

# **From Ashes of Scandal to His Embrace (Laurinda)**

## **- Chapter 1**

### **Chapter 1**

[ 556 words ]

"Laurinda's party is packed. I wonder if she'll still be grinning like that when she figures out what the Austins have been up to behind her back. Or maybe she'll end up on her knees, begging not to get kicked out, crying her eyes out."

"Honestly, I want to see it. She acts like she's so untouchable. I hope the Austins throw her out without a second thought. Watching her fall apart would be the highlight of my night."

"If she gets kicked out, it won't just be her pride that takes a hit. She's pissed off so many people over the years just because she could. The second she loses the Austin name, those people will eat her alive. We'll get to watch the whole thing unfold."

"She thinks she's better than everyone. Kicking her out is too easy. If it were up to me... I'd make sure she never recovers."

"Congrats, Fabian. Good thing your dad never made your engagement to that idiot official. Otherwise you'd be the joke of the city."

Laurinda slipped out of the banquet hall and was passing by the lounge when she caught the sound of their laughter, her name tossed around like a punchline. She paused, listening.

She frowned, thinking about how strangely Aiken had been acting lately and that strange dream she'd had just a few nights ago.

In the dream, Aiken brought a girl in shabby clothes to her party. Right in front of everyone, he'd announced that this girl was the real Austin heiress, and Laurinda was just a stand-in, switched at birth, living someone else's life for eighteen years. After that, she was thrown out, completely abandoned, her life spiraling until she died alone and miserable...

Remembering the end of that dream, Laurinda almost laughed out loud.

Leaving the Austins would be a relief. There was no way she'd end up lost and helpless. That dream was honestly the funniest thing she'd ever imagined.

"Fabian, I heard you got Finn to help transfer the real heiress's school records. I wonder how Laurinda will take it when she finds out. She'll be crushed."

Fabian twirled his phone around in his hand, a cocky smile playing on his lips as he listened to the jokes.

"Why would care about her? The

only reason I ever bothered with Laurinda was for the Austin Group shares she has. She's nothing compared to Laura, not even close.

He smiled, softer this time. "The first time I saw Laura, it was like sunlight broke through my whole life. She's bright, open, confident, and she's smart."

"Next to Laura, Laurinda is just... nothing. Not even worth mentioning."

Laurinda listened, the tension in her brow slowly fading.

Funny. She never thought she'd see the day Fabian learned to talk back instead of just following her around.

She lost interest and gathered up the long train of her dress, making her way toward her private dressing room. She needed a quick touch-up before the real drama started.

As she reached the door, a familiar figure slipped out from the shadows. She glanced over, then pressed her finger to the lock and let him inside with her.

"Laurinda, here's everything you

asked for. It's all sorted. The Austins are completely dry now.

They don't have a single dollar of

liquid cash left."

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Laurinda took the folder, set it on the vanity, and her eyes sparkled with a hint of mischief.

"What's Aiken been up to these days?"

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## Chapter 2

[ 557 words ]

"Aiken brought back the daughter he kept hidden away in the countryside, and lately he's been reaching out to the Gates family. Their youngest, who married into the Cabinda family, just came home, and Jeniffer is already trying to befriend her."

Laurinda's face barely changed when she heard about the real heiress. She just nodded, as if it all made perfect sense. "Alright, I get it. You can leave now."

Once the man was gone, Laurinda opened the file he'd left behind. She read through the papers, then tucked them away in the safe in the lounge. Afterward, she sat down at her vanity, staring at her own reflection for a long time. Finally, she picked up her phone, scrolled to her photo album, and looked at a picture of her family.

"Dad, Mom, my time with the Austins is almost over..."

A gentle voice called from outside the door. "Laurinda, are you in there?"

Snapping out of her thoughts, Laurinda put her phone away and stood up to open the door.

Jeniffer greeted her with a warm smile. She fussed over Laurinda's dress, smoothing the fabric with careful hands, as if Laurinda was made of glass. "Why are you still in here? Today is your coming-of-age ceremony, and it's the day the next Austin Group

heir is announced. You're the star, you can't go missing. Your grandfather, Aiken, and everyone else are waiting for you."

Laurinda watched Jeniffer with a small, knowing smile. If she hadn't caught Jeniffer poisoning her water back when she was twelve, she might have believed this gentle act was real.

