

From Ashes of Scandal to His Embrace (Laurinda)

c 111

[585 words]

Laurinda barely reacted after hearing everything. Honestly, she wasn't surprised at all.

With a family that messed up, it was only a matter of time before things crashed and burned.

"Do you know why Abbott took Florrie outside, even though she was six months pregnant and it was dangerous?"

"It was because Aiken couldn't keep his hands off Florrie. He tried more than once. He's not just messed up, he's dangerous. He couldn't stand the idea of Florrie having Abbott's baby. He even drowned Abbott's six-year-old kid in a septic tank."

"It sounds awful, right? But the worst part isn't even that. It's Belinda. To cover for Aiken, she took the blame herself. She even threatened to kill herself so Abbott would feel guilty and drop everything against Aiken."

"And of course, Baily was mixed up in all of it. Honestly, today's outcome was the best he could hope for."

"Do me a favor. Tell Baily and Aiken that their precious Lance isn't even theirs. He's actually Jeniffer and the family driver Aaron's son."

"It's ridiculous, isn't it? They wanted Lance to inherit the Austin family, so they even set up my kidnapping. In the end, I was the one who made sure Lance got sent away."

Adolphus pulled Laurinda close, wrapping her in a hug. His chest tightened for her. He couldn't imagine how she survived that family. It was terrifying. No one in that house was normal.

"You've gone through so much..."

Laurinda shook her head. "It wasn't me who suffered. It was Fidelia. She's still in a care home, too scared to see anyone. If she hadn't risked everything to protect me, I never would have gotten my chance to fight back."

She checked the time, not wanting to get lost in the past any longer.

"It's late. I should get back to the dorm. When New Year's comes, I'll take you to see Fidelia."

Laurinda realized she was starting to crave Adolphus's warmth, the safety of his arms. But she wasn't sure if someone like her could ever have a normal life.

She slipped out of his embrace and

turned around, only to see Irvin, their classmates, and even some students from other classes standing there. Great. They had an audience.

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Trying to play it cool, Laurinda walked over to her roommates and cleared her throat. "So..... are we heading back to the dorm?"

"Yeah... let's go," Elaine was the first to recover. She tugged at the others, whispering, "Save all your questions for the dorm."

Everyone snapped out of it and agreed. Shirley fell in step beside Laurinda, eyes sparkling with curiosity, her expression teasing.

Laurinda quickly looked away and picked up her pace. She couldn't deal with all their nosy questions right now.

Once they got back to the dorm, the girls surrounded Laurinda and pushed her down into a chair.

"Alright, spill. When did this start?"

"It hasn't," Laurinda said, wide-eyed and innocent. They honestly hadn't even started dating.

"It hasn't? And he's already hugging you in front of everybody? Isn't that just harassment? So what if he's good looking? I'm calling the cops!" Shirley grabbed her phone totally serious about reporting the guy.

The others saw how fired up she was and quickly let Laurinda go, rushing to stop Shirley.

Elaine snatched the phone out of Shirley's hand and tapped her on the head. "You're such a goof," she sighed.

"Seriously, can't you see it? Maybe

they haven't started dating, but it's so obvious they know each other.

The way he looks at Laurinda... it's

so gentle it could drown someone. Why would you call the police?

only hugged her because Laurinda let him, you silly girl."

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Chapter 112

[583 words]

Elaine gave Shirley another gentle tap on the head. Shirley was still clueless when it came to romance, so who knew if she'd really get any of this.

"Ugh, Laurinda, you tricked me again!"

Shirley shoved past her friends, determined to hunt Laurinda down and get some answers. But Laurinda had already slipped out to the bathroom to wash up.

Watching Shirley stomp off, the others couldn't help but crack up at how cute she was.

"Laurinda is so mean. I was actually worried someone was picking on her."

Laurinda sat on her bed and pulled out the little gifts she'd prepared, handing them out to her roommates.

It wasn't the first time she'd given them jewelry from Queen, but none of them really knew much about it. They just assumed they were some pretty little trinkets.

Laurinda always let them believe that. She didn't want them to feel awkward about accepting anything expensive.

