

The Ashes 681

Chapter 681

Christina completely ignored Harvey's vile words because, at that moment, her mind was in utter chaos. She had no choice but to believe it-whether she wanted to accept it or not. Andrew had helped the Stevens family countless times, and it turned out that her position as CEO, even her very survival, had all been thanks to him.

Everything she thought she knew was wrong. It was her arrogance and prejudice that had hurt the one man who should have belonged to her all along.

Harvey made no effort to hide his venomous amusement as he mocked, "Christina, are you finally waking up? Do you finally see how amazing Andrew was?"

He laughed and added, "Too bad, though. Andrew is already soaring high, and he doesn't feel anything for you anymore. Compared to Lauren or Francesca, don't you think they're all better than you?"

"They've got better backgrounds, better connections-what do you have left? Nothing. So instead of being stubborn, why not just give in and marry into the Weller family?"

His eyes gleamed as he took a slow, lustful look at Christina's legs and chest.

To him, those were the parts he desired the most-what he longed to ravage, to conquer. He imagined the proud, ice-cold woman writhing beneath him, completely at his mercy.

That, to Harvey, was a man's highest achievement-breaking her, making her submit, fulfilling his deepest, most twisted desire for domination.

He said, "What do you think? If we join forces, you'll become my wife, and with the Weller family's backing, you can slap Andrew in the face. Show him that you've moved on, that you're living far better than he ever could.

"And me? I'll have you in my arms and bring glory back to my family. A win-win for both of us."

Christina's heart burned with regret, frustration, and an unspoken, indescribable resentment. Her emotions were tangled in a storm of anger and bitterness.

Moreover, hearing Harvey's taunting words only added fuel to the fire. She could not hold back any longer -her hand lashed out, slapping him hard across the face.

"Harvey, listen to me and listen well. No matter how low I fall, I will never give you a single chance. You're nothing but a worthless piece of trash, a disgusting animal!"

Her voice was ice-cold as she spat the words, glaring at him with pure hatred.

Harvey clutched his stinging cheek, his jaw tightening as he snarled, "Christina, if it weren't for Aspen and that damn hunchback old man.

guarding the Stevens familial ne

now would have already tortured you!"

The only reason he had not made a move on the Stevens family yet was because of Gordon's presence. Aspen smirked playfully and said, "Good, as long as you know what you're dealing with, Harvey. But let me tell you something-Andrew, Rodney, and you? None of you will escape my grasp!"

Harvey let out a cold laugh. "That old cripple might be untouchable for now, but as for you, Aspen? If you dare to come knocking on my door, let's see if the Weller family will let you walk out alive."

Then, he turned back to Christina, his eyes dark and filled with bitter hatred. "Christina, you'd better pray that the Stevens family always has someone strong protecting them: e Because the moment I get the chance, I will make sure you that pathetic excuse of a mother, and your useless little brother all know what real suffering is!"

He continued, "You probably never even realized it, but the only reason you've been living comfortably,

acting like some untouchable, elegant CEO, was because Andrew was there to protect you.

"But now? Without him, the Stevens

family is just an easy target, a juicy piece of meat for anyone to sink their teeth into. I was just unlucky that I didn't get to devour you first otherwise, by now, you would've been nothing more than a filthy whore!"

Christina snapped, and she screamed at the top of her lungs, her blood-red eyes blazing with fury. "You disgusting beast! Shut up! Shut the hell up!"

Chapter 682

Harvey grew even more delighted, bursting into laughter. "What's wrong? Did I strike a nerve? Did I dig into that dark, shameful corner of your heart?"

He mocked, "Christina, are you finally realizing what a complete fool you've been? Do you feel like the pathetic woman who brought this all on herself? Andrew treated you well and gave the Stevens family respect, but you were too blind to appreciate it-you pushed him away.

"And now, look at you. The Stevens family is struggling at every turn, surviving only because you're clinging to the Bridgefields' Stevens family for dear life. That's why when Aspen was crushed the moment she stepped into Jayrodale, your family had to bite their tongue and endure it."

His voice turned colder, eyes glinting with malice as he continued to tear into her.

