

From Ashes of Scandal to His Embrace (Laurinda)

- Chapter 129

Chapter 129

[587 words]

Harden gripped his phone and moved quickly through the crowd, searching for a quiet spot to call Finn.

When he first heard the whispers around him, he thought someone had leaked Aileen's low scores online. He pulled out his phone to check, but what he saw was so much worse than he'd expected.

Everything was unraveling fast. Before he could dial Finn, another scandal dropped — a recording of Aileen threatening a contestant. It wasn't just Aileen's reputation on the line anymore. Both the Gates and Charles families were about to get dragged into the mess. This was bad. Really bad.

"You little brat, how dare you record me? Do you even know who you're messing with "

Aileen didn't get to finish. A sharp slap cut through the noise. A woman with a fierce, commanding presence stepped forward and struck her across the face, bringing the whole room to a sudden hush.

"Watch your mouth," the woman snapped, her hand still raised like she might slap Aileen again. "Aileen, if you don't want everyone to find out how your daughter actually got those awards, you'll apologize. You think you're so above everyone else? I could drag all your dirty secrets out, but I won't waste my breath. You're the one who messed up here, so why are you yelling at him?"

It was Lea, staring Aileen down with fire in her eyes.

Aggie saw her mom get slapped and, forgetting her own tears, lunged at Lea. But halfway there, her knees buckled. She went down hard, her forehead smacking the stage.

Aileen was still in shock from the slap, but seeing Aggie fall snapped her back. She rushed to her daughter's side, helping her up off the floor.

"Aggie, are you okay?"

"Mom..." Aggie sobbed, clutching her aching head. Her voice was shaky and weak, like she might pass out at any second.

"Don't worry, Aggie. I'll take you to the hospital right now." Aileen scooped Aggie up onto her back, shooting a venomous look at Lea. "Lea, I swear, I won't let this go."

Lea didn't back down. "You should worry about yourself. I already sent all the evidence of your dirty tricks to the piano association. Those talented pianists you tried to block? They all signed a petition. You can expect to get kicked out of the association soon."

Aileen's legs gave out at that. She staggered, nearly dropping Aggie.

Thankfully, Harden and Lawrence rushed over and caught them before they could fall off the stage.

"Lea, my dad says you need to stop and leave, now," Harden said, steadying Aileen. He didn't give her chance to argue, practically dragging her away from the chaos.

Laurinda watched them go, clicking her tongue. "Wow, that was rough."

Now that the drama was over, the host hurried out to announce the final list of contestants moving on, then ushered the judges off stage.

Laurinda, Adolphus, and Irvin slipped out with the rest of the audience, waiting outside for Jasper.

Adolphus stood close, quietly shielding Laurinda from the cold wind.

Irvin kicked at a stone on the

pavement, then suddenly looked up

at Adolphus. "Hey, my dad said your family's having their annual dinner at
a

Christmas So does that mean

you're heading back tomorrow?

Adolphus shot him a look, clearly annoyed, then glanced at Laurinda, whose face
stayed perfectly calm.

"Want to come back to Cabinda with me for Christmas?" he asked her.

"No. I'm having dinner with my classmates and teachers tomorrow night." "Then you "

"Laurinda."

Jasper's voice interrupted whatever

Adolphu

was about to say.

Laurinda turned to him, lowering her

Voice.

Well talk about at home

She spotted Lea coming over and stepped forward to say hello. "Lea."

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Chapter 130

[582 words]

"It's been ages. Look at you, all grown up," Lea said, her voice warm and familiar. "I've been overseas for a while and barely had a chance to check in on you. How have you been?"

Lea had heard all about what happened with the Austin family. She never expected so much to change in just a few months. Laurinda must have really gone through it.

"It's all sorted out now," Laurinda replied. "But what are you doing here? Grandma didn't mention you'd be back today. You haven't even been home yet, right?"

Lea shook her head. "No, I made a last-minute decision to fly back. I haven't even made it home yet. As soon as I landed, I saw the news online. Adolphus was getting dragged through the mud. I had to show up for him, no matter what."

She pulled Laurinda in for a hug and whispered, "I already handed over all the stuff you gave me to the Piano Association and the Pianists' Guild. Aileen's not getting away with it this time."

Laurinda smiled, grateful. "Thanks for helping out. You must be exhausted. Let's go eat at Aeterna tonight and celebrate you coming back."