Shirley opened her box and caught sight of the indigo diamond bracelet inside. Her eyes lit up, completely dazzled by how beautiful it was. It made her think of the night sky.

"Wow, Laurinda, you're amazing. This is so gorgeous!"

She bounced onto Laurinda's bed and wrapped her up in a tight hug, snuggling her head against Laurinda's shoulder like a spoiled kitten.

Laurinda just smiled and patted Shirley's head gently.

"If you like it, wear it. It's a little gift for the big exams. I hope you all ace them."

The mention of exams wiped the smiles off their faces. Fannie pushed her glasses up, looking serious.

"Are you really going to mess up your answers on purpose again? Why not just be yourself?"

"Exactly. You've already left the Austin family. You don't have to hide anymore. You could show everyone at school just how incredible you are."

They all looked at Laurinda, waiting for her reply. They knew exactly how talented she was. Even Fannie, who always ranked first in their grade, would quietly ask Laurinda for help with tough problems.

Laurinda didn't say anything right away. She was seriously thinking about what kind of results she wanted to put down this time.

Shirley gave her arm a gentle shake, her eyes hopeful. They all wanted to see

Laurinda shine, to see her finally step into the spotlight.

"You know how much I hate drama. If I got my real scores, everyone would start asking questions, and I don't like explaining myself."

"But I promise you, I'll be at The Cabinda University with you. It's just a matter of donating a lab, that's all. Don't worry, I won't let myself get left behind."

Laurinda meant it about donating the lab. She didn't want Irvin's talent to go unnoticed. She wanted him to have the chance to shine in the field he loved.

The room went quiet as the girls slipped back to their own beds. None of them doubted Laurinda for a second. Maybe they'd just been overthinking things.

The next morning, the standardized exams started. Everyone was shuffled into their assigned classrooms.

Laurinda ended up separated from her roommates. When she looked up, she spotted the same group of guys who used to trail after Fabian.

They avoided her eyes, clearly not looking for trouble. Even Fabian couldn't take Laurinda down, so they definitely weren't going to try.

Just as Laurinda was walking past a corner, a girl appeared with a cup of something suspicious in her hand.

Laurinda caught the movement out

of the corner of her eye and

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sidestepped quickly. The liquid went flying, splashing all over one

of

Fabian's lackeys westead

"Hey, Felice, are you out of your mind? Why would you throw that at me?"

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[629 words]

"I wasn't trying to splash you. I was aiming for her."

Felice jabbed her finger at Laurinda, her voice raised and shaking with anger. "She's got no shame. First she was after Fabian, now she's cozying up to the school doctor. Why doesn't she just disappear? She's nothing but trouble....."

Laurinda didn't even let her finish. She grabbed Felice's finger and bent it back. There was a sharp crack, loud enough for everyone nearby to hear.

"You've got guts," Laurinda said, her eyes cold. "No one's ever dared talk to me like that before."

"I'm giving you a chance. Go to the infirmary and get your finger checked out. When you see the doctor, ask him exactly how I 'seduced' him. If you can't get a real answer, don't blame me when you find out you're not welcome in this school anymore."

A stunned silence fell over the crowd. No one had expected Laurinda to fight back, let alone get physical. Her reaction sent a chill through everyone watching.

People had always said Laurinda was distant, that she never bothered with the gossip about her. But this time was different. It felt like she actually cared about the rumors with the school doctor. Some students started to wonder if maybe those rumors weren't even true.

Felice, embarrassed and still hurting, tried to keep up her bravado.

"Who do you think you are, Laurinda? You don't run this place. You can't just do whatever you want. You're just a fake who got kicked out of the Austin family. Even if you were their real daughter, the Austins are over. You're nothing but bad luck."

Laurinda was getting tired of Felice's mouth. She reached out, gripping Felice's chin, her tone icy.

"This school isn't mine, you're right. But I know how to make your dad listen to me. Have you heard what happened to the Barton and Bruce families? Those girls were your friends, right? You can ask them why they suddenly had to move overseas..."