"But if Andrew were still around, things would be different. The Stevens family would have grown much stronger by now, and you wouldn't be in this mess. But too bad-Andrew isn't yours anymore. He belongs to Lauren or maybe Francesca. Either way, he's long gone.

"Remember how you trusted me? How you stood by my side and went after Andrew, hurting him again and again? I bet Andrew was devastated. He probably thinks you're a hopeless idiot-just a pretty face with nothing inside that head of yours."

Harvey chuckled darkly. "In fact, I should be thanking you, Christina. Without your stupidity, I never would've won against Andrew, not even a couple of times."

Christina's voice cracked as she roared, "You liar! You filthy animal! I never wanted to hurt Andrew! Who the hell do you think you are? You never won against him-you never could!"

Yet, her fury only fueled Harvey's sick pleasure. The more she cursed him, the more he laughed.

He sneered. "Go ahead. Scream, curse me out. Let it all out. At the end of the day, it wasn't me who messed up. It was you, Christina. You claim you never tried to hurt Andrew, but your actions said otherwise. You hurt him more than anyone else ever could, and you know it.

"I almost feel sorry for Andrew. He wasted his time protecting a family as worthless as the Stevens. Your mother's a coward, your brother's an incompetent fool, and you? You're just a self-righteous, clueless woman who couldn't tell a friend

from a snake.

"If it weren't for your help, I never would've had the chance to strut around and act like I was a match for Andrew. You practically handed me the victory yourself!"

Christina's tears poured down her face as she clutched her head, her mind unraveling beneath the weight of his words. She screamed, "Stop it! Stop talking! I said stop!"

Her sobs turned into wild shrieks. "You bastard! You disgusting piece of trash! I swear I'll kill you!"

Blinded by rage, she lunged at Harvey, her eyes filled with murderous intent.

Aspen reacted just in time, grabbing her around the waist and pulling her away from the Weller residence.

"Christina, snap out of it!" Aspen shouted, holding her tightly as she thrashed in his arms. "Get a grip! None of this is your fault-you didn't do anything wrong!"

However, Christina broke down completely. She buried her face in her hands, sobbing uncontrollably. "Aspen, I really messed up. I blamed Andrew for everything... but he was the one saving us all along

She continued, "He's surpassed me, leaving me far behind. And all this time... I was the clown. I thought I was capable and that I had built the Stevens Corporation with my own strength. But it was him-it was Andrew every single time."

Her voice cracked with self-loathing. "I was so blind. I'm such an idiot... such a pathetic, worthless woman."

Lost in despair, Christina raised her hand and slapped herself across the face with brutal force.

Chapter 683

Aspen's face darkened with anger as she barked, "Christie, you listen to me. You are not any less than Andrew.

"The decision you made back then wasn't wrong. You're Christina Stevens, the elegant CEO of the Stevens Corporation. Are you really willing to admit that you were blind, that you misjudged Andrew so badly?"

For a moment, Christina hesitated, confusion flickering across her tear-streaked face. She shook her head. "No... of course I don't want to admit that I was blind, that I couldn't see what was right in front of me."

She mumbled, "But what's the point in denying it when the truth is so obvious? I was wrong- horribly, irredeemably wrong."

A bitter, broken laugh escaped her lips. The proud, confident woman she once was faded like the closing credits of a movie. All that remained was sorrow, regret, and a hollow sense of defeat.

Aspen let out a cold snort. "Christie, you're too kind-you always blame yourself for other people's mistakes. Think about it. Andrew's the one snuggling up to Lauren and Francesca now, living off those women like some gold-digger. And you? You're the victim here.

"If he really loved you, he never would've left. He would've stayed, would've fought for you. So stop it- you didn't do anything wrong."

Tears streamed down Christina's face. "But I was the one who broke up with him... I was the one who turned cold right before our wedding. I destroyed his heart, Aspen. I-I was a blind, arrogant woman chasing after vanity and ambition."

Aspen's lips curled into a mocking smile. "And you ever think maybe this pathetic breakdown of yours is exactly what Andrew wants to see? Let's say you hurt him-so what? People make mistakes. Nobody's perfect."