"It's so crowded in there. I just wanted to get some fresh air before things started. Let's head back, though. We shouldn't keep Aiken and Grandpa waiting."

She took Jeniffer's wrist, lifted the hem of her long gown, and walked quickly toward the hall, her heart beating faster as she thought about what was coming next.

As Laurinda stepped into the hall, a spotlight swept over her, drawing every pair of eyes her way. The room went completely silent. It was so quiet she could hear her own breathing.

Suddenly, a deep, furious voice cut through the silence.

"Laurinda, did you always know you're not really an Austin? If the doctor hadn't shown me your report and pointed out your blood type doesn't match ours, never would we have realized how cruel you could be

even as a child."

"You even tried to get the doctor to change the report for you. How could you? You almost ruined the Austin bloodline."

Aiken's anger was written all over his face. The file in his hands shook as he glared at Laurinda.

Baily sat beside him, gripping his cane so tightly his knuckles turned white. His eyes were hard and cold as he stared at Laurinda, like he wished she would just disappear.

"You stole eighteen years of the life Laura deserved, and now you're

trying to stop her from coming.

home? If I hadn't found out the truth,

and brought her back myself, would you have left her to die in that broken-down cabin?"

Baily shook his head, looking at Laurinda as if he could hardly believe she was the person he'd raised.

The guests listened in stunned

silence. Some glanced at the pale, thin girl standing quietly by Baily, their faces full of sympathy Others lööke at Laurinda with disgust, as if they couldn't believe someone so beautiful could be so heartless. It was chilling.

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## Chapter 3

[ 578 words ]

Laurinda watched the father and son put on their show, her face cool and just a little annoyed.

"Sure, I'll admit it. I'm not really an Austin. But I'm not about to take the fall for a murder I didn't commit. Grandfather, maybe we should call the police. I'd love to know who hired a hitman using my name."-

Her words landed like a bomb. The whole crowd went quiet. No one expected Laurinda to just come out and admit the truth.

Baily and Aiken looked like they'd been slapped. They clearly hadn't planned for this. Their mouths opened and closed but nothing came out.

"You... you..."

They couldn't figure out what Laurinda was doing. Wasn't she supposed to deny everything so they could expose her and make Laura look like the real deal? Now she'd thrown their whole plan out the window and Aiken was left speechless.

"Laurinda, I'm breaking off our engagement. The Gates family would never want a fake like you."

Fabian stormed into the room, face twisted in anger. He started to say more but stopped when he realized how tense everything felt. His eyes darted around until he spotted the girl helping Baily catch his breath.

That seemed to give him his nerve back. He practically threw the engagement papers at Laurinda.

"You're not good enough for me! Take this back. Stay as far away from me as possible!"

Laurinda watched the crumpled papers fly her way. She just tilted her head to dodge them, a small, amused smile on her lips.

"Fine. I never wanted this engagement anyway. Now get out of my sight."

She didn't spare Fabian another glance. Instead, she lifted her foot and kicked him right in the chest, sending him stumbling several steps back.

With the path clear, Laurinda smoothed her dress and turned to face the Austin family. Her voice was calm and a little bit lazy.

"So, Grandfather, Aiken, you threw this whole scene at my birthday just to get your hands on my inheritance, right?"

She walked over to Aiken, took the file from his hands, and flipped it open. Her lips curled into a half-smile as she scanned the papers inside.

"You really did your homework. Let's show everyone, shall we? If you're going to make a spectacle, might as well let everyone see for themselves. That way, no one can say clinging to the Austins after this."

She handed the file to the nearest guest. If everyone was here to gossip they could at least get the facts straight. Maybe then, no one would ever tie her name to the Austins again.

Once the documents were out of her hands, Laurinda's eyes landed on the thin girl in shabby clothes standing next to Baily. Laurinda clicked her tongue.

"You really brought your real daughter home, but you couldn't even bother to dress her properly? People might think you're not actually happy to have her back."

Laura shrank away, looking fragile and innocent. But Laurinda didn't miss the sly glint in her eyes.

"Laurinda, stop wasting time. You're not Ms. Austin anymore. Hand over the family seal and give Laura her rightful place as heir. Because you've lived with us for eighteen years, I'll let your past with Laura

slide. Once you leave, don't try anything reckless out the...- Austins, you'll have to look out for yourself."

