

From Ashes of Scandal to His Embrace (Laurinda)

Chapter 11

[629 words]

The car rolled to a stop inside the estate. Laurinda had barely stepped out when an older man with silver hair, dressed neatly in a high-collared suit, hurried over to her. You could tell right away he'd been waiting for her, probably for a while.

She met his expectant gaze and gave him a polite smile. "Fraser, thank you for waiting. Let's talk in the study, shall we?"

She gestured for him to go ahead. Fraser seemed to understand this wasn't the place for serious conversation and followed Laurinda into one of the villas.

Inside the study, Laurinda asked the butler to bring Fraser some hot ginger tea to warm him up. "Sorry for making you wait, Fraser. What brings you here today?" Her tone was gentle, even though she already knew this wasn't his first visit.

Fraser didn't waste any time. "Laurinda, you refused to go to Cabinda before, saying your situation made things complicated. But now that you're no longer tied to the Austin family, can't you go back?"

Just as she expected. He was still trying to get her to return.

Laurinda sat down across from him. "I'll go back to Cabinda, but not right now. If you're feeling overwhelmed at the institute, I can find someone to assist you."

Fraser sighed, clearly frustrated. He'd really hoped this would be the visit that convinced her to go back with him, but she still wasn't budging.

"Laurinda..."

She cut him off gently. "Don't try to guilt me with my parents. They were willing to give up everything for their research, but I can't do that. I'm not like them. I want my own life."

"If you're not in a rush to leave, you're welcome to stay for dinner. But I have no plans to return to the capital right now."

Laurinda stood up, glanced at Fraser, who looked more disappointed than ever, and quietly left the study.

She had her own plans for her life. She wasn't going to let anyone else call the shots.

The butler came in with the tea and found Fraser sitting silently on the sofa. He set the cup down in front of him and gave his shoulder a gentle pat.

"Fraser, Laurinda's had it rough these past few years. You shouldn't push her so hard. As long as we can, let's just look out for her. Maybe she'll change her mind in time."

Fraser looked up at the butler,

hesitated for a moment, then

nodded. "Tell Laurinda I won't be

staying for dinner I have some

projects to check on. Ask her to take care of herself for me."

He finished his tea in one long sip, picked up his briefcase, and left the study.

Laurinda stood by the window, watching the car as it carried Fraser away. She stood there for a long time before finally looking away.

She remembered watching her parents leave just like that. They'd promised her they'd be back in time for her birthday, but then the accident happened, and they never made it home.

The next day, Laurinda arrived at Whispering Pines Lodge with her suitcase. Before she even reached the front door, she heard a child's bright laughter drifting out from inside. The cold look on her face melted into something softer.

"Laurinda, you're here. Beatrice was just telling Linda to make some seafood since she remembered it's your favorite," the butler said, hurrying over to take her suitcase and walking with her toward the courtyard.

Laurinda gave a small, peaceful smile at that. Then, as she noticed two unfamiliar cars parked outside, she asked curiously, "Do we have guests?"

"Actually, a new student is coming to start high school here. He'll be going to the same school as you..." the butler started to explain.

They had just reached the main courtyard when, before Laurinda could react, a little rocket of a child launched themselves straight into her arms.

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Chapter 12

[570 words]

Jasper barreled into Laurinda, sending her stumbling until she landed against a firm chest. The familiar scent of pine snapped her out of her daze. She wrapped her arms around Jasper to steady herself, then glanced over her shoulder at the man behind her, her face full of confusion.

"Wow, we meet again," he said, a hint of amusement in his voice.

Adolphus met Laurinda's wide, startled eyes and, for a moment, thought of the cat in Baily's room. The resemblance was uncanny.

"Adolphus, you know Laurinda? Laurinda, this is Baily's guest," someone explained.

Laurinda nodded politely to Adolphus, whispered a quick thank you, and took Jasper's hand. She walked away without noticing the small smile tugging at Adolphus's lips as he watched her go.