She argued, "If Andrew truly loved

you, would he have called you an idiot? Would he have turned around and run straight into Lauren's arms? No real man would give up so easily. He clearly didn't deserve you. And what kind of man runs off the moment he doesn't get what he wants? If you'd married him, you'd be the one suffering now. You got lucky, trust me."

Christina's mind spiraled into confusion. Aspen's twisted words wormed their way into her thoughts like poison.

"Do you really think so, Aspen?" she whispered, her voice trembling.

"Of course I do," Aspen answered with certainty. "Everyone knows how exceptional you are, Christie. You made one mistake big deal. You misjudged Andrew-so what? He's a man, isn't he? Where's his maturity? His patience?"

She added, "Look at Harvey-he's

trash, sure-but even he can't forget you. And you? If you gave the word, you'd have wealthy heirs, CEOs, hotshot investors tripping over themselves just to get a date with you Finding a man is

You

know what they say: there are plenty of fish in the sea."

His twisted logic seeped into Christina's heart. She wiped away her tears and slowly nodded, mumbling, "Aspen, you're right. I might've misjudged Andrew, but it wasn't all my fault. All I wanted was to chase after something bigger-to build something with my own two hands.

"I had dreams, ambition, a vision for success. How was that wrong? No, I wasn't wrong. No one should ever be shamed for chasing their dreams. I need to find Andrew... I need to talk to him and set things straight."

Aspen's face twisted with concern. "Wait, Christie... you're not seriously thinking about getting back with him, are you?"

Christina went quiet for a long moment, then shook her head. "I don't know what the future holds for us. But I do know this: I'll prove to Andrew and myself that even without him, I can carve out my own success."

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know this: I'll prove to Andrew and myself that even without him, I can carve out my own success."

Chapter 685 Aspen gave a satisfied nod. "That's the spirit. That's the Christie I know. Don't worry. With me by your side, Stevens Corporation will rise stronger than ever."

Christina forced a weak smile. "Yeah... at this point, the only way I can reclaim my dignity is through my career. I'll make Andrew see that I'm not a quitter. I'll catch up to him—and surpass him.

Aspen's eyes gleamed with a cold, twisted amusement. In her mind, Andrew was probably already rotting six feet under, completely unaware of the foolish Christina's self-pity.

Still, she could tell that Andrew's brutal truth had shattered Christina's confidence. Well, killing Andrew had at least served the purpose of giving Christina a sense of closure.

Meanwhile, Andrew had no idea that Christina was drowning in regret and disbelief, teetering on the edge of an emotional breakdown. Then again, why would he care? To him, whether Christina's well-being was none of his concern anymore.

He strolled into the Moonlit Apothecary, a bag of herbs swinging from his hand. He asked casually, "Nyla, how are you feeling?"

To his surprise, Lauren was already there, sitting beside Nyla with a concerned expression.

"Dr. Lloyd, I'm feeling much better now," Nyla replied with a smile. Her complexion looked noticeably healthier than before.

Lauren walked up to Andrew, her eyes filled with curiosity. Dr. Lloyd, Fran told me you stormed out earlier. You didn't go after Gordon, did you?"

Andrew let out a cold snort. "There's no more Gordon. He's gone-for good."

His words stunned the three women into silence. Lauren, Nyla, and Francesca exchanged nervous glances.

"Andrew... did you kill Gordon? That hunchbacked freak?" Francesca asked, her voice tight with apprehension.

Andrew noticed the worry on their faces. Lauren seemed calm enough, but Nyla and Francesca were visibly unsettled.

He decided to ease their minds, saying with a casual shrug, 'No, I didn't do it myself. I just sent Dylan and Natasha to handle it. Gordon was a dangerous lunatic, so we had him run out of Jayrodale. He won't be coming back.'

Lauren nodded with relief. "That's good. As long as he was still around, we were always going to be at risk."

Francesca exhaled heavily, clutching her chest as if trying to steady her heartbeat. "Andrew, you scared me half to death. For a second, I thought you'd actually killed him. If that were the case, we'd be in big trouble with the Bridgefields' Stevens family."

