his final word fell, Gordon's back gave a grotesque shudder. With a sickening pop, the hump on his back exploded, spraying his entire body with the toxic, corrosive blood.

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"No!" Gordon screamed, his voice shrill with terror. The poison ate through his skin instantly, black veins spiderwebbing across his body.

The pain was unimaginable. He collapsed to his knees, clutching his chest as his skin sizzled and disintegrated.

"Please... Andrew... please," he begged, his voice raw and broken. "Spare me. I'll do anything-anything you want!"

Andrew did not answer. He simply turned away, walked to his car, and started the engine.

With a single press of the accelerator, the vehicle roared to life and sped away from Bamboo Hill Estate.

Behind him, Gordon's body

convulsed on the ground.

Desperately, he shoved fistfuls of detox pills into his mouth, choking on them as they dissolved into foam.

Yet, it was useless. The toxin coursing through his veins was far beyond any remedy. His eyes rolled back as he convulsed violently.

Within five agonizing minutes, his body collapsed, lifeless. Even then, the poison did not stop.

The skin melted away, followed by muscle, tendons, and finally, bone. Half an hour later, the only thing left of Gordon was a bubbling pool of black, rancid sludge.

Back at the Stevens mansion, Aspen glanced at the darkening sky. By now, she figured Gordon had already taken care of Andrew.

Hours had passed surely the fight was over. Andrew was probably just a rotting corpse by now.

Unable to suppress her curiosity any longer, she dialed Gordon's number. However, there was no answer.

Her brows knitted together, and she muttered, "Maybe he's still busy finishing the job."

Gordon was meticulous. He would not just kill Andrew-he would destroy the evidence and erase every trace of the body.

"Yeah," Aspen said to herself. "He's probably dealing with the body right now."

## Chapter 677

Aspen thought for a moment, then let out a cold, satisfied laugh. She decided to wait a little longer before calling Gordon again.

Now that Andrew was finally out of the picture, the suffocating frustration she had been feeling for weeks seemed to lift, and she was in a much better mood.

Meanwhile, Christina was on a call with Owen Maloney from Wealthroller Investments.

"Mr. Maloney, this is Christina Stevens. I was wondering if I could possibly speak with Mr. Yates... if he has a moment?"

Her voice was cautious, almost nervous. Wealthroller Investments was a powerhouse, and she knew she had to tread carefully.

Owen had overseen the South City Orphanage project and had previously liaised with the Stevens family, but his tone remained indifferent.

He asked, "What do you need to speak with Mr. Yates about, Ms. Stevens?"

Christina hesitated, gripping the phone tighter. "I-I'd like to ask him something about Andrew."

There was a pause on the other end. When Owen spoke again, his voice had completely shifted- from dismissive to sharp and attentive. "Hold on, Ms. Stevens. I'll get Mr. Yates on the line right away." Christina's heart skipped a beat. She wondered why Owen's attitude had changed so drastically the moment she mentioned Andrew.

He had treated her like an unimportant small-timer moments ago, despite her being the CEO of Stevens Corporation. Yet, as soon as Andrew's name came up, his entire demeanor flipped.

Could Andrew really be someone important to Marvin?

While she was lost in thought, a deep, gravelly voice came through the phone.

"This is Marvin Yates. What can I do for you, Ms. Stevens?"

Christina felt her palms grow clammy. She quickly said, "I-I'm so sorry to bother you, Mr. Yates. I just... I just wanted to ask if the South City Orphanage project was, um... was it Andrew who convinced you to give it to us?"

Marvin chuckled dryly. "So, you want

to know how your company managed to get that project, huh? Well, you might not want to hear the truth, Ms. Stevens-but yes. It was your ex, the man you dismissed like trash, who got me to hand it over."

He continued, "Do you really think I would have bothered with a small company like Stevens Corporation otherwise? Do you think I lack people begging to work with me? Please.

"If I so much as snap my fingers, business leaders across Jayrodale and even across the entire Gabo Creek region-would fall over themselves trying to partner with me."