Aiken sounded so generous, and a smug little smile tugged at his lips.

He really thought he'd won. He'd gotten Laurinda out of the way, secured the family for himself, and came out looking like the good guy.

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## Chapter 4

[ 650 words ]

Laura was his secret daughter. By having her take Laurinda's place and become the Austin family heir, he would make sure the entire Austin legacy would fall into his hands. Once he secured his connection with the Gates family and brought the Austins into Cabinda's elite circle, he would have everything he ever wanted.

"I'm willing to leave the Austin family. I'll give up my rights as heir, no problem. But I won't take the blame for something as serious as attempted murder. When I go, I want to walk away with a clean slate."-

Laurinda smiled at Aiken, pulled out her phone, and called the police right in front of him.

"Laurinda, what do you think you're doing?"

When he realized she was actually calling, Aiken lunged forward, trying to grab her phone out of her hand. The lies he'd spun were too fragile. If anyone started digging, Laura's real identity would come out for sure.

Laurinda watched him panic, her smile growing even brighter. She leaned in, her voice just above a whisper, meant for him alone.

"Aiken, the real drama is just beginning."

Aiken stared at her like he didn't recognize her anymore. Wasn't she supposed to be weak and helpless, somebody he'd raised to be completely dependent on him? Right now, she looked nothing like that.

The police showed up almost instantly. They didn't give Aiken a chance to talk his way out of anything. The entire Austin family was brought to the station.

With the Austins gone, the guests left in the ballroom just looked around at each other, lost and awkward. Was that really it?

"Fabian, should we go to the police station too?"

"Why would we do that? Let's go home and find my dad..."

Fabian brushed off the person trying to help him, pressing a hand to his chest as he hurried out of the hall. He had a bad feeling. If he didn't sort things out with the Austins soon, Laura might end up in real trouble.

At the station, the officers split the Austin family into separate rooms for questioning.

Aiken glared at Laurinda, his words sharp and bitter.

"Do you really have to make this so humiliating? Do you want to drag everyone down with you?"

"Humiliating? What's left of the

Austin family's reputation? You ruined it the second you exposed

me. And now you want to talk about saving face? Don't worry, Aiken. You'll get exactly what you deserve."

Aiken looked at her like she was a stranger. He never expected her to fight back like this. Wasn't she supposed to break down, beg him not to throw her out?

Laurinda didn't spare him another glance. She followed the officer into the interrogation room.

Inside, a middle-aged man in a crisp white uniform was waiting. When Laurinda saw him, her expression

softened. She gave him a gentlenet

almost serene smile. Her face glowed, her big eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Kinsey."

"Did you have to go so far today? Is everything under control? You're not going to get yourself into trouble, are you?"

His voice was gentle, full of concern. He'd rushed over as soon as he got the call, worried she might get hurt or treated unfairly.

"Of course not. I didn't start anything. The Austins were the ones who handed me this opportunity on a silver platter."

Laurinda dropped into the chair across from him, accepting the cup of warm water he passed her. She took her time, her mood light and relaxed, a faint smile playing at the corners of her eyes.

Suddenly, Kinsey's phone rang. He checked the screen and his face tightened with annoyance.

"It's the Gates family..."

Laurinda didn't even blink. She grinned and teased, "Kinsey, aren't you supposed to be off the clock by now? There's no reason to answer personal calls at this hour, right?"

Kinsey paused, then let out a laugh. He looked at Laurinda, seeing how thoughtful and sharp she really was, and nodded. "You're right. Honestly, I've been dead tired lately. I'm trying to get some rest for once."

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## Chapter 5

[ 596 words ]

"If you're tired, you should go rest. Tomorrow, I'll have York bring you something to help you sleep."

"As for the Austins, they're beyond saving. The fortune my parents left behind just fed their greed. I hope they're ready to deal with the mess themselves."

"Kinsey, keep everyone here until morning."

Kinsey didn't know what Laurinda was planning, but he never questioned her. If she asked, he'd do it.

"Alright. Hiring someone for murder isn't a small thing. We have to investigate properly. No one takes them away, no matter who they send."

They traded a quick smile. The man glanced at his watch, then stood up.

"It's late. Head home and get some rest. When you have time, come have dinner at Whispering Pines Lodge. The teacher really misses you."