Felice went pale. She definitely knew about her friends being shipped out of the country, but whenever she asked them why, they never gave her a straight answer.

"That was you?"

She didn't buy it. Last night at dinner, her dad had been talking about buying out the Austin Group. The Austins were finished, so how could Laurinda do anything to her?

"Go ahead and ask them. If you still don't believe me, I can arrange for you to find out for yourself. Maybe you and your friends can hang out together over there."

Felice went quiet. Something about the way Laurinda said it made her uneasy. She shoved Laurinda's hand off her chin, her finger throbbing.

"I..."

Before she could say anything else, a teacher walked over, holding a stack of exams. His face looked even more annoyed when he saw the crowd blocking the hallway.

"What are you all doing here? The exam is about to start. Get to your classrooms, now!"

He glanced at the group, clearly unimpressed. None of them were known for their grades, especially Laurinda. She was good at everything else but always failed to deliver infass, no matter how much anyone tried to help her.

He stopped in front of Laurinda and sighed. "Just write down whatever you can. If you don't know it, guess. This is an important test, try to get at least two hundred."

He didn't expect much, just hoped she wouldn't completely bomb it.

"I'll try my best," Laurinda said.

He looked a little surprised, then smiled, almost relieved. He noticed Felice still standing there.

"Why aren't you heading in? Trying to skip the exam?"

"No, teacher, my finger's messed up. I really don't think I can write today."

He took one look at Felice's swollen finger and frowned, handing the exams to a nearby teacher.

"Everyone else, get to your exams. I'll take her to the infirmary."

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Chapter 114

[658 words]

The teacher barely finished speaking before tugging Felice along, hurrying her toward the nurse's office. Laurinda just turned around and headed back to the exam room.

So much for her usual spot at the bottom of the class rankings. That streak was probably over.

The second the test began, Laurinda dropped her head onto the desk and went right to sleep. The proctor walked past and just shook his head, baffled by how a student who was so talented at everything else could be so unbothered about schoolwork.

With only thirty minutes left, Laurinda finally woke up, rubbing her eyes and grabbing her pen. She started on the answer sheet as if she had all the time in the world.

When the bell signaled the end of the exam, Laurinda set her pen down. Every answer was filled in. Who knew how many she got right, but at least nothing was left blank.

Three days of back-to-back exams left everyone looking worn out. Even Irvin, who was usually full of energy, seemed totally spent.

Laurinda, on the other hand, looked like she'd just come back from a vacation. Not a hint of stress on her face.

Their homeroom teacher walked in, taking in the room full of exhausted students. He offered a few words of comfort, told everyone they'd worked hard, then his eyes landed on Laurinda.

He wasn't the least bit surprised to see her so relaxed. He already knew she'd spent most of the tests napping. He'd tried talking to her before, tried to encourage her, but Laurinda always just did her own thing. If anything, her results only slipped further.

He told himself to let it go. Laurinda wasn't a troublemaker. There was no point pushing her to be something she wasn't.

"The exams are over, so it's time for a break. Use the next couple of days to rest and recharge. We'll pick things up again on Monday and set some new goals together. You all did great. Keep at it."

He clapped his hands softly. "Alright, start packing up. Those on cleaning duty, take care of the classroom before you go. And everyone, please be careful on your way home."

As the teacher was about to leave, the class president spoke up. "Sir, we're having a class dinner on Sunday night. Laurinda wanted to invite you to join us."

The teacher paused and turned around, looking straight at Laurinda. She was leaning against the radiator, watching him, and their eyes met across the room.

Noticing the teacher's attention, Laurinda straightened up and smiled, suddenly more serious.

"Sunday night, I'm treating everyone. to dinner at Aeterna. I hope you and the other teachers can make it Think of it as a little pep talk before the new term."

It was the first time Laurinda had ever invited him to anything, and the teacher looked genuinely pleased. He didn't hesitate.

"I'd love to. I'll ask the other teachers if they want to come too."

After he left, Harden walked over to Laurinda, holding out an invitation. It was the first time he'd spoken to her since she came back to school.