Andrew smirked

to himself. Even if they were, he was not afraid of Bridgefields or any family that tried to stand in his way. As for Gordon, the man was as dead as dead. Could be-there was no question about it.

He shifted the bag of herbs in his hand and smiled at the three women. "Lauren, Fran, you two keep Nyla company for a bit. I'll go make her some medicine."

Lauren beamed. "Of course, Dr. Lloyd. Thanks for taking care of her!"

Nyla flushed with embarrassment. "Dr. Lloyd, I-I can take care of myself. I shouldn't be troubling you with this."

Andrew shook his head. "Nyla, if

you're going to help out here at the Moonlit Apothecary, you should stop calling me Dr. Lloyd. Just call me Andrew or Andy. Dr. Lloyd sounds way too formal."

Nyla hesitated. "But... if Ms. Rhodes can call you Dr. Lloyd, why can't I?"

Lauren's eyes sparkled with amusement as she gave Nyla a teasing grin. "Oh, silly girl. That's because

Andrew and I are a couple. I have special privileges, obviously."

Francesca scoffed and crossed her arms. "Andrew, go make the medicine already. Lauren, quit rubbing it in- you're going to make Nyla feel awkward."

Lauren turned to her with a playful smirk. "Aw, Fran... are you jealous again?"

"I'm not jealous," Francesca muttered.

"You totally are."

"I'm not!"

Andrew knew where this was headed. The playful bickering between Lauren and Francesca was only going to get louder. Without a word, he turned and hurried into the backroom, welcoming the O momentary peace.

As soon as he lit the stove and set the herbs aside, his phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out and froze it was the foolish woman, Christina.

Even though they still had each other's numbers saved, neither had called the other in ages.

Chapter 686 Aspen's expression darkened as she watched Christina nervously hover her thumb over the call button. "Christie, are you sure you want to make this call? You and Andrew have already gone your separate ways. What's the point of reaching out now?"

Christina bit her lip, her anxiety plain to see. "Honestly, I don't even know what I want to say. But... I need to know. I need to hear his voice. I need to know if he really hates me as much as I think he does." Aspen did not say another word. She just leaned back and crossed her arms, her eyes cold with indifference.

'What a waste of time', she thought, 'Andrew is long gone probably feeding worms in a coffin by now. This phone call is pointless.'

Still, if Christina wanted to chase ghosts, so be it. The phone would either go straight to voicemail, or someone else would pick up. Andrew was not alive to answer.

To Aspen's surprise, the call connected.

"Hello?" came Andrew's familiar voice on the other end.

Christina's heart leaped. She clutched the phone tightly. "Andrew? Is that you?"

"It's me," Andrew replied flatly. "What do you want, Ms. Stevens?"

Christina's throat went dry. "I-I went to verify everything you said earlier, and I-"

Andrew cut her off coldly. "Whatever it is, I don't care. Just leave me alone. From now on, let's not contact each other again.",

Christina's heart clenched. She furrowed her brow and pushed past her pride. "Wait, Andrew, hold on! Can't you at least have a little patience with me? Are you really that unwilling to even listen?"

Andrew let out a mocking snort. "Patience? What do you expect, Christina? Do you want me to go back to the way used to be? To worship you? To bend over backward for you?"

Christina felt a sting deep in her chest. "Andrew, yes, you helped me a lot in the past. You helped the Stevens family, and you helped the corporation. But it's not like we treated you like trash. You're acting like you have some massive grudge against me."

Andrew's tone was completely detached. "You're imagining things. I don't care about you or the Stevens family anymore. You can't hold a grudge against something you no longer give a damn about. Now, if you're done, I'm hanging up."

Christina's pulse raced. She was used to Andrew being calm and patient with her-never this cold or dismissive. Nevertheless, she swallowed her frustration and softened her voice.

"Andrew, I've realized that I made a huge mistake," she said, forcing herself to stay calm. "Can't we meet somewhere and talk things through?"

Andrew let out a bitter laugh. "A mistake? Christina, you're still the same stubborn woman who refuses to admit when she's wrong. Save yourself the trouble. I'm not interested. And even if I were, meeting you would only piss off Lauren."