"Sure. Once I finish dealing with the Austins, I'll spend a few days at the lodge. I just hope the teacher won't be tired of me."

Laurinda answered cheerfully and followed him through the back door of the police station.

As soon as they stepped outside, a slick, powerful Agent's car pulled up. A little boy, maybe seven or eight, jumped out of the passenger seat and ran straight to her.

"Laurinda, happy birthday! I made a cake for you at home."

Laurinda looked down at him, her eyes softening. He looked so much like her. She gently tousled his hair.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Jasper. Let's go eat some cake."

She took the keys, glanced at a Maybach parked nearby, and led Jasper to the car. She helped him into the passenger seat, got behind the wheel, and with a press of the pedal, they took off.

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The next morning, Laurinda sat at the Austins' dining table, eating breakfast and watching their stock prices tumble on her tablet. Excitement sparkled in her beautiful fox-like eyes.

The butler stood close by, fidgeting and clearly wanting to say something but holding back.

Laurinda finished her last bite, set down her chopsticks, and grabbed a wet wipe to clean her mouth.

"If you have something to say, just say it. You look uncomfortable, holding it in all morning."

The butler hesitated, a little embarrassed. "It's nothing, really. I just noticed that Baily didn't come home last night. I wanted to ask when he and Mr. Aiken will be back."

Laurinda checked the time. "They should be here soon. I'm going upstairs to pack a few things. When Grandpa and Aiken get back, let someone come tell me."

She headed upstairs. The butler glanced from Laurinda's retreating figure to the numbers on the tablet, and his heart skipped a beat. Disaster was closing in on the Austin family.

Laurinda had just finished packing when noise erupted downstairs. Someone knocked on her door. When she opened it, Aiken was standing there, face twisted in anger.

"Laurinda, this is too much. You left me locked up at the police station all night, while you just walked out..."

Before he could finish, Laurinda shoved a box into his arms. He stared at its contents, his eyes wide.

"What... What is this supposed to mean?"

"It's what you wanted, Aiken. Isn't it obvious?"

She pushed the box closer to him. Aiken clutched it, and all the exhaustion on his face vanished, replaced by excitement. He never thought Laurinda would hand over the company this easily.

"Check it, Aiken. Make sure nothing's missing. If everything's here, the lawyer will be here soon. I can transfer my shares to the real heiress right away."

Aiken forgot all about dignity. He dropped down to the floor, opened the box and started rifling through everything. When he saw all the company seals were there, he broke into a grin, thrilled beyond words.

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[ 511 words ]

"No problem. Once you hand your shares over to Laura, you're free to leave the Austin family."

"Laurinda, don't take it personally. You might not be a real Austin, but the family's treated you well. What a pity. If only you were my brother's daughter by blood..." Aiken sounded regretful, but there was no hiding the satisfied smile tugging at his lips. He finally had everything he'd ever wanted.

"Laurinda, Kendal's here." The butler came upstairs, his voice respectful as he addressed Laurinda. When he glanced at Aiken, his expression turned complicated.

"Alright, I'll be down in a second."

Laurinda went back to her room, grabbed her already packed suitcase, and handed it to the butler. With a confident stride, she headed downstairs. There wasn't a trace of sadness on her face, only a calm, light energy, as if being pushed out of the Austin family meant nothing to her.

At the bottom of the stairs, Kendal was waiting. He walked over and pulled a stack of documents from his briefcase.

"Laurinda, here's the share transfer agreement."

Laurinda took the folder and set it right in front of Laura, who looked exhausted. Laurinda's eyes lingered on Laura's oily hair for a moment. Her brows knit together briefly, but she quickly looked away.

"Take a look through the contract. If there's anything you don't get, Kendal can explain it to you. If everything looks good, just sign it. Once you do, the Austin Group is yours."

Laura looked up, lost and confused, her mind somewhere else. She'd met Laurinda before, but she couldn't figure out how someone about to be kicked out of the family could still have so much confidence.

"What's wrong? Don't you want it?"

"Of course she does. Laurinda, stop scaring her. Laura's new to all this. She just spent a night in jail because of you. It's normal for her to be a little out of it. Laura, go through it with you. Jeniffer sat down next to Laura and gave Laurinda a cold look, all her previous warmth gone.