Christina's heart pounded in her chest. She had braced herself for this possibility, yet hearing Marvin confirm it so bluntly still hit like a sledgehammer.

Andrew had not lied-the South City project really had been his doing. However, she still could not understand how.

How did a supposedly insignificant, "useless" man convince a tycoon like Marvin to hand over a high- profile development project to Stevens Corporation?

Was Andrew more than just a disposable pawn in Marvin's network as the rumors suggested?

"Mr. Yates, I'm so sorry to take more of your time," she ventured hesitantly. "But... could you tell me what exactly Andrew is to you?"

There was a beat of silence. Then, Marvin let out a low, scornful laugh.

"Now you're curious? Don't you think it's a bit late for that, Ms. Stevens?" he said, his tone dripping with disdain.

"If you'd asked me that when you were still with him, I might've humored you. Hell, I would've smiled and chatted with you for hours out of respect. After all, back then, you were his woman-and that meant something to me."

"But now?" Marvin's voice hardened. "You're nothing but a CEO of a small, second-rate company. Whatever status you once had through him is gone. Tell me, Ms. Stevens-what makes you think you have the right to ask me about my relationship with Andrew?"

Christina's mind went blank. "I-I'm so sorry, Mr. Yates!" she stammered, panic flooding her voice. "I didn't mean to overstep. Please don't be angry. I-I won't ask anymore."

Marvin's voice turned icy. "Good. Because you have no need-and no right to know."

"But I will tell you this, Christina," he added, voice@lowing for emphasis. "You once had the world's greatest man standing at your side. The strongest. The most capable. And

you let him slip through your fingers. By giving him up, you didn't just lose a relationship-you lost everything."

## Chapter 678

The line went dead as Marvin hung up without giving Christina the chance to say another word.

She sat there, the phone still pressed to her ear, her mind utterly blank. Marvin's parting words echoed through

her skull like a relentless drumbeat.

"Christina, by giving him up, you didn't just lose a relationship-you lost everything."

"No," she whispered to herself, gripping the phone tighter. "No, my judgment wasn't wrong. Andrew was lazy. He had no ambition. We didn't match anymore-I made the right decision... I did the right thing." Yet, no matter how many times she repeated the words, the doubts gnawed deeper. Denial was always the first response when confronted with a painful truth. People instinctively clung to their own version of events, unwilling to admit they had misjudged, unwilling to face the consequences of their choices. Her breath quickened, and before she could think twice, she dialed another number. This time, she called Mark's office.

"Hello, this is Mark Thatcher," came the familiar, steady voice on the other end.

"Mr. Thatcher, this is Christina Stevens from Stevens Corporation," she said, forcing calm into her tone. "I'm really sorry to bother you, but I was hoping you could help me with something. It's about... Andrew Lloyd."

There was a pause. Then, Mark asked in a surprised tone, "You're calling me just to ask about Mr. Lloyd?" "Yes," Christina said quickly. "I know it sounds unusual, but this is really important to me. Please, if you have a moment."

"All right," Mark said, his tone softening. "What exactly would you like to know? I'll tell you what I can, though I know little about his personal affairs."

Christina swallowed hard. "A while back, when Jayrodale Bank tried to deny us that loan, and you stepped in to help... was it Harvey Weller who asked you to intervene?"

Mark chuckled lightly. "Ms. Stevens,

you've got that part all wrong. Harvey? Please. The man might have the Weller family name, but he doesn't have the influence to summon me. That day at the bank? Mr. Lloyd called me. He made one phone call, and I came right away. Simple as that."

Christina went numb when she realized it was Andrew, not Harvey, who had saved her. Her lips trembled

as she forced out her next question. "Mr. Thatcher, I also heard that you were seriously injured last year. Is it true that Andrew saved your life?"

Mark replied, "Yes. That's absolutely true. I owe my life to Mr. Lloyd. In fact, Ms. Stevens, I'd say Mr. Lloyd is the most remarkable man in all of Jayrodale right now."