The butler noticed that smile. Ever since Adolphus arrived at Whispering Pines Lodge, he'd been nothing but polite, but always kept himself at a distance. Now, though, his expression had softened, and there was a warmth in his eyes that made

the butler pause.

"Honestly, your legs are too long. I turned around for one second to grab the chessboard and you vanished," Larson's booming voice came out of nowhere, breaking the moment. "Come on, let's head inside and play a round."

Adolphus quickly turned to take the chessboard from Larson. Larson glanced at the butler, who was still standing there looking a little dazed, then spotted the black suitcase and his eyes brightened.

"Laurinda's here?"

"She just arrived. Jasper almost knocked her over. I think she's giving him a little lecture right now," the butler replied.

Larson's face softened with a fond

smile. "Those two must be off having a private chat. Take her suitcase to her room and see if she needs anything. Make sure she has everything she wants she probably didn't bring much with her from the Austin house."

As he thought about the announcement the Austin family had made that morning, Larson's face grew serious. The ferve of them, Spreading lies so easily. Laurinda hadn't told him to stay out of it, he'd have made sure the Austins were out on the street by tomorrow.

"And tomorrow, when you take Laurinda to school, talk to the staff. She might not be an Austin anymore, but she has the Adams family behind her. Make sure everyone knows to treat her right. I don't want her dealing with any trouble at school."

"Of course. Don't worry, I'll take care of everything," the butler said, grabbing the suitcase and heading off.

Adolphus listened quietly, then followed Larson into the front hall. He'd barely sat down at the chessboard before Coco, the cat, jumped onto his lap. She curled up contentedly and shut her eyes without a care in the world.

Irvin stared, completely shocked. He couldn't believe the usually standoffish cat was being so affectionate, or that someone as fastidious as Adolphus would let a kitten settle in his lap.

Beatrice walked in and noticed Irvin's surprised face. She guessed he was upset that the cat was ignoring him.

"Laurinda's cat is a little odd. She

only warms up to people she really likes, so don't take it personally.

Honestly, this is the first time/et

seen her act like this, Beatrice said "Irvin, come have some fruit had

Linda pick it fresh from the garden this morning."

She gently tugged his arm and handed him a plate of neatly sliced fruit.

"Laurinda's back too. I'll introduce you two soon. You're in the same grade at school, so you can look out for each other there."

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Chapter 13

[619 words]

When Irvin heard there was someone his age in the house, his attention snapped away from Coco, the cat curled up in Adolphus's arms. He took the seat across from Beatrice and started peppering her with questions about his soon-to-be classmate.

No one noticed that while Beatrice was talking, someone else nearby was quietly listening in, picking up every word.

Laurinda came into the front hall with Jasper at her side. She heard Beatrice speaking about her, and the warmth in Beatrice's gentle voice was obvious.

"Grandma."

"Oh, you're back. Come over here."

Beatrice waved her over with a smile. Laurinda came closer, still holding Jasper's hand, and Beatrice squeezed Laurinda's soft fingers in hers.

"Laurinda, let me introduce you. This is Irvin, the grandson of one of my dear friends. The young man playing chess with your grandpa is Adolphus, the youngest son of another friend. They both just arrived from Cabinda. Irvin is transferring to your school, so he can look out for you."

To Beatrice, Laurinda was still a delicate, cherished girl. She'd always been well protected as an Austin, but now that tie was gone. Beatrice couldn't help but worry that people would take advantage, so knowing someone would be by her side gave her some peace of mind.

Laurinda caught on right away, and she gave Irvin a friendly nod and a little laugh. "Grandma, you're putting him on the spot. We just met, and you're already asking him to take care of me. Don't you think that's a bit much? I've been at that school forever. Do you really think I'm going to get bullied? You don't have to worry so much."

Larson, her grandfather, jumped in with a grin. "Exactly. Who would dare mess with Laurinda? If anyone tries, just give me a call. I might not have a lot of power, but I can still throw my weight around if I need to."