Laurinda watched Jeniffer's sudden change in attitude. She couldn't help but

wonder how Jeniffer would act once Aiken brought back Laura's real mother. Would she still be this gentle then?

Settling onto the sofa, Laurinda let

out a soft laugh. "Is that so? Then Jeniffer, maybe you should find her a tutor to help toughen her up.

Someone timid can handle bene

the Austin family's heir. The family business isn't easy, you know..."

"Of course, but that's none of your business anymore," Baily said, stepping out of the bedroom. Her eyes landed on Laurinda's suitcase before turning to the butler. "Butler, check her luggage. Make sure she doesn't take anything valuable. She's not part of our family anymore. If she takes anything now, it's theft."

she

The butler froze, looking helplessly at Laurinda.

"Laurinda..."

"It's alright. Go ahead and check. Since I'm leaving, I don't want anyone calling me a thief. We don't need another trip to the police station, do we?"

Everyone's faces darkened at Laurinda's words. Last night had already caused enough trouble, and none of them knew how they were going to clean up the mess.

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## Chapter 7

[ 636 words ]

With Laurinda's permission, the butler popped open her suitcase. Inside, there were just a few sets of clothes and some books. That was it. Everyone in the room let out a breath they'd been holding. They'd been eyeing Laurinda's jewelry for ages, and now it was finally theirs.

"I'm finished signing." Laura's mood soared when she saw the suitcase held nothing valuable. Her pen moved faster as she scribbled her signature. She handed the folder over to Kendal, shooting Laurinda a look that practically screamed victory.

Laurinda caught that smug look, but just smiled and took the folder from Kendal. She signed her name with a flourish.

"Congrats, you're the next heir of the Austin family."

Hope you can keep smiling like that forever, Laurinda thought, but she kept the words to herself.

She passed the folder back to Kendal so he could handle the rest of the handover. With her suitcase in hand, she didn't bother looking back as she walked straight toward the front door.

As she reached the entryway, Laura's voice rang out from behind her, loud and full of attitude.

"Butler, toss everything she used in that room. It's mine now."

...

Standing by the road, Laurinda took a long breath and tipped her face up to the sky. The weather couldn't have been better. Clear, blue, perfect.

A Rolls-Royce Phantom eased to a stop in front of her. The door opened and out stepped a man in his fifties, dressed in a sharp black suit. His black hair was slicked back and tied neatly, and there was a huge, excited smile on his face.

Laurinda's expression softened when she saw Cain. Her voice turned light, almost teasing.

"I told you there was no need to pick me up. I remember the way home."

"I just couldn't wait. I thought you'd be home for breakfast, but heard you were up all night and had to go

back. Come on, get in. I've got

everything ready at home to eh

out all that bad energy. Let's go

home, you take a long bath, and that family's out of your life for good."

The butler hurried over, took Laurinda's suitcase, and opened the car door for her.

Settled in the backseat, Laurinda watched the sunlight drift across the window. Something popped into her mind.

"Let's stop by the nursing home first."

The butler's face tightened for a second. He knew exactly why she wanted to go. He turned to the driver and said quietly, "Take Laurinda to the nursing home."

They drove out to a high-end facility on the edge of the city. From a distance, Laurinda spotted a group of people gathered in front of the main building. She raised a brow and looked at the butler.

"Did you set this up?"

He shook his head. "No, I know you hate all that unnecessary attention. I wouldn't do something like this. They're probably waiting for some other important guest."

Laurinda nodded, not in any hurry to get out. She watched the scene with a cool, steady gaze.

A few moments later, a tall man got out of a car nearby. He wore a black cashmere coat, walked with this easy, confident stride, and just gave

off an effortless sense of authe

The nursing home director, spotted him and rushed over to greet him with both hands, practically beaming.

Laurinda studied his profile. He looked oddly familiar. She glanced at the butler, who was also watching, and asked, "Do you know who that is?"

He shook his head again. "No, never seen him before. He doesn't look like anyone from Apex's big families, at least not anyone I've met. Want me to find out who he is?"

"No need. Just wait here. I'll go see her myself. She's not always stable."

Laurinda turned away from the window, pushed open the car door,

and stepped out. A gust of cold wind hit her, so she pulled her coat tighter and walked briskly toward the nursing home's side entrance.

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## Chapter 8

[ 551 words ]

Laurinda stepped into the care center and was immediately greeted by the head nurse, who walked over with a warm, easy smile.