Christina froze, her breath catching in her throat. Lauren's name twisted her heart with an irrational pang of Jealousy.

"So... you and Ms. Rhodes are

together now?" she asked, her voice low and tight. "Andrew, have you considered what you're getting yourself into? She's Lauren

Rhodes-heiress of the Rhodes

family. She's the darling of wel

Jayrodale."

She continued, "You might be successful now, but the gap

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between the two of you is still massive Do you really think this relationship has a future? Don't you see how impossible it is for someone like you to be with

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someone like her?"

Andrew let out a sharp, humorless laugh. "Thanks for the advice, Ms. Stevens, but tny relationship isn't your concern."

And with that, the line went dead.

Christina lowered the phone, her face burning with humiliation. Her jaw clenched as she swallowed the sharp sting of rejection.

"He's so damn stubborn," she muttered. "Still holding a grudge... still unwilling to give me even the smallest way out."

She stared at the blank screen, her

thumb hesitating over the redial button. She thought, "To hell with itk She called again, and again, but every time, the call went straight to voicemail. Her stomach dropped as she realized she had been blocked.

"Andrew, you're such a petty, small-minded jerk," she hissed through clenched teeth. "Still so stubborn after all this time. Can't even let me apologize, can you?"

She was so absorbed in her rant that she did not notice Aspen sitting across from her, her face drained of color, her entire body rigid.

When she finally glanced his way, she jumped. "Aspen, what's wrong?"

Aspen's lips were pressed into a tight, bloodless line. Her eyes were wide with shock, and her skin looked ashen- like he had just seen a ghost.

Her voice trembled as she mumbled, "Christie... I just remembered... I need to report something to the main family. I-I'll catch you later."

Christina nodded. "Sure! Go ahead."

Before Christina could say more, Aspen bolted from her chair and rushed down the hall, disappearing into her room.

Inside her locked room, Aspen leaned against the door, panting heavily. She could not hide her shock, her mind racing as she realized Andrew was alive.

'But how? What the hell is going on?' Aspen wondered.

Chapter 687 Aspen was in disbelief. After all, she thought Gordon was supposed to have already killed Andrew. Hence, there was no way Andrew could still be alive.

Aspen's mind spiraled into chaos. Her breathing grew ragged, and her thoughts twisted in every possible direction. She even wondered if it were Andrew's ghost, a vengeful spirit coming back from the grave. Her trembling fingers fumbled for her phone as dread coiled tighter around her chest. She quickly called Gordon's number, only to find that his phone had been turned off.

Aspen's heart skipped a beat. She already knew it would not go through, but she kept dialing anyway- again and again.

She tried more than a dozen times, and each time, she was met with the same automated response that the number was unavailable.

Frustration exploded within her, and she screamed, "Gordon! What the hell is going on? Are you dead or alive? Can't you give me a damn sign?"

The silence that followed was deafening. Nothing about this made sense. Andrew, who should been rotting in the ground, was walking, talking, and answering phone calls. Meanwhile, Gordon had vanished without a trace.

Tears of fear and helplessness pricked her eyes. Her confidence, her bravado-everything was unraveling. As dread tightened its icy grip, one terrifying thought surfaced. 'What if Andrew wasn't killed? What if Gordon was the one who died instead?'

Aspen calmed down and immediately called Zephyr Stephens, the patriarch of the Bridgefields' Stevens family. "Aspen? Well, well... what an unexpected surprise. What brings my rebellious little daughter to call me out of the blue?" Zephyr joked.

Aspen forced herself to swallow the rising panic. She could not just blurt out the truth. Zephyr would lose his mind if he found out Gordon had gone missing.

After all, Gordon was the family's hidden ace, their invisible dagger in the shadows. His disappearance would be seen as Aspen's catastrophic failure.

She plastered on her best fake smile and softened her voice. "Dad, I was just thinking about you. I had some free time and figured I'd call you to see how you've been."

Zephyr laughed heartily. "Ah, Aspen, my precious girl. As long as you're doing well in Jayrodale, I'm doing just fine. I'm glad Mr. Woods is helpful."