Laurinda burst out laughing at that. The brightness in her smile made Irvin and Adolphus both go a little quiet, each of them thinking to themselves that she really was stunning.

After lunch, Laurinda was upstairs unpacking when the butler called her back to the front hall. The first thing she saw was Coco, curled up and completely at ease on Adolphus's lap. Laurinda frowned a little. Coco wasn't usually this clingy, not even with her. Something felt off.

"Where's Grandpa?" she asked.

She glanced at Adolphus, still sitting at the chessboard. She couldn't figure out why he was still here after lunch. Was he planning to move in?

"Larson's gone for a nap," Adolphus said. "He mentioned you're a great chess player. I was hoping you'd play a game with me."

"I'm not interested," Laurinda replied. "I have things to take care of. I'm sure you can keep yourself busy."

She didn't look back as she left the hall. Playing chess with a guy who already had a fiancée? Not her idea of fun. She'd leave those cultured hobbies to the people who enjoyed them.

Adolphus watched her go, totally confused. He couldn't remember doing anything to upset her. Lunch had gone just fine, hadn't it? What had he done wrong?

He stroked Coco's head gently and chuckled under his breath. "What's her deal?"

Coco stretched out in his arms, let out a sleepy meow, and curled up even tighter.

That morning, the Austin family held a press conference to announce the identity of their t Heir and to

reveal that Laurinda was not the real

heiress after all.

Suddenly, everyone Laurinda had ever put in their place smelled blood in the water. They couldn't wait to take her down.

Especially at school, the people she

had once made look foolish were buzzing with excitement. They huddled together plotting exactly how they'd get even with her the next day.

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Chapter 14

[613 words]

"Fabian, I heard the top bully at New Horizons College has been looking for a reason to mess with Laurinda. Why don't we just let him handle it? Maybe it'll put Laurinda in her place. I'm honestly hoping it ruins her reputation for good."

Edward, always by Fabian's side, was practically buzzing with excitement. He knew exactly what kind of people ran things at New Horizons. If Laurinda got tangled up with them, even if she walked away without a scratch, the rumors alone would be enough to drag her down.

They just wanted to see her fall. It was the only thing that could satisfy the resentment they felt. Edward had never liked how Laurinda acted like she was better than everyone else.

Fabian didn't answer right away. Instead, he turned toward Laura, who was sitting quietly beside him, and started to explain in a gentle voice what the bullies at New Horizons were really like.

"Fabian, isn't that kind of harsh? I know Laurinda took my identity, but it's not like she had a choice. She was just a kid when it happened."

Laura clung to Fabian's arm, her expression full of nervous concern, like she was genuinely worried about Laurinda.

Fabian's heart softened at Laura's kindness. He took her hand in his, feeling how rough it was, and his voice turned gentle.

"You're too kind, Laura. Honestly, you should be thinking more about yourself. Laurinda got to live your life, spoiled with everything she wanted. Just one of her fancy creams probably costs more than you've spent in a whole year."

He absentmindedly rubbed her hand, and for a moment he wondered what Laura would have been like if she'd grown up with the life she deserved. Maybe even more confident and dazzling than she was now.

Laura pulled her hand away, smiling awkwardly. "I had no idea her life was so over the top. I just..."

"It's fine, don't stress about it. She's already been kicked out of the Austin family. You're the real heiress now, and you're amazing. Your future's going to be so much better, and I'll be right here with you, always."

Fabian noticed Laura's discomfort, so he quickly tried to make her feel better. He pulled a tube of hand cream from his pocket and started gently applying it to her hands, making the people around them cheer and tease.

"Fabian, you're such a sweetheart! Laura, don't overthink things. We've got everything under control. This will go perfectly."

The next morning, Laurinda showed up to school right as the bell rang. As soon as she walked into the classroom, she noticed someone new sitting behind her seat. She narrowed her eyes, just a little.

She hadn't even reached her desk when the teacher, standing up front, started speaking in a snarky, sarcastic voice.