Lea looked at Laurinda, taking in the way she carried herself now. She really had grown up. Lea squeezed Laurinda's hand and said softly, "Honestly, let's just eat at home. My

parents already cooked everything. They called earlier to ask if you were still at the competition and told me to bring you home for dinner. Your grandma made those plum-glazed ribs you love."

"That sounds perfect. I've been thinking about Grandma's ribs all week," Laurinda said with a laugh. "Lea, you and Jasper can ride with Josh. We'll meet you guys at the house."

"Sounds good. Drive safe, okay? See you soon."

Adolphus parked in the Adams family driveway, got out, and headed to the trunk to grab a stack of gifts.

Laurinda leaned against the car, arms crossed, watching him. "You had gifts ready ahead of time?"

He looked over and shrugged. "I always keep a few in the car. You never know when you'll need them."

Laurinda nodded, not surprised. Growing up in a family like his, you learned never to miss a beat when it came to manners.

A voice called out, "Laurinda?"

She turned around, spotting a man hurrying toward her.

Adolphus reacted instantly, stepping in front of her, his eyes wary.

The man waved his hands, trying to ease the tension. "It's okay, really. I'm Baal's assistant, Dalton. I just left his house and saw you here Baat asked me to set up a meeting with He wants to talk about Austin

you

Group."

Laurinda stepped around Adolphus

and checked her phone. "Three-thirty this afternoon works for me. Let's

meedat Baal's office. I'll bring a couple of people with me.

Dalton's face lit up. "Great, I'll let him know right now. We'll be waiting for you."

He took off toward Baal's house, leaving Laurinda watching after him, eyebrows raised. "When did Baal move into this neighborhood?"

Adolphus reached over, fixing Laurinda's hat with gentle hands. "Want me to have someone look into it?"

She smiled, shaking her head. "No need. I'll just ask him later. Not worth the trouble."

Laurinda hooked her arm through his and started toward the house, calling back, "Irvin, come on. Move it or the food's going to get cold."

Hearing her voice, everyone inside

Voice,

rushed out to greet them. Larson opened his mouth to say something, but stopped short when he saw Laurinda hanging onto Adolphus's arm. He stared for a second surprised.

"Adolphus? I didn't expect to see you here."

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Chapter 131

[623 words]

Adolphus's last surprise visit had already caught Larson off guard, but seeing him walk in now with Laurinda at his side, the two of them looking so close, made Larson's heart skip a beat. Was this guy really making a move on his precious granddaughter?

"We went to watch Jasper's match together, and Lea invited us to come back for dinner," Adolphus replied, his tone as polite and warm as ever.

Larson nodded, but his eyes lingered on Laurinda's hand, which was still wrapped around Adolphus's arm. He couldn't help but comment, "It's been a while. I didn't realize you two had become so close."

Laurinda caught the look on Larson's face and just grinned at him. Instead of letting go, she hugged Adolphus's arm even tighter. "Yeah, we're getting along pretty well. Larson, I'm starving. Can we eat yet?"

"Of course you can eat. Hurry up and come inside. Lea and Jasper have been home for a while and are already waiting at the table. Adolphus, Irvin, you too, come on," Beatrice called out as she stepped out from the dining room, waving everyone in.

After the three of them had gone inside, she gave Larson a firm pat and whispered, "Laurinda knows what she wants. Adolphus is a good man, and they're a great match. Don't go messing things up."

Larson lowered his voice, "I'm just worried... about the Lane family..."

"What's there to worry about? Laurinda and Adolphus are perfect for each other. Eda and Darby are reasonable people. They don't care that much about family background. Honestly, they'd be happy to have someone who can keep Adolphus in check. Why wouldn't they like Laurinda? Just look at him. You can tell he's completely smitten. Stop worrying. If Adolphus ever hurts Laurinda, then you can step in and back her up."

Larson looked at Beatrice, who was all smiles, and let out a helpless sigh. It felt like he was losing more and more say in this house. He couldn't even stick his nose in anymore.

Once everyone sat down, the family started eating. There was plenty of praise for Jasper, but nobody brought up the issue with the judges at all.

During the entire meal, Laurinda hardly had to lift her chopsticks. Adolphus made sure she had everything she needed, taking care of her with quiet attention.

Larson and Beatrice exchanged a glance, both of them clearly satisfied with what they saw.

After lunch, Beatrice pulled Laurinda over to the soft couch and had her sit beside her. She gently took Laurinda's hand, looking at the healing wound in her palm with concern in her eyes.

"How did you end up hurting yourself like this? Why didn't you tell us?"