Laurinda glanced at the invitation, then looked up at Harden's face. He looked so much like Finn that it was almost uncanny. She squinted at him.

"Is this for your next e-sports tournament?"

Harden was kind of a big deal in the gaming world, and since transferring here, he'd become even more popular. Someone had just asked for his autograph a few minutes ago.

"No, this is for The Gates Group's celebration party. I've left team ZTG. I probably won't be playing pro anymore."

"You're quitting?" Laurinda was actually surprised. She couldn't even imagine what Finn might have promised him to make him walk away from a pro career.

"Did Finn ask you to invite me to The Gates Group's party? You know I got kicked out of the Austin family. I'm not exactly the best fit for a fancy event right now:

Harden kept holding out the invitation, his eyes steady as he looked at her.

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Chapter 115

[670 words]

Laurinda couldn't see a trace of emotion in his eyes. That alone told her just how guarded and intense he really was.

"Finn sent me to give you a message. The Austin family is done. You'll be going to the celebration as Laurinda, just yourself. Finn wants you to know no one's going to bring up the whole 'fake heiress' thing again."

Laurinda looked Harden up and down, holding his gaze until he started to look uneasy. Only then did she reach out and take the invitation from him.

"Sure. Tell Finn I'll be there. I just have one question—can I bring someone as my date?"

Her question threw Harden for a loop. He knew Finn wanted to match the two of them, so if Laurinda brought someone else, wouldn't that kind of ruin Finn's plans?

"What's wrong? Is it not allowed? If it's a problem, I'll just skip the whole thing. I'm not really the type to show up at parties alone."

As she spoke, Laurinda started to hand the invitation back.

Harden hadn't seen that coming. He didn't take the invite, just reached out and pressed down gently on her wrist.

"I think it's fine. I'll talk to Finn about it."

Harden could guess exactly who Laurinda wanted to bring. The school doctor didn't even register as competition in his mind.

When Laurinda saw him agree, she lit up with the kind of bright smile that made Harden's heart skip a beat. For a second, he found himself thinking that being engaged to Laurinda might actually be a really great idea.

"Laurinda, are you ready yet?"

Irvin had just finished helping her clean up and came back to find she was still in the classroom. He hurried in to get her moving, but stopped short when he saw the scene in front of him.

Catching Harden's expression, Irvin quietly thought, Looks like Adolphus has another rival now...

"I'm coming, I'm coming."

Laurinda picked up her backpack and spoke to Harden, who was still standing in her way, her voice polite but distant. "Could you move, please? I need to get home."

"I can give you a ride," Harden offered quickly. He didn't like how close Laurinda seemed with the school doctor and didn't want to give them more opportunities to be together.

"Thanks, but I've got someone picking me up."

Before Harden could say anything else, Laurinda handed her backpack to Irvin and walked out with him.

Harden just stood there, watching as Laurinda and Irvin joked and laughed together. His hands curled into fists at his sides. He realized it was time for him to stop waiting and do something.

Outside, on their way to the infirmary, Irvin kept sneaking curious glances at Laurinda. Eventually, he couldn't help himself.

"So, Harden came looking for you earlier. Is he trying to chase after you or something?"

"I honestly don't know. He's hard to figure out I can never tell what he's thinking. He just came to give me an invitation from Finn. I'm invited to The Gates Group's celebration banquet."

"The Gates Group?" Irvin repeated, eyebrows raised. He didn't know much about the powerful families in Apex, but even he'd heard of The Gates Group. They had ties

the

Charles family.

"You've heard of them?" Laurinda was surprised. She'd always assumed Irvin didn't keep up with these family politics.

"I know a little. Bagot's wife is from The Gates Group. I saw her name pop up when I was looking into the Charles family, but I've never met her in person."

Laurinda frowned slightly. She hadn't realized there was a link to the Charles family. It looked like she needed to dig a little deeper into the Gates family's connections.

"If I'm not wrong, Bagot doesn't actually work for The Charles Group, right?"

"Yeah, that's right. The Charles

family has two sides, one in the

open and one in the shadows. Bagot

runs the secret side. They used to be involved in all kinds of shady stuff, but after things got really tough for them, they set up a public, respectable front. They actually climbed up by stepping over the

James family, and that's how they

became a real force almost

overnight."