Aspen's heart was pounding hard, but she managed to sound as calm as possible. "Of course! You know me, Dad. I've laid a solid foundation here. The Stevens family will have no problem setting a solid foundation in Jayrodale."

Zephyr praised, "That's what I like to hear. You've achieved so much in such a short time. I've always said you were the sharpest of all my children."

"Still, you shouldn't let your guard down," he said, his tone sharp. "Jayrodale isn't our home turf. I heard from Mr. Woods that you've had a few setbacks there. Something about a kid named Andrew Lloyd giving you trouble?"

Aspen forced a cold, dismissive laugh. "Dad, he's nothing more than a nobody. Mr. Woods already stepped in and handled it."

Zephyr let out a snort. "Good. No one messes with my daughter or disrespects the Stevens family. If Bridgefields' Stevens family is going to expand and establish dominance in Jayfodale, then we need to use force when necessary. So, you're saying this Andrew is taken care of?"

Aspen squeezed out a stiff, hollow smile. "Yes, Dad. He's long gone reduced to dust. Nothing to worry about." Zephyr chuckled with satisfaction. "Good. Hearing that puts me at ease. You've handled the family's business well, and I'm proud of you. Was there anything else, sweetheart? If not, I need to head into a meeting soon." Aspen swallowed hard, trying to keep her voice steady as she scrambled to come up with an excuse. "Actually, Dad

it's about Mr. Woods. I've... temporarily lost contact with him."

She added, "I was hoping you could use your

authority as family head to track his location and send it to me.'

Zephyr did not question her story. "That sounds like Mr. Woods-he's always been a lone wolf and hates anyone monitoring his movements. now.

Alright, I send you his locatio

But when you find him, make sure to thank him properly for his work."

"I will, Dad. Thanks. Bye."

The moment the call ended, Aspen's face twisted into a grim mask. Everyone back in Bridgefields thought she had made incredible strides in Jayrodale and was on her way to building a bright, prosperous future for the family.

Yet, in reality, she had burned through billions of family assets. The fortune she had brought with her had been squandered, piece by piece.

Not only that, but Gordon-her so-called ace in the hole was also missing without a trace, his life or death unknown.

If Zephyr or the Stevens family council ever found out the truth, it would not matter how favored she was. The punishment would be swift and merciless.

As the head of the family, only Zephyr had the authority to track Gordon's phone location. Soon, Aspen the information.

She clenched her jaw and barked, "Bruce! Jackie! Get ready. We're heading out to find Mr. Woods-now." received

Chapter 688

Aspen did not say a word. Her lips trembled as she crouched down, reaching toward the skeleton. Her fingers found the metal ring resting on the bony remains of a hand. She pulled it free, her breath catching in her throat.

It was a signet ring-made of reinforced alloy, untouched by the decay around it. Etched into the surface was a single word: Woods.

Aspen's mind went blank for a moment before a wave of dread crashed over her. She mumbled, "Mr. Woods... is dead."

Her heart pounded erratically as the truth she had tried so hard to deny solidified into cold, undeniable reality. That ring was Gordon's-a personal item he never went anywhere without. Yet, here it was, buried with this broken, rotting corpse.

The implications were crystal clear.

Jackie stumbled back, his face deathly pale. "W-Who the hell did this? Who the hell in Jayrodale is capable of taking him down?"

Bruce sucked in a sharp breath. "Miss, t-this has to be Mr. Woods. There's no mistake. We need to inform the family immediately. Mr. Woods was Bridgefields' Stevens family's strongest asset. Mr. Stevens needs to know about this."

Aspen's head snapped up. Her bloodshot eyes burned into Bruce's. "No! We can't report this to Bridgefields."

Bruce's mouth fell open. "What? Miss, this is Mr. Woods we're talking about. He was the family's pillar of strength. We have to tell Mr. Stevens!"

Aspen's jaw tightened. She snarled through gritted teeth, "Listen here we can't let Dad or our family in Bridgefields know about this! Absolutely not!"