"Honestly, someone isn't cut out

for studying, they should just stay home. No need for one rotten apple to ruin

dimit for everyone else. A fake

still a fake. Even if you steal

someone's life, you're still hopeless."

Laurinda actually found the teacher's attitude funny. She leaned lazily against the doorframe, her tone relaxed and teasing.

"Wanda, do you live in a soap opera or something? You're really good at that passive-aggressive talk."

The classroom erupted in laughter.

Laurinda glanced at the group

laughing the hardest, her striking, fox like eyes sparkling with mischief. She looked completely unbothered, as if the teacher's words didn't touch her at all.

Wanda's face darkened. Seeing Laurinda so calm only made her angrier. She jabbed a finger toward the door.

"You're not allowed in my class anymore. As long as I'm here, you're not."

"Oh, really? Wow, Wanda, you must have a lot of authority. Maybe I should go ask the education board if you're actually allowed to kick me out of class."

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[616 words]

Wanda couldn't believe Laurinda was still acting so bold. She let out a cold laugh.

She'd never liked Laurinda, but before, she'd been careful because of Laurinda's powerful background. Now, Laurinda was just an orphan, cast out from her wealthy family. What was there to be scared of anymore?

"Go ahead. Report me to the education board if you want. I'd love to see what someone like you thinks she can do to me. I won't let you in my classroom because I don't want you disrupting the other students. Honestly, the air feels so much cleaner in here without you."

Wanda stepped down from the podium, walked right over, and shoved Laurinda away from where she was leaning against the doorframe. Then she slammed the door shut.

Laurinda stood there for a second, just staring at the closed door, then let out a short laugh, half annoyed, half amused. She slung her backpack over her shoulder and headed toward the main building.

In the principal's office, Malcom had just finished quietly asking the principal to look out for Laurinda, to make sure she wasn't getting picked on at school. Before he could say more, the office phone started ringing.

The principal answered. As he listened, his face fell, and he shot an uneasy look at Malcom, who was still sipping his tea.

"Malcom, I hope you don't mind me asking, but do you have any connections at the education bureau?"

"The education bureau?" Malcom set down his tea, clearly confused about why the principal would bring that up.

"Yes. That was them on the phone. Laurinda just filed a complaint against Wanda, saying she was stopped from going to class and insulted by her teacher. They want me to deal with Wanda right away."

This was the first time the principal had gotten a call like this. Usually, the bureau would notify them of an investigation first, then give instructions. Today, the order was straightforward—solve the problem with the teacher, and do it now. That kind of directness meant this wasn't just some ordinary issue.

Malcom immediately shot up, his face serious. "What did you say? A teacher isn't letting Laurinda into class?"

The principal was startled by Malcom's sudden intensity and quickly tried to calm him down. "Malcom, let's not jump to conclusions. I'm sure this is just a misunderstanding. Let me go see what's going on. Please wait here for news."

He wiped sweat from his forehead, even though the weather was cold. The stress was getting to him. He grabbed his jacket and hurried out not daring to waste even a minute.

Malcom stayed behind, pacing with worry. If Larson hadn't told him to keep his visit a secret from Laurinda, he'd have gone along to check on her himself.

Just then, the door opened again. Malcom couldn't help blurting out, "What happened? Is my little... I mean, is Laurinda okay?"

Realizing his mistake, he looked up and saw someone he didn't expect.

"Adolphus? What are you doing here?"

Malcom's tone turned respectful. He'd already learned who this elegant man was the day before.

"I'm here to finish up my new hire paperwork. What's going on with Laurinda?"

Noticing Malcom's worried face and hearing Laurinda's name, Adolphus figured something bad must have happened.

"I'm not sure of all the details. The education bureau called just now....."

The butler explained what the principal had told him. He

understood Laurinda,

temperament-she wouldnt pull

string unless she was truly angry. Whatever happened must have really pushed her over the edge.