His tone grew more thoughtful as he

continued, "I've heard bits and

pieces about you two. What can I say? Fate is fickle. But don't let regret

consume you. At least from

what I've seen, Mr. Lloyd never once wronged you. He never wronged Stevens Corporation, either.

"More than once, he pulled your company back from financial ruin. You might not have known it, but he was always making sure you and your business stayed afloat. And

you

now? Well... whatever history two had, it's over. But one thing is clear-Mr. Lloyd is a man who stands tall, a man worth knowing.

And when he was with you, Ms. Stevens... he never let you

down.'

Christina did not even remember how the call ended. Her hands felt numb as she slowly lowered the phone.

She realized Andrew had told the truth—he was the one who built Stevens Corporation's success, and he was the

reason she had her CEO position.

His connections reached into the highest circles, including Marvin, the wealthiest man in Jayrodale, and Mark Thatcher, the most influential figure in the city's political and financial sectors. They both respected Andrew and spoke of him as someone far beyond her reach.

## Chapter 679

With a dull thud, Christina's phone slipped from her trembling hands and hit the floor. Her legs gave out, and she collapsed onto the ground, her body drained of all strength.

Everything was true, which meant she had been blind. Completely, utterly blind.

But how? She had thought she knew Andrew inside and out and had been convinced he was an unambitious man who did not deserve to stand beside her.

Yet, in the end, it was she who had been standing outside the gates of the truth, unable to see what was right in front of her.

Was she really as foolish as Andrew had claimed?

A storm of thoughts spiraled through her mind, and she cried out as she clutched her head, overwhelmed by the unbearable realization.

Irene and Leroy rushed to her side, their faces stricken with alarm.

"Christie! What's wrong? You're scaring me!" Irene cried, gripping her daughter's arms. "Are you feeling sick? Let's go to the hospital!"

"Christie, you look awful!" Leroy added, his voice filled with concern. "Did that bastard Andrew do something to you again? Just say the word, and I'll hunt him down myself!"

Their anxious voices barely registered in Christina's ears.

It took her a long moment to compose herself before she finally muttered, "I'm fine... this has nothing to do with Andrew. I just... I have a lot on my mind that I can't figure out."

She shook her head and forced herself to stand, though her brows remained furrowed, and her thoughts continued to churn. Every moment she shared with Andrew came flooding back, leaving her heart tangled in a mess of

emotions.

Irene scowled. "Christie, I've told you before-you shouldn't believe a single word that loser says. You're only like this because you're overthinking things. That man is nothing but a liar, and you're wasting your time dwelling on him!"

She continued, "My precious daughter, you're the CEO of Stevens Corporation, the backbone of the Stevens family! If something happens to you, what will happen to me and your brother?"

Tears welled up in Irene's eyes as she began wailing dramatically.

Meanwhile, Christina's head throbbed with frustration. She snapped, "Mom, can you stop crying already? Don't we have enough problems right now? Do you really have to make things worse?"

She turned away before Irene could protest and immediately sought out Aspen.

"Aspen, come with me to the Weller family estate," Christina said, her voice tight with determination.

Aspen arched a brow. "Christie, you cut ties with the Weller family ages ago. Why do you want to go back now?"

Christina let out a forced laugh. "You'll probably think I'm ridiculous, but I need to see Harvey, I need to confirm something."

Aspen's eyes darkened slightly. "Let me guess-it's about Andrew, isn't it?"

Christina hesitated before nodding. "Yeah. It's about him."

"I still don't want to believe it," she admitted, her voice growing softer. "I don't want to believe that I was wrong about him all along. So I need to hear it one more time. I need proof-proof that I didn't misjudge him."

Aspen crossed her arms and studied Christina for a moment. She asked, "And what if Harvey gives you that proof? What if he confirms that you did misjudge Andrew?"

She pressed on, "Christie, will you

regret it then? Will you hate yourself for the choice you made?"