"Laurinda, I thought you usually came on Thursdays. What brings you here so early today? Fidelia's been doing pretty well lately. She still spaces out sometimes, but honestly, she's much better than she was before."

"Thank you for taking such good care of her. What's she up to right now? Is it alright if I go see her?"

"Of course. She's been asking about you since last night. She remembered yesterday was your birthday and said she had a present for you."

As they headed down the hallway together, the nurse chatted with Laurinda, then stopped quietly outside Fidelia's room.

Laurinda peeked through the small window in the door. Fidelia was sitting by the window, quietly knitting, bathed in sunlight. Her skin looked so fair, her features delicate. The light made her look even softer, almost serene. Watching her, Laurinda was suddenly swept back to her childhood, remembering how safe she'd felt curled up in Fidelia's arms, how sweet those days had been.

If it hadn't been for that monster, none of this would have happened. The thought made Laurinda's resolve even stronger. She wanted him to suffer for what he'd done.

"Laurinda..." The nurse's voice broke through her dark thoughts, noticing the chill in her expression.

Laurinda blinked and quickly smoothed her face, turning to the nurse with a gentle smile.

"I'll stay with her for a while. I'll find Dr. Earl later, after we've talked."

"Alright, I'll go let him know you're here." With that, the nurse hurried off down the hall.

Laurinda opened the door to Fidelia's room. Fidelia looked up at the sound, and when she saw Laurinda, her whole face lit up. She set her knitting aside, stood, and practically ran over.

"Laurinda, what are you doing here today? Did you sense I was missing you?"

Laurinda couldn't help but smile back. Fidelia's joy was so genuine and bright.

"I did. I just felt like you were thinking about me, so I came right after breakfast. Have you been eating your meals like you promised?"

"Of course I have. Laurinda, I made you a birthday present. Let me show you." Fidelia hurried over to the closet pulled out a gift box and held it out with both hands, her eyes shining with anticipation.

"You know I can't go out to shop, so I asked the nurse to get me some yarn. I knitted you a sweater. Do you like it?"

Laurinda opened the box and pulled out a red cardigan, decorated with little flowers and playful dolls. It was a bit flashy, but it made her laugh, her eyes crinkling with happiness. After all these years, Fidélia still remembered exactly what she liked. That feeling was amazing.

She shrugged off her coat and slipped on the cardigan right away, spinning in a circle for Fidelia. "How does it look? Do you like it on me?"

Fidelia set down the box and hugged Laurinda tightly, her voice soft and full of love.

"My Laurinda would look beautiful in anything."

"Thank you for my birthday gift. I really do love it."

Laurinda hugged Fidelia's thin

frame, gently stroking her back. She thought of the wish she'd made that morning before dawn. She just wanted Fidella to get better to leave this place, and to be with her again.

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## Chapter 9

[ 577 words ]

After lunch with Fidelia, Laurinda waited until she drifted off to sleep before slipping out of the room. Holding the gift box close, she made her way down the hall toward the doctor's office. Before she could even knock, the door opened, and a tall man stepped out. He glanced down at her, and for a moment, Laurinda caught a perfect view of his face.

He had striking features and a strong jawline, with sharp brows that framed dark, expressive eyes. His nose was straight and proud, and his lips were full, adding a touch of softness to his otherwise sculpted face. When Laurinda looked into his eyes, she sensed a cool, distant aura that made him seem untouchable.

He was so tall that Laurinda, even at five foot six, felt small standing in front of him. He nodded at her politely, then stepped aside to leave. As he passed, a hint of pine drifted through the air, clean and subtle.

Laurinda found herself staring at his retreating figure, lost in thought, until the office door swung open again. Earl, with his unmistakable blond hair, poked his head out.

"What are you staring at? He's already gone," Earl teased, grinning.

Laurinda shook herself out of her daze and turned to face him. "That guy seemed kind of familiar. I feel like I've seen him before."

"Him? No way. He's from Cabinda. Do you know anyone in the Lane family?"

Laurinda squinted, thinking, but then shook her head. "No, I don't."

"That checks out." Earl leaned against the doorframe, clearly in gossip mode. "He was basically the apple of the Lane family's eye growing up. Super hard to get along with. I've never seen him act friendly with anyone, not even his fiancée. She doesn't have any say in front of him."