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Chapter 116

[585 words]

"The James family only lost everything because they were too honest for their own good. They just couldn't play as dirty as the Charles family."

"Laurinda, the way Harden looks at you is off. And with Bagot possibly showing up too, I really think you should skip tonight's banquet."

Irvin watched Laurinda with genuine concern. He knew she could handle herself, but he just didn't see the point in mixing with people who would stab you in the back the second you let your guard down.

Laurinda understood what Irvin was getting at. Instead of replying, she asked

quietly, "Between the Charles family's third son and Adolphus, who do you think is tougher?"

The second Laurinda made that comparison, Irvin's expression changed. For the first time ever, he actually raised his voice at her.

"Laurinda, don't lump Adolphus in with people like that. Just saying it is an insult to him. The Charles family might have clawed their way into Cabinda's big leagues, but the Lane family will always be out of their reach."

"Honestly, it's only because Len has rocks in his head that he married Ms. Charles. Otherwise, there's no way the Charles family could ever be connected to the Lanes."

Irvin kept ranting about the difference between the two families, completely oblivious to the fact that they'd reached the infirmary. He only stopped when he walked straight into someone.

He and Sam ended up staring at each other. Sam gave Irvin a look, almost like he was scolding a child.

"What's got you so fired up?"

The second Irvin saw Sam, whatever simmering annoyance he felt turned into full-blown irritation.

"I'm talking about your future wife's family. You and that woman are a perfect match. You two should just be locked away together so you can't ruin anyone else's life."

Sam watched as Irvin stormed past him, still fuming. He didn't look embarrassed at all after being insulted. Instead, he turned to Laurinda with genuine confusion.

"What did I do to set him off this time?"

Laurinda couldn't help but laugh. "You, obviously." She actually found Irvin pretty adorable sometimes, especially when he got so riled up just by seeing Sam.

"Me? I wouldn't dare cross him. The stuff he's pulled on me has traumatized me for life. Whenever I see him, I take a detour."

Before Sam could get another word out, he felt his hand go numb. His face twisted with confusion and panic.

He shouted, "Foley, didn't you say you got rid of all his 'medicine'? Why... why am I

His tongue stopped working mid-sentence. Sam's eyes fluttered shut and he dropped to the floor, stiff as a board.

Laurinda looked down at Sam lying there, lips pressed tight. For a second, she couldn't decide whether to feel sorry for him or just burst out laughing.

It would be mean to laugh, but honestly, he looked ridiculous...

Foley rushed out of the infirmary and saw Sam on the ground. For a moment, he just stared, then yelled back inside.

"Irvin, get out here and help me drag him in!"

"I'm not doing it. I'm not helping that jerk," Irvin shouted back from inside. He was determined not to

the re

lift anger for Sam or even if

Adolphus himself asked.

A man Laurinda didn't recognize stepped out from the infirmary and stopped in front of her, nodding politely. "Hi Laurinda, I'm Egan."

"Hi," Laurinda replied, giving a small nod back. She guessed he was probably

another one of Adolphus's friends, just like Sam.

After the quick introduction, Egan

joined Foley and together they carried Sam into the infirmary- Laurinda followed them in, still trying not to laugh at the sight.

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Chapter 117

[624 words]

Laurinda stepped into the infirmary and immediately caught the tension in the air. Adolphus stood there, his eyes cold and fixed on Irvin, while Irvin looked downright defiant, refusing to back down.

"Can you seriously get a grip for once? How many times have I told you, you can't just use that drug whenever you feel like it?"

Irvin wouldn't even meet Adolphus's eyes. Instead, he shot back, voice hard, "I promised I wouldn't use it on anyone else, but I never said anything about Sam."

Adolphus realized there was no reasoning with him, so he turned to Egan. "When you head back to Cabinda, take him with you. Let him talk to Cathleen and ask her what really happened between her and Sam. This can't keep going like this."