Adolphus set his folder on the principal's desk. "Don't worry. I'll go check things out."

"Thank you, Adolphus."

He nodded slightly, buttoned his

coat, and headed toward the classroom buildings. It didn't take long before he spotted a familiar figure near the

flowerbeds-Laurinda, standing there in her thin school uniform, looking small and a little lost.

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[576 words]

Every time Laurinda saw him, he felt like a completely different person.

He walked over with those long strides of his, stopping right in front of her. Then he crouched down, and his voice softened in a way he probably didn't even notice.

"It's freezing out here. How can you sit on this cold stone wearing so little? Aren't you worried about catching a cold?"

Laurinda glanced down at the man squatting in front of her, completely confused by how persistent he was. If he hadn't caused so much trouble in her dreams, she wouldn't have overslept this morning or gotten stuck outside by that old witch of a teacher.

She shot back, "Why do you talk like someone's dad when you're not even old?"

Adolphus didn't get mad. He just stood up, gently lifted Laurinda off the planter, and spoke in a low, coaxing kind of way.

"This stone's too cold. It's not good for you. If you aren't going back to class, come sit in the infirmary for a while. It's warm in there."

Before Laurinda could protest, he had already taken her by the wrist and was leading her toward the infirmary.

Laurinda watched his side profile, feeling a little out of it. She could have pulled away if she'd wanted, but for some reason, she just let him lead her.

As soon as they walked in, Laurinda wrinkled her nose at the familiar smell. She hated the scent of disinfectant. Every time she caught a whiff of it, she'd have nightmares about her parents' deaths.

"I think I'll just go back to class. This place isn't really for me."

She tried to pull her hand away and turned to leave, but Adolphus caught her wrist again, stopping her.

"What's wrong? Can't handle the disinfectant smell? It's not that strong in here." He led her further inside. Sure enough, there was just a faint, clean hint of pine. "Sit down. Have some warm water."

Adolphus poured her a glass and set it in front of her, then stepped outside to make a phone call.

Laurinda sat there, taking in her surroundings. She remembered the old doctor who used to work here. The place was never this tidy or bright before.

Her eyes drifted to the rows of medicine bottles. She reached out for one, but a large hand closed gently over hers.

"Not sleeping well? That one has hormones in it. Sit down, let me check your pulse."

"I'll write a prescription to help you get some rest."

"No way. That stuff tastes awful. I'm not drinking it."

Laurinda pulled her hand back quickly, eyeing him warily. She scooted to her chair, cupped the glass in her hands, and took a sip, changing the topic. fo FindNovel.net

"So, what are you doing here? Are you the new school nurse?"

"Kind of. I'm just filling in. You sure you don't want me to take a look? I'm actually pretty good at this."

Laurinda didn't expect him to be so stubborn. She gave him a tight, polite smile.

"Thanks, but I'm not that desperate. I can still sleep most nights, so I don't need any medicine."

She fished her phone out of her

pocket, opened a game, and ignored him after that. Adolphus seemed to get the hint. He just smiled to himself and started organizing medicine on the shelf nearby.

When the bell rang, Laurinda slipped her phone back into her pocket and grabbed her backpack. As she was about to leave, she glanced at

Adolphus, who was still busy.

"Thanks for letting me hang out here. I'm heading to class."

"Wait..."

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Chapter 17

[531 words]

Adolphus hadn't even finished speaking when the infirmary door swung open. A tall guy stepped in, shopping bag in hand.

"Adolphus, here's what you asked for."

Adolphus got up, peeled off his rubber gloves, and took the bag from Foley. He pulled out a long cashmere coat and held it out to Laurinda.

"Put this on. It's cold outside. Don't catch a cold."

Laurinda eyed the coat, her lips pressed tight. The pieces were finally starting to fit together in her mind. If she still couldn't see what he was after after all this, she'd have to be blind.

"Sorry. I'm not interested in men with fiancées."

She brushed past the hand blocking her, heading straight for the door. She pushed it open and left without a single glance back.