Laurinda blinked. "Fiancée? He's engaged?"

All her curiosity about the man disappeared. Sure, he was attractive, but Laurinda had zero interest in men who were already taken.

"Yeah, she's a socialite from the Charles family. I heard they grew up together, childhood sweethearts and all that."

Hearing that made Laurinda even less interested. She caught the knowing look on Earl's face and decided to steer the conversation away from gossip.

"How's Fidelia doing? The head nurse said she's a lot more stable lately. Does that mean she can start getting back to normal?"

Earl dropped his teasing smile and turned serious. "She's definitely improving, but she's still sensitive outside stress. Just give me a bit more time. I'm doing everything I can to help her recover."

He launched into a detailed explanation about Fidelia's treatment and the next steps. Laurinda listened carefully, only leaving when Earl had to start his rounds. She didn't go back to Fidelia's room, just grabbed her bag and headed for the side exit.

Out the back door of the rehab center, Laurinda spotted a tall, elegant figure standing by her car. She frowned, not expecting to see him here.

She walked over, noticing he didn't seem in any rush to leave. "Do you need something?" she asked, trying to keep her tone neutral.

Remembering he had a fiancée, Laurinda didn't want to get tangled up in any awkward conversation. She was ready to head out.

The man had clearly been waiting for her, but when he saw the look on her face, he hesitated. Was she annoyed with him?

"My friend had an emergency and

took the car. It's pretty far from the city, and it's tough to catch a ride gü here Would you mind giving me a

lift?"

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## Chapter 10

[ 557 words ]

Laurinda listened to the man's awkward excuse, a quiet, mocking smile slipping across her lips. She quickly hid it, her expression turning cool and distant. "Sure," she said, her tone light and effortless. "Hop in."

As soon as she spoke, the man stepped forward and opened the car door for her. He was polite and gentle, his face giving nothing away. If you didn't know better, you'd think he really was just here for a ride. Laurinda only snapped out of her thoughts once he'd circled around and gotten in on the other side. She ducked into the car and settled herself in.

They drove into a quiet neighborhood, stopping at a side street near the entrance. Before getting out, the man turned to her and thanked her softly.

Laurinda watched him walk away, a nagging feeling tugging at her. She was sure they'd met before, but for the life of her, she couldn't remember where.

"Laurinda, Fraser's been waiting for you at home for ages. I told him we didn't know when you'd be back, but he just wouldn't leave. What do you want to do?"

"Let's just go see him. He won't give up otherwise." Laurinda finally looked away, closing her eyes and falling silent. Leaving the Austin family meant she had to start over. At least the past few years in hiding had given her a chance to get ready.

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On the other side of town, Adolphus slid into his car. Sam greeted him with a wide, eager grin. "So, did you get her number or what?"

Adolphus barely glanced at him, clearly unimpressed. "Who said I was after her number? I just needed a lift, that's all."

The three guys in the car couldn't hold back their smirks. If they didn't know him so well, maybe they'd buy it, but they'd grown up together. They could tell he was into her.

And honestly, who could blame him? The girl was gorgeous. She had this vibrant, fox-like gaze that was impossible to ignore.

"I heard she's Ms. Austin. The one who turned out to be a fake heiress. They kicked her out of the family at her birthday party last night. Not that the Austins got off easy. She managed to send the whole family to the police station. They just got released this morning. The whole Apex elite is laughing about it."

Adolphus listened, thinking back to the car ride. He had a feeling there was a lot more to that girl than people realized.

When he stayed quiet, the others quickly dropped the subject and straightened up.

"Adolphus, are you really going along with Felix's plan? You're going to be the school doctor at Apex Academy?"

"Yeah. Felix set it up already. It'd be rude to go along with it. Foley

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you should head back."

Sam looked like he wanted to argue but Foley cut him off.

"Sam, you should go. Irvin's coming this afternoon. He's starting school at Apex Academy too."

The second Irvin's name came up, Sam lost all interest in hanging around. Ever since his breakup with Cathleen, Irvin had been relentless, making his life miserable with every trick he could think of. Sam had had enough.

“Alright... I'll leave you to it, Adolphus. And I'm not coming home for dinner tonight.”

Seeing Sam shrink back, no one in the car teased him any further. Adolphus didn't even bother to look his way.

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