Every time Irvin saw Sam, he lashed out. Even if the drug wasn't deadly, it could still do real damage. He needed to stop.

"I'm not going back to Cabinda," Irvin muttered.

"Fine. Then call Cathleen. Does she really think she can just run away and dump all the blame on Sam? He's suffered just as much as she has."

Adolphus was clearly losing his patience. Normally, he kept out of other people's drama, but Irvin was pushing him too far.

As long as Irvin was here, Sam couldn't just avoid him forever.

Irvin seemed taken aback that Adolphus was actually sticking up for Sam. He clenched his jaw, disappointment written all over his face.

"You never used to interfere in this. You can't just cover for him because he's your friend."

Adolphus let out a short, humorless laugh. "If I wanted to cover for him, you'd be out of here already. I kept out of it before because I didn't know what was really going on between him and Cathleen. Now that I do, I'm not letting you keep acting out."

"I know you don't believe a word I say right now. That's why I want you to ask Cathleen yourself. If she won't tell you, then tell her what you've been doing to Sam. If she has any conscience at all, she'll tell you the truth."

Adolphus was done arguing. He waved Irvin off, telling him to just go make the call.

Irvin realized Adolphus was genuinely angry, and his stubbornness finally cracked a little. He took out his phone and stepped away.

Laurinda glanced toward Sam, then looked at Adolphus. "Should we take him to the hospital? He doesn't look so great."

Adolphus shook his head. "It wouldn't help. This isn't the first time. Irvin never knows when to stop."

"He really does need someone to set him straight."

Laurinda nodded. Even without worrying about the side effects of the drug, just seeing the way Sam looked at Irvin made things clear. Sam treated him like a spoiled kid, and Irvin was seriously out of line.

"Are you heading out soon? I still have some things to finish. Can you wait for me a bit?"

"Yeah, that's fine. Take your time."

Laurinda sank into the sofa, and as she did, an invitation card slipped out of her pocket. Adolphus noticed and pointed at it.

"What's that?"

"Finn had Harden give it to me. It's an invite to his celebration party."

The second he heard Finn's name, Adolphus looked suspicious. "I'll go with you."
"Alright."

"Cool. I'll get my stuff done. Do you want me to find a dress for you?"

"No need. The Gates family isn't that important."

Laurinda waved him off, letting him get back to whatever he needed to do. She had her own plans, and there was no way she was dressing up just for Finn Gates.

She found a sunny spot in the infirmary, settled in with a book on her lap and started reading and scribbling notes. Whatever she was up to nobody seemed to know, and Laurinda wasn't about to explain.

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[644 words]

Irvin came back inside, still carrying the chill from outdoors, and settled down next to Laurinda.

Laurinda shivered and edged away from the cold, but when she noticed the look on Irvin's face, she set her book aside right away.

"Did you find out what happened?" she asked.

Irvin nodded, catching the way Laurinda didn't even look surprised. "You already knew, didn't you?"

"Kind of. I asked about it before. I only heard Sam's side, though. What did Cathleen say?"

Laurinda always made sure to get the full picture before she said anything,

especially when it came to relationships. That stuff was messy. There was never a simple right or wrong.

Irvin let out a slow breath. "Cathleen said their breakup had something to do with Adah, but Sam's not the bad guy. Cathleen just got too wrapped up in her insecurities. She cared too much about what everyone else thought, so she ran away from it all. She told me to stop blaming Sam."

Laurinda was quiet for a long moment, thinking it over. When she finally spoke, her voice was gentle. "I'm not an expert, but honestly, I think Cathleen should see a therapist. She's in a rough place right now, and if she keeps going like this, she won't be happy with anyone, no matter who she's with."

"If you trust me, I can introduce you to someone who's a psychologist. His name's Earl."

"Earl?" Irvin looked genuinely surprised, like he hadn't expected Laurinda to know the guy.

"You know him?" she asked.

"Yeah. His mom is Fiona, Adolphus's sister."

Laurinda hadn't known about that connection before. She remembered the first time she met Adolphus, right outside Earl's office.

"So, what's up? You know Earl, but you didn't know he was related to Adolphus?"