Christina's body tensed. A bitter smile tugged at her lips as she

mumbled, "Honestly... I don't know,

Aspen smirked as she thought, 'It doesn't matter what truth you uncover. Andrew is dead. Nothing can change that.'

Nonetheless, she was in a good mood. So, if Christina wanted to waste her time chasing ghosts, Aspen was more than happy to humor her.

She simply replied, "Alright, Christie.

I'll go with you to the Weller family. But be prepared. Even if Andrew really did do all those things for you, even if he was more than you ever realized-it's too late. You two are on completely different paths now. There's no going back."

## Chapter 680

Christina let out a deep breath; her expression strained with unease. "I just hope I didn't make the wrong decision back then."

Aspen did not bother to answer. Whether Christina admitted it or not, the truth was already clear.

Yet, here she was-desperately clinging to the belief that she had been right all along. It was laughable. No, it was downright pathetic.

Aspen found it amusing, but in a way, she was the same. She had been crushed by Andrew time and time again, only to refuse to accept it.

She had also kept chasing after her so-called dignity, convinced that she, Aspen of Bridgefields' Stevens family, could never lose. In the end, she and Christina were not so different.

The two women soon arrived at the Weller family estate.

Harvey had not seen Christina in a while, but the moment she walked through the door, he smirked.

He teased, "Christie, don't tell me you've come to your senses and decided to crawl back to me. If that's the case, I might be willing to give you another chance. Bring Stevens Corporation under my name, and I'll make sure your family is set for life."

Christina shot him with a look of pure disgust. "Harvey, you're nothing but a perverted scumbag who sleeps with his own stepmother. Just hearing your voice makes my skin crawl!"

Harvey's smirk instantly darkened, his jaw tightening. "If you're not here to beg, then what the hell do you want, you bitch? Whatever it is, I don't have time for it. But don't worry-once I'm done with my business, I'll make sure to crush the Stevens family properly."

Aspen scoffed. "You can try, Harvey. But if you so much as lay a finger on Christie, I'll make sure the entire Weller family burns to the ground."

Harvey let out a mocking laugh. "Aspen, drop the act. Do you really think your Bridgefields' Stevens family scares me? Anyway, just say what you need to say, and then get the hell out."

Christina ignored his hostility and got straight to the point. "Harvey, back at Jayrodale Bank, you lied about calling Mr. Thatcher to help me, didn't you?"

Harvey leaned back, his smirk returning. He mocked, "Took you long enough to figure that out. Christina, you really are exactly what Andrew said you were-just a pretty face with no brains to match."

He continued, "That's right. I never had the power to call Mr. Thatcher. That was all Andrew. After saving Thatcher's life, he became one of his most trusted people. That bastard got lucky-his entire life has been one stroke of dumb luck after another."

Christina barely processed the last part of Harvey's words. All she heard was Andrew had been important from the very beginning.

She took a slow breath, her heart pounding. "Then let me ask you something else-whenver the Stevens family was in trouble, you weren't the one who stepped in to help us, were you?"

Harvey rolled his eyes and looked at her like she was an idiot. He scoffed, "Do you even have to ask? Why the hell would help the Stevens family? Sure, back then, I wanted to get you into my bed, so I made a few small efforts to impress you. But every time I tried to take the spotlight, that bastard Andrew got in my way!"

His voice grew sharper, tinged with resentment. "And if that wasn't enough, on the very day I became head of the Weller family, Andrew walked in and nearly crippled my. family's elders. Then, just when thought I'd finally get rid of your precious Stevens family, Andrew

swooped in again and bailed you

out."

"If it weren't for him, your company would have gone under long ago. And you?" Harvey licked his lips, a lecherous grin spreading across his face.

"You'd already be in my bed. Those long legs of yours, that cold, untouchable face... I could play with you for years and never get bored."

His eyes darkened with lust, his greedy gaze raking over her body. It had been too long since he had Serena to satisfy him, and now, standing before him, was Christina the one woman he had always wanted to break.