She bit her lip so hard that it was even bleeding.

Jackie panicked. "Miss, a-are you seriously planning to hide this matter?"

Aspen glared at him as she spat, "You idiots, think it through! If word gets back to Dad, what do you think will happen to us? I'll survive-I'm his daughter, his golden girl. He'll punish me, sure, but he won't kill me. But you two? You're nobodies. You're disposable. He'll blame you for Mr. Woods' death and have you executed to make an example."

Bruce and Jackie exchanged a horrified glance. Aspen's words hit like a slap to the face. They immediately stiffened, realization dawning on them.

"You're right, Miss," Bruce said, voice trembling. "If word gets out about Mr. Woods' death, we'll all be in deep trouble."

Aspen fiddled with Gordon's cold, metal ring in her hand. Her eyes glinted with venomous hatred as she growled, "Andrew. This has to be Andrew's doing."

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Bruce and Jackie's eyes widened in disbelief. "That's impossible, Miss. Andrew? Against Mr. Woods? No way. Mr. Woods said it himself—if his body hadn't been acting up that day at the Moonlit Apothecary, he could've killed Andrew with ease."

Aspen's brow furrowed, her mind tangled with confusion. She could not figure out how Andrew had managed to kill Gordon, but she did not need evidence her instincts screamed that Andrew was behind this.

"Miss," Bruce said, lowering his voice, "we won't be able to hide Mr. Woods' death forever. Sooner or later, people will start asking questions."

Aspen gave a sharp nod. "You're right. We need a plan-fast. First, we have to secure our footing here in Jayrodale. We need to recover the billions we lost and build up our position."

Her jaw tightened as she clenched

the ring in her palm. "Once we've regained our standing and made enough money to send back to the main family, Dad will be satisfied. If he's happy, even when he finds out Mr Woods is dead... he'll likely turn a blind eye."

Chapter 689

Jackie wore a deep frown, worry etched across his face. "But Miss, we're completely stuck here in Jayrodale. We have no working capital, no reliable connections, and now Mr. Woods our strongest card -is gone. We can't pull off anything without resources."

Aspen shot her a glare, voice cold and sharp. "Shut up. It's not as hopeless as it looks. Don't forget that I still have the pharmaceutical formulas from Rhodes Corporation's Pharmaceutical Division. Those formulas are pure gold."

She added, "Stevens Corporation has already partnered with a manufacturing firm to start production. Once that kicks off, we'll have cash flowing in soon enough."

Bruce gave a cautious nod. "That's a start, but we still need protection. Without someone strong guarding our operations, we'll be exposed."

Aspen's lips twisted into a venomous sneer. Her grip on the ring tightened, her knuckles turning white. "Andrew... this is all your fault."

She turned to Bruce. "Find Finley Moore for me. Tell him I want to partner up. We'll make money together."

Bruce's eyes lit up. "Finley from Hidden Dragons? They're one of the top three in Gabo Creek. That could actually work!"

Three days later, at the Moonlit Apothecary, Nyla had finally regained her strength. The deadly toxin from the Plaguebringer's Palm was gone, thanks to Andrew's treatment.

She was still a bit weak from the lingering effects of the palm's crushing force. Her body just needed rest to fully recover.

Francesca stretched with a satisfied sigh. "Andrew, Lauren, I have a suggestion. Let me know what you think."

Andrew glanced at her. "Go ahead, Fran."

Lauren chuckled before Francesca could speak. "Oh, Fran, I already know what you're going to say." Francesca huffed in disbelief. "Oh really? Well, if you're that confident, then tell me what I was going to say."

Lauren's eyes sparkled mischievously. "If I guess it right, what do I get?" Francesca crossed her arms. "If you guess it right, I'll admit defeat."

Lauren laughed softly. "Admit defeat? What's the fun in that? I already know every inch of you,

Fran. There's nothing left to conquer. If I guess it right, you'll

have to fulfill one of my wishes."

Francesca's cheeks turned crimson. "Lauren Rhodes, you've become absolutely insufferable since you started dating Andrew!"

"Fine," she said through gritted teeth. "If you guess right, I'll agree to whatever conditions you set."