Irvin shook his head. "No. When he talked about the Lane family, he acted like he barely knew them."

Laurinda narrowed her eyes, thinking back to the way Earl had talked about Adolphus.

"How did he describe the Lane family to you?"

Just then, Adolphus came out of the break room, catching the tail end of their conversation. He looked curious, wanting to hear how his nephew talked about their family outside the house.

Laurinda glanced over at Adolphus, her eyes narrowing playfully as she answered. "I don't remember his exact words, but basically, he said you grew up as the Lane family's

golden child. He's also the one who told me you had a fiancée.

Irvin couldn't help himself. "He wasn't lying. The Charles family started that rumor. Everyone in our circle thought Adolphus and Adah were about to get engaged."

Laurinda turned to Adolphus, a teasing smile on her lips, just to see how he'd react. "So, everyone was in the loop, huh?"

Adolphus's face grew colder by the second, but he jumped in quickly. "That's not true. Those were just rumors the Charles family started. My sister-in-law kept bringing Adah over and people started to gossip that my mom wanted her as a daughter-in-law. My mom cleared it up ages ago."

He watched Laurinda closely, nervous she might misunderstand, and even more nervous she might decide to walk away before he had a chance to win her over.

Over by Foley, Egan was watching the scene unfold for the first time. He leaned in and whispered, "Is he always like this? I can't believe what I'm seeing."

Foley just laughed and draped an arm around Egan's shoulders. "This is Adolphus whenever Laurinda's around. You'll get used to it come

on, let's get back to what we were doing. Adolphus's drama isn't exactly open to the public.

Irvin could feel the tension in the air and decided now was definitely the time to make himself scarce. He stood up and nodded in Sam's direction.

"I'll go check on Sam. And apologize."

He slipped away as quickly as he could, not wanting to get caught up in any more drama. In his head, he sent a silent little prayer for Earl, just in case.

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Chapter 119

[587 words]

Earl stepped out of Fidelia's hospital room and sneezed. Rubbing his nose, he turned to the head nurse.

"It's flu season. Make sure the rooms stay ventilated and disinfected. We can't have the more fragile patients catching a cold."

"Yes, Earl. We'll take care of it."

Adolphus took Laurinda out for dinner first, then they stopped to get her hair and makeup done. By six o'clock, they were standing outside the Gates family's party venue, right on time.

Laurinda paused at the familiar steps, glancing at Adolphus with a soft laugh. "This is where I had my coming-of-age party. The Austins announced in front of everyone that I was a fake heiress and kicked me out. I sent them straight to the police in front of all their guests."

She smiled, a little wistful. "I never thought I'd be back here so soon, especially with the Austins gone."

Adolphus listened, turning his head just enough that she caught the warmth in his eyes. "Honestly, you should thank them. They got you away from all that ugliness."

Laurinda leaned her head back and let out a gentle laugh. With someone who truly loved her, she didn't need to say anything else. He was the only thing that mattered. Harden heard Laurinda was here and rushed outside. As soon as he stepped out, he spotted them at the bottom of the stairs—the perfect couple.

The woman stood there, impossible to miss. She wore bold makeup, a sweep of red at the corners of her eyes, and her hair was curled and loose. Even under a long black down coat, she looked stunning, her beauty shining through.

Laurinda leaned into Adolphus, murmuring something. When she laughed, cute dimples appeared, and her smile was almost blinding.

Adolphus looked every bit the part—sharp features, broad shoulders, long legs, all cool confidence and quiet elegance. He leaned down a little to listen to Laurinda, his eyes soft, focused only on her.

Harden hovered by the door, feeling like his feet were glued to the ground. He wanted to turn back, not sure he could bring himself to break up the picture in front of him.

A voice came from behind him. “What are you doing out here? Weren't you going to meet Laurinda? Why are you just standing there?”

It was Finn. Before Harden could answer, Finn caught sight of

Laurinda and Adolphus chattering

laughing together and let out a cold, dismissive laugh.

"What's this? My son losing out to some nobody from the school infirmary?"

The words snapped Harden out of it. He was different now. He could go after what he wanted.