Laurinda leaned her head on

Beatrice's lap, swinging her feet and

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smiling contentedly. "I didn't want to make you or Grandpa worry. Adolphus and Bonnie took really good care of me. I didn't feel mistreated at all. And it's healing fast. Irvin even brought some star same star Cream from Cabinda. I've already started using it, so it should be better soon."

Beatrice knew

Laurinda was

sensible and level-headed. She felt sorry for her but didn't say much more, just gently patted her back, "As long as it heals, that's all that matters. But you still need to be careful. Are you sure your hand won't have any lasting problems?"

Laurinda understood Beatrice's deeper meaning and shook her head. "Don't worry.

It'll be fine. Adolphus has been taking really good care of me."

"Good. He's a responsible young man. His mom always says that people in Cabinda misunderstand

him but he's a good person. Your

two take your time getting to know each other, but don't let him get

away with anything, okay?"

Laurinda got what Beatrice was hinting at and answered with a blush, "I know. I'm

still young. He wouldn't try anything."

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Chapter 132

[562 words]

When Beatrice saw that Laurinda had caught on, she smiled and gently tapped Laurinda's smooth forehead with her finger. For a moment, she was lost in a memory of Laurinda as a baby, curled up in her crib. She let out a soft sigh.

"If your mom could see her little girl all grown up, she'd be over the moon, don't you think?"

Laurinda didn't answer. She just leaned against Beatrice's shoulder, eyes closed. In her mind, she saw a gentle woman's face. It had been ages since she'd dreamed of her.

York came in, a folder in his hand. He paused when he saw them, then walked over to Laurinda.

"Hey, are you okay? Not feeling well?"

"I'm fine. Just needed a minute with Grandma," Laurinda said. "Are we ready?"

She let go of Beatrice and sat up, taking the folder from York. She flipped through the papers, then glanced over at the big grandfather clock in the corner.

"Looks like it's time. Let's head out."

Laurinda rose from the couch and Adolphus came over, holding out her down jacket. She slipped it on and lowered her voice.

"Take them home when you get a chance. York and I will just go straight back. No need to come pick me up later."

Before they could leave, Lea spoke up.

"Laurinda, wait. I need to ask you something," she said. "I want to take Jasper abroad with me. I have a tour coming up, and I'd love for him to be my guest."

Laurinda didn't answer right away. She turned to Jasper instead, wanting to hear what he thought.

Jasper's eyes sparkled. She could see how much he wanted to go.

"If he's up for it, that's fine. Just send me the details so I know where he'll be. If you need help setting things up, let me know. Jasper, remember to listen to Lea when you're away, okay?"

She reached out and messed up Jasper's hair a little. He threw his arms around her waist, hugging her tight.

"I'll make you proud, Laurinda."

She looked down and saw the

determined look on his face.

Crouching so she was on his level,

she held his small hands in hers, and

spoke softly.

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longs

"You just have to be yourself, Jasper Do what makes you happy. No matter what, you'll always be my

pride." no

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Laurinda squeezed his chubby cheeks and hugged him close. Right then, her resolve grew even

stronger. She was never going to let those people hurt him. Jasper would never have to go through what she did. He just needed to grow up safe and happy.

Adolphus came over and patted Jasper's head.

"I'll pack up his things. Don't worry about a thing. You go take care of what you need to do."

Something warm stirred in Laurinda's chest. She looked up at Adolphus and gave him a real, grateful smile.

"Thank you."

"Of course. Go on."

Laurinda nodded. After saying goodbye to everyone, she left the Adams house with York.

The moment they stepped outside the front door, Laurinda spotted a familiar figure. That person saw her too.

"Laurinda, can you give me a ride?" Adelaide called out, running over and grabbing Laurinda's arm.

Laurinda noticed how pale she looked, how tired. She didn't pull away.

"What's going on? Where are you off to in such a hurry?"

Adelaide's face got tight. She didn't answer right away. After a second, she let go of Laurinda's arm.

"Forget it. I don't need a ride from you. Why would you help me anyway? We're not really friends."

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Chapter 133

[645 words]

Laurinda watched Adelaide, who looked completely lost, and held back the sarcastic comment she was about to make. Despite everything, she really did feel bad for her.

"If you don't tell me where you want to go, how am I supposed to take you anywhere? Look at yourself right now. Honestly, I'm worried that if I take you out and something happens, I won't be able to explain it." Laurinda frowned, trying to figure out how to snap Adelaide out of her funk. She just wasn't used to this side of Adelaide. Part of her even missed the feisty, argumentative version who was always ready for a fight.