"Deal." Lauren tilted her head playfully. "You're worried that even though the Moonlit Apothecary has opened, we need someone reliable to stay here full-time and handle patients."

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"Andrew's always busy, running around dealing with other issues, which leaves the clinic unattended too often."

Francesca's jaw dropped. "How the hell..."

Lauren smirked. "Not only that, but I bet you've already picked the perfect candidate to sit here in Andrew's place. And that person... is your grandfather, right?"

Francesca groaned and dropped her head into her hands. "Damn it! You read me like a book."

Andrew smiled. "If Mr. Aicker can come here to help out, that'd be amazing. But won't it cause issues back home with the Aickers if he leaves?"

Francesca shook her head sadly.

"Ever since Simon betrayed us, Grandpa has been devastated. He keeps blaming himself-saying Simon's betrayal is his fault for not raising him right. I'm hoping that if he works here, it'll give him Something positive to focus on."

Chapter 690

Andrew smiled warmly. "Fran, you've really thought this through. What does Mr. Aicker think about it?" Francesca nodded. "Grandpa agreed, but he asked me to check with you first. The Moonlit Apothecary is yours, after all. He doesn't want to come here uninvited and cause trouble."

He continued, "He's also worried people might start gossiping that the Aickers are trying to take over your medical center."

Andrew's expression turned serious. "If Mr. Aicker feels that way, he's being way too polite. Tell him the doors of the Moonlit Apothecary will always be open to him. Anytime he wants to come by, he's more than welcome. He won't just be a guest-he'll be part of this place."

Francesca's eyes lit up with gratitude. "Thank you, Andrew! Honestly, Grandpa's always wanted to run a medical center like this-something prestigious and respected. But our family's been struggling for years. Grandpa's been saving every penny for Simon and us younger ones. He couldn't bear to spend the money on himself.

Lauren crossed her arms with a huff. "Simon was a disgusting traitor. The Aickers gave him everything, and he repaid that kindness by stealing from the family-and trying to drug and assault you, Fran.'

She added, "Honestly, I think kicking him out was the best decision. Your grandfather shouldn't feel guilty at all."

Andrew's gaze darkened. "Don't worry. Simon won't be a threat anymore. I destroyed his sexual organs during our last encounter. He lost everything. Even if he survives, he'll be a hollow shell of a man- completely useless."

Lauren's eyes softened as she glanced at Francesca. "But Fran, you still look upset. Come on, cheer up! Remember, you promised me something if I guessed your idea correctly."

Francesca immediately tensed up. "Wait... what do you mean? I only agreed if your condition wasn't outrageous!"

Lauren tapped her chin with a delicate finger, pretending to think hard. "Hmm... what should I make you do? Ah! Got it. It's simple, fun, and I promise you'll enjoy it."

Francesca's curiosity got the better of her. "What is it?"

Lauren's eyes sparkled with mischief as she leaned in. "You can help me... by sleeping with Andrew." Francesca froze, her eyes going wide. "What?"

Lauren's smile turned devilish. "Yep! My poor Dr. Lloyd has been so... neglected lately. He's practically starving. I just can't keep up with him, so I figured-why not let you step in?"

Francesca's face flushed deep red. For a moment, she was speechless, then exploded. "Lauren! You pervert! Go to hell!"

However, her heart was pounding, and she could not stop herself from sneaking a quick glance at Andrew.

She secretly cursed, 'What a jerk! Acting all innocent after what happened between us. Total scumbag. Absolute player.'

Andrew groaned, rubbing his

temples. Will you two stop with the nonsense? And who the hell told you

I was starving for... all ove

Lauren and Francesca turned to face him at the exact same time. "You are!" they declared in unison.

They blinked in surprise, realizing they had answered together. Their eyes met, and they both burst into laughter, giggling like mischievous teenagers.

Lauren grabbed Francesca's hand. "Come on. Let's talk in private."

She dragged Francesca into the next room, tossing a playful warning to Andrew over her shoulder. "No eavesdropping!"

Francesca whispered, "Lauren, is everything okay? Did Andrew do something to you?"