Adolphus just stood there, coat still in hand, completely thrown. He looked over at Foley, who seemed just as confused.

"Fiancée? Since when do I have a fiancée?"

Foley shook his head. He didn't think the fiancée thing was really the point here. What mattered was that girl who'd just walked out. Was Adolphus actually catching feelings?

For the next few days, Adolphus didn't run into Laurinda again. Sometimes he'd hear her name pop up when Irvin was talking, but that was it.

Foley had no idea who Laurinda was, but he could read Adolphus's face. The guy clearly wanted to know more, so Foley ended up asking.

"Irvin, is Laurinda really that impressive? She managed to get a teacher replaced?"

Swapping out a teacher during senior year was pretty much unheard of, but apparently Laurinda had pulled it off.

"Yeah. She argued with our teacher one morning, and in the middle of class the principal came and called the guy out. Next period, new teacher. The old one got transferred."

Irvin talked with his mouth half full, shoveling food in between sentences.

"I don't think Laurinda's like everyone says. Other classes are always gossiping that she's a fake heiress who's been cut off from her rich family."

"But honestly, even The Gates

Family couldn't have pulled off what happened with that teacher.

Whoever's backing her must be even more powerful you know, Foley. The Gates Family is the biggest deal in

Apex."

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Foley nodded. Before he'd even come to Apex, he'd looked into all the major families. The Gates Family was a powerhouse.

Still, they weren't all-powerful. There were other forces at play in Apex. That was one of the reasons they were here, after all.

Adolphus spoke up suddenly. "So you're saying The Gates Family was involved too?"

"Yeah, that's what I heard. People say Laurinda and Fabian used to be

a thing, but after some family drama Fabian turned on her. When Laurinda wanted the teacher gone, Fabian tried to block her, but in the end the teacher still got transferred."

"People say The Gates Family let it go just so the principal wouldn't lose face or look weak."

Adolphus laughed quietly, tapping his fingers against the table.

"Quit wasting your time on gossip and focus on your schoolwork. If you don't get

your grades up this time, your dad's really going to send you out to the desert to dig ditches."

He got up and walked out. Foley watched him leave, feeling a chill run down his spine. Someone was definitely in for some trouble.

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Chapter 18

[595 words]

Irvin watched Adolphus walk away and let out a disgruntled snort. "Adolphus is so weird. He acts like he doesn't care, but you know he just wants to listen in. Foley, you don't even know how bizarre Laurinda is. She barely pays attention in class, spends most of her time either napping or reading novels. The teachers don't even bother with her anymore."

Foley glanced at Irvin, who was clearly way too invested in Laurinda's business. He rubbed his temples, feeling a headache coming on.

"Alright, just eat your lunch and stop obsessing over her. Maybe you should listen to Adolphus for once, unless you really want to end up working in the mines."

There was a hint of warning in Foley's voice as he shot Irvin a meaningful look.

Adolphus left the infirmary, cigarette pinched between his fingers, and settled into the little gazebo nearby. He stared off into space, lost in thought.

After lunch, Laurinda and York headed back to the classroom, only to be greeted by the sound of her deskmate's excited scream.

"Laurinda, you're back! Hurry up and get over here. There's a total heartthrob on the school forum. He's exactly your type."

Shirley shoved her phone into Laurinda's hands, practically bouncing with excitement.

Laurinda glanced at the photo on the screen, her pretty eyes curving into a smile.

Shirley caught that look and immediately knew Laurinda was interested. She couldn't help but press for details.

"He's a total dream, right?"

"He's good looking, I'll give you that. But he's already taken. Did you finish those practice sheets I gave you?"

"I'm almost done. Wait, how do you know he's taken? Do you know him?"

Shirley's response was casual but her eyes were full of curiosity. She clearly suspected Laurinda knew the guy.

"I know him a little, not much. He's the new school doctor. They say he's really skilled, too."