"I..." Adelaide bit her lip, refusing to say where she was headed. She was too scared to reveal anything, afraid that if Laurinda knew the truth, someone she cared about might get hurt.

"I'll pass on your ride. You can go. I'm heading home." Without looking back, Adelaide walked away. She must have been worried Laurinda would try to stop her, because she suddenly broke into a run.

Laurinda watched her disappear, lips pressed together. She was sure now that Adelaide was hiding something, and this kind of secrecy could only mean it was about someone important. She almost wanted to ask if Adelaide had lost her mind and offer to set her up with a really good neurologist.

"Let's go." Laurinda decided not to mess with someone else's choices. She got into the car with York and they left.

On the way, Laurinda asked York about some of The Austin Group's old core projects. After some discussion, she picked one of the less important projects to propose as a partnership with The Baker Group.

When Laurinda and York reached The Baker Group's building, Dalton was already waiting for them in the lobby. He spotted them immediately and walked over.

"Laurinda, right on time."

Laurinda glanced at her phone. It was 3:29. Still good. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Dalton. I bumped into Adelaide on my way out and we talked for a bit, so I just barely made it. Let's head up to Baal's office. No sense making him wait."

"Perfect timing," Dalton said with a polite smile before leading them to the elevator. They rode up to Baal's floor, and Dalton gave the door three quick knocks. From inside, Baal's steady voice called, "Come in."

"After you, Laurinda."

Laurinda and York stepped into Baal's office, and she caught a familiar scent in the air. Her eyes narrowed just a little.

Baal stood up the moment Laurinda walked in, smiling warmly. "Sorry to drag you in for a business talk on the weekend."

Laurinda noticed his expression and smiled. "You're the one adjusting to my schedule, Baal. It's already getting late, so let's just get to the point."

Baal picked up on her directness and dropped the small talk. His

intentions were clear. He wanted The Austin Group and the key projects Laurinda controlled and the price he offered was so bold that Laurinda had to wonder if he was betting everything on this deal.

"Are you sure you want to take on this much, Baal? It's a risky move. I don't want The Austin Group turning into a burden for you." Laurinda's warning was genuine she could see he was gambling hoping to get her on his side.

Baal met Laurinda's eyes with a determined look, exuding the authority of someone used to being in charge. "I never make moves I'm not confident about. I'm here today because I'm willing to take risks. The Austin Group might look like a lost cause to some people, but to me, it's got value. I believe I can bring it back to life."

Seeing how sure of himself he was, Laurinda knew there was no point in trying to talk him out of it.

She turned to York. "You handle the rest of the negotiations with Baal. Here's hoping our partnership is a great one."

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[663 words]

Laurinda stood up and reached out to Baal.

Now that their partnership was official, Baal let out a breath of relief. The intensity he carried seemed to melt away. As he went to shake her hand, his eyes caught sight of her palm. He paused, his gaze flickering with concern.

"Is your hand really that bad?"

Laurinda opened her hand and smiled, just a hint of mischief in her eyes. "It's not a big deal. The reins just rubbed my skin raw, so it looks worse than it actually is."

She pulled her hand back and sat down again, waiting patiently as York and Baal discussed the final details of the contract. Once everything was set, she and York left The Baker Group together.

After Laurinda walked out, Baal opened his drawer and pulled out an old photo, the one that showed a woman from behind. His voice was soft, edged with guilt.

"I'm sorry. I said I'd protect her, but she still ended up hurt. It looked pretty serious, but she told me it's healing. I'll make sure to get her the best scar cream. Now that we're working together, I'll keep an eye on her. I won't let anything happen to her if I can help it."

He traced the photo with his fingertips, the woman's face lingering in his mind. He couldn't help but wonder, if nothing had gone wrong back then, would their little girl have grown up with the life of a princess?

In the car, Laurinda stared out the window, lost in thought. The scent from Baal's office clung to her memory. She knew that fragrance way too well, but she never expected to find it there. What was that supposed to mean?

"What's on your mind? I've been talking and you haven't heard a word," York said, her voice pulling Laurinda back to the present.

Laurinda turned to York, exhaustion in her voice. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"I was asking, don't you think Baal was looking at you kind of strangely? Like he was seeing... someone from his past. That's it, someone familiar."

Laurinda shook her head. That shook

wasn't the vibe she got. To her, Baal's eyes, held a kind of warmth, almost fatherly, like he was looking at his own kid. Honestly, it was a

it weird, almost like he wanted to
be her dad.