"Of course not."

He put on his most confident smile and strode toward Laurinda.

Line

He barely reached her when he saw Adolphus's large hand holding Laurinda's small one, their fingers laced together. Harden's confidence faltered, just for a second.

"Laurinda," he said.

Laurinda looked up at the unfamiliar voice, her smile vanishing the moment she saw him. Her expression turned icy.

"Harden, we're not that close. I don't think you should be calling me Laurinda."

Harden pretended not to notice her coldness, keeping his smile as he stepped closer.

"I just heard everyone at school call you that, so I figured it was fine. You don't mind, right?"

"I do mind. We're not close," Laurinda said, not bothering to soften her words.

Harden stiffened, unprepared for how blunt she was. No wonder Fabian had never managed to win her over.

But honestly, that just made him like

her more

strong by

He needed someone, someone

his sta

own. Contonete

could really hold her .net>

Even with her rejection, Harden didn't get angry. He just smiled, letting a touch of

hurt show on his face.

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Chapter 120

[569 words]

"Alright then. Since you don't like it, I'll just call you Laurinda. I came out here just for you. Come on, let me take you inside."

He motioned for her to follow.

Laurinda didn't move. She stood there, studying Harden with a sly smile.

"Harden, you said you were done with pro gaming. I figured you must have found something even better. Turns out you're just working as a greeter now. Honestly, being a pro was way cooler. This job isn't really your style."

She didn't wait for his response. Instead, she slipped her arm through Adolphus's, and together they headed for the banquet hall.

Harden stayed rooted to the spot, fists clenched tight. He could hear the sarcasm in her tone. She must not know who he really was. Once he took over the Gates family, he'd see if Laurinda could still act so high and mighty.

When Laurinda and Adolphus walked into the hall, the whole crowd turned to look. Just like that, Laurinda became the center of attention. No one expected the so-called fake heiress of the bankrupt Austin family to show up here.

"Laurinda, you made it! Finn told me to look out for you tonight," Alice said, coming over with a bright smile. She shot Adolphus a quick, dismissive glance before focusing on Laurinda, her voice warm and friendly.

Laurinda knew all about the Gates family's two-faced ways. She'd learned to play along, saying what people wanted to hear, acting close even when she wasn't.

They chatted for a while until a few glamorous women came over to greet Alice. Only then did Alice finally let go of Laurinda's hand.

"And who's this beauty? How come we haven't met before? Laurinda, introduce us," one of the women said.

Laurinda guessed right away that she must be Finn's sister, Aileen.

Alice acted surprised that Aileen didn't recognize Laurinda. "Aileen, you don't remember her? She's from the Austin family... Oh, look at me, I probably shouldn't mention that now. This is Laurinda. She used to come over to our place when we were little."

At Laurinda's name, Aileen's eyes flashed with surprise, then narrowed with disdain.

"Oh? So you're that imposter? The Austin family's broke and now you want to cling to the Gates family? Keep dreaming."

Aileen stared Laurinda down, her voice dripping with contempt. She hated girls like Laurinda, thinking they could get ahead just by being pretty.

Alice clearly hadn't expected Aileen to be so blunt in front of everyone. She tugged at Aileen's arm with an awkward smile, turning to Laurinda. Laurinda, they've got your favorite desserts inside. Go grab something to eat. We need to go greet some more guests."

Before Laurinda could answer, Alice was already dragging Aileen away. Aileen tried to pull free, but whatever Alice whispered made her settle down.

Laurinda let the show go on without her and turned to Adolphus, meeting his dark, stormy eyes.

"What's wrong? Are you upset? There's no reason to be. Want to hear a secret?"

She tipped up on her toes, leaned in close, and murmured in his ear, "She hates me because I caught her sneaking around with Aiken. If the Gates family hadn't covered it up, she'd be finished. But don't worry, something's coming soon that'll really make her fall apart."

Laurinda's eyes sparkled as she grinned, looking like a mischievous kitten who'd just stolen a treat. She was so cute, anyone would want to pull her in for a hug. And that's exactly what Adolphus did.

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