Laurinda's mind drifted to the day he offered to check her pulse. Ever since then, her sleep had only gotten worse. Maybe she really did need to see a doctor and get her health sorted out.

"A doctor? I always thought doctors were old guys. I never expected one to be young and so good looking. Too bad he's already off the market."

Shirley sighed dramatically, shaking her head. Laurinda just laughed and gently patted her on the head.

"Come on. Boys will only slow you down. Didn't you say you wanted to get into The Cabinda University? You should be focusing on your studies."

"Right, right. No way I'm letting a guy distract me from my goals. Beauty really is dangerous. Such a tragedy."

Shirley stuffed her phone back into

her desk, pulled out another worksheet, and got right back to Studying Laurinda watched her for moment, amused, then sat down, pulled out her own phone, and logged onto the campus network.

Five minutes later, the infamous photo of the handsome school doctor vanished from the forum. Wails of disappointment echoed down the hallway.

"Wait, where did the picture go? I didn't even get a chance to save it!"

"My saved photo is gone too! Is this place haunted or what?"

"Who did it? Who stole the hot doctor's photo? Show yourself!"

Listening to all the commotion outside, Laurinda felt strangely satisfied. She pulled her puffy jacket over herself and got ready for a nap.

Fabian, Laura, and their group walked past Laurinda's classroom after lunch, obviously on purpose. They glanced over at Laurinda's seat, their faces turning grim.

"Fabian, do you think that fake knows what we're up to? She won't even leave the classroom anymore. Such a coward."

"Fabian, do you have any ideas to get her out? We can't just sit around waiting all day."

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Chapter 19

[596 words]

Fabian glanced away, then looked at the group trailing behind him. He pressed his lips together and stayed silent.

Admitting he meant nothing to Laurinda was the last thing he wanted. It wasn't just now either. Even back then, he could never get Laurinda to show up just because he called.

Laura noticed the struggle on his face and said softly, "Fabian, maybe we should just leave her alone. Laurinda... she never really did anything to hurt me. She just lived the life that belonged to me for eighteen years, that's all..."

As soon as Laura said that, all of Fabian's hesitation vanished. His whole expression turned firm.

"No way. We can't just forget about this, Laura. I know you're kind, but Laurinda deserves to pay. She isn't even an Austin anymore, but she still acts like she owns the place. She even dared to lay a hand on a teacher. Go back to class. I'll handle the rest."

He didn't let Laura say another word. Walking her back to the classroom, he made sure she was inside before heading off to talk with his friends about what to do next.

As soon as Fabian left, all the worry dropped from Laura's face. In its place was a cold, twisted smile.

Laurinda wasn't part of the Austin Family anymore, and now she had Fabian coming after her. Her glory days were about to be over.

She used to be the little princess, always above everyone else. Soon, she'd be nothing but a stray. Laura couldn't wait to see how Laurinda would act when she lost everything.

While Laura was picturing Laurinda's downfall, her phone suddenly rang.

She looked at the number on the screen and froze. Old, painful memories came rushing back all at once.

Her hands shook as she quickly powered off her phone, refusing to look at it even a second longer.

"Laura, are you alright?" A classmate who'd just walked in through the back door noticed how pale she looked and came over, full of concern.

Laura shook her head, looking small and tired.

"I'm okay. I think it's just low blood sugar. I haven't been eating well for a long time. I'll be fine."

"Are you sure? If you feel sick, let me know. I can walk you to the nurse."

"No, thank you. I just need a minute to rest."

She went back to her seat, but behind her, she could hear people whispering.

"A real heiress is a real heiress. Even growing up in the countryside, Laura's still got such good mar Not like Laurinda That girl always acts like she's above everyone."

"Right? She even treated Fabian like that. Now she's too scared to show her face. Serves her right."

"Real will always be real. A fake can't ever take her place. Laurinda doesn't even know who her real parents are. She's nothing but a stray."

...