"He knew my parents. They saved his life back in the day. He was the one who went out to sea with Abbott. I'm starting to think his issues with the Gates family might have something to do with my parents."

York shot her a surprised look in the rearview mirror. "So you're saying, at least for now, he's fighting for the same thing we are?"

Laurinda nodded. "More or less. But I'm not sure yet. We'll just have to wait and see."

She didn't feel like talking anymore, her thoughts spinning. She glanced down at her phone scrolling through page after page of news about Aileen Gossip accounts were already piecing together everything that had happened today.

"The Gates family must be in chaos right now," she said quietly.

York had seen the headlines too and had already arranged for someone to keep tabs on things, ready to stir things up if needed.

"Probably. I heard Finn didn't want Aileen causing trouble for their deal with Frostford, so he just sent her and her kids back to Cabinda. Who knows what'll happen once they're back with the Charles family."

Laurinda wasn't shocked. Finn had never hesitated to cut his own son out of his life, so sending off a sister who only brought him trouble was nothing to him. Bagot's absence from the Gates family's celebration dinner had already made it obvious that things weren't great between the Gates and the Charles families. Aileen didn't seem to have much standing in her own family either.

"Speaking of the Gates family," York said, "I keep wondering about Fabian. What did Bonnie do to make Finn drop Fabian like that, and not even go after her for revenge? It's honestly kind of wild."

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[603 words]

When Fabian came up, York went quiet again.

It wasn't that he didn't want to talk. He just couldn't get the words out. He was a guy, and honestly, he just couldn't handle the way Bonnie did things.

Laurinda kept her eyes on him, waiting for an explanation. York stayed silent all the way until the car rolled up to the manor.

The butler stepped out to greet them, taking Laurinda's things from her. He glanced at York, who was still sitting in the car, and asked with a puzzled look, "Working late again? You haven't had a meal at home in ages. How about staying for dinner before you leave?"

Laurinda glanced at York. He looked like he wanted to stay, but didn't quite dare.

She gave the car door a little tap, letting out a sigh. "Alright, stop overthinking it. I won't ask anymore, okay? Just stay for dinner."

She walked inside without looking back.

The house was quiet. No one else was home yet. Laurinda headed upstairs, pulling out her phone to call Adolphus as she climbed.

He picked up right away, his voice soft and gentle. "Home already?"

"Yeah. When are you coming back?"

"I'll be late tonight. Irvin's sleeping over at Jasper's place."

"Okay. Drive safe, and if it gets too late, you don't have to rush back."

"Alright. Just remember to leave the door unlocked."

His voice was warm, almost teasing. Laurinda felt her ears get hot. She mumbled a quick reply and hung up, a little flustered.

Adolphus smiled at his phone, his expression turning even softer. He could just picture Laurinda's shy face.

"Adolphus..."

It was the first time Mario had ever seen Adolphus look like that. He was a bit stunned, but since they were in front of everyone, he reminded Adolphus to get back on track.

Adolphus put down his phone and looked at the group. "Where were we? Go on."

The Frostford rep wiped sweat from his forehead and continued discussing the project with The Gates Group. He watched Adolphus, carefully, ready to stop if anything went wrong.

He managed to finish his report without any interruptions. Adolphus didn't look nearly as annoyed as they'd feared. The rep took a deep breath and added, "Adolphus, we only decided to partner with The Gates Group after a lot of research. Out of all the companies in Apex, they really are the best fit."

Adolphus glanced down at his notes. He couldn't deny it. The Gates Group checked all the boxes.

"Alright. Work with them for now. Once this project is over, we'll look for other options."

Everyone breathed easier. They'd all worried Adolphus might pull the plug and cost them big.

Adolphus checked his watch and stood up. "That's it for today. I have something else to take care of, so I'm heading out."

Mario hurried after him as they left the conference room. "When are you going back to Frostford? There's still a lot waiting for you over there."

"Not for a while. I won't make it back before New Year's..." Adolphus paused, thinking. "Let's wait until the high schoolers start winter break."

Mario was caught off guard. He watched Adolphus disappear into the elevator; then muttered to himself. He's really taking this. schoondector gig seriously waiting for the students to go on break... that's actually kind of sweet."

When Adolphus got back to the manor, he saw Laurinda sprawled on the sofa, hugging a bowl of cherries.

He took off his coat, then warmed himself by the fireplace for a bit before going to sit next to her.

Laurinda glanced up at him, then pinched a cherry and popped it into his mouth. Her voice was muffled. "Did you eat dinner?"

"Not yet. Had some last-