Listening to their words, Laura

suddenly had an idea. Laurinda should taste every bit of pain she'd ever felt. Why did an imposter get to live like a princess, while she

Austin

suffered as the real Miss

Laurinda owed her everything.

Her mind was made up. Laura gripped her phone, left the classroom, and headed for thool net

rooftop. She dialed the number

She'd spent years

trying to forget.

Meanwhile, Laurinda was half-asleep when her phone buzzed.

She groaned, grabbed it, and squinted at the screen. When she saw the photo in the message, her eyes narrowed in annoyance.

You just ruined my mood.

York replied, Sorry. I just got this evidence from their group. When do you want to use it?

Keep it for now. She's still useful to the Austin Family. Did they find her mom yet? Don't let Aiken get to her first.

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Chapter 20

[631 words]

York texted, "We've found her. Our people had just arrived when Aiken showed up, but I've already had her taken care of."

Laurinda replied, "Good. Do you think Aiken's going to panic when he realizes she's gone?"

"I have no idea," York answered, "but I do know The Austin Family is about to hit their first big financial crisis. Laurinda, just wait and see. Things are about to get interesting."

"Thanks. Can you book a doctor's appointment for me? I haven't been sleeping, and my head is killing me."

"Of course. Tomorrow's Saturday, right? I'll pick you up from school."

Laurinda slid her phone back into her pocket. There was no way she'd be able to sleep now, so she just gave up on the idea. She tossed off her down jacket and sat up, only to lock eyes with Irvin, who'd been staring at her all along.

She remembered him from that day at The Adams Family's house. Because of Adolphus, she'd never really wanted to get close to Irvin, but having him watch her like that was making her feel uneasy.

"Do you... need something?" she asked.

Irvin had been trying to figure out how to talk to her. When she broke the silence, he nodded, a little too quickly.

"Yeah, there's something I need to talk to you about. Can we go somewhere private?"

Laurinda glanced at the time, then looked outside at the sun. A walk might actually help clear her head.

"Sure, let's go." She pulled her down jacket back on, tugged her hat into place, and walked out of the classroom.

Irvin followed. Watching her bundle up like a penguin made him laugh a little. "Are you really that cold? I saw you come to school in just your uniform the other day. I thought you didn't get cold."

"That was a fluke. So, what do you want?" she said, getting straight to the point. They stopped beside a planter behind the school building. Irvin pulled out a small white bottle he'd been holding tightly and held it out to her.

"This is a nerve-paralyzing powder. If you're ever in danger, just toss it at whoever's after you. They'll be knocked out for a while, and no one will be able to trace it back to you."

Laurinda looked down at the bottle but didn't reach for it. She paused, then looked up at him, her expression skeptical.

"Where did you get this? And why are you giving it to me?"

Irvin pressed his lips together, clearly not wanting to answer. He hadn't planned to get involved, but for Beatrice's sake, he just couldn't look the other way.

"If you can't say, that's fine. You keep the powder. It's freezing, and I want to go back inside." Laurinda was already turning to leave. She'd heard enough to figure out that someone her

He was targeting out

Honestly, she'd been hoping for a chance to deal with them. She'd put up with Fabian for way too long.

Irvin panicked when he saw her start to walk away. He reached out, grabbing the sleeve of her jacket, his voice urgent. "Don't you get it? Someone's out to get you. Someone like you, you wouldn't stand a chance against those guys. Please, just take it."

Before she could protest, Irvin pressed the bottle into her hand. When his skin brushed hers, he hesitated, surprised. "Your hand is freezing."

"I get cold easily," Laurinda said,

rolling the bottle between her

fingers "But really, you don't have to

worry,

you can deal with those people"

on my own. Still, I'm curious where

did you get this?"

Irvin avoided her gaze, looking embarrassed. "I can't tell you. Just trust me, I'd never hurt you. It's too cold out here. You should go back inside."

He couldn't bring himself to meet her eyes. They were just too beautiful. Every time he looked at her, his heart started racing in a way he didn't quite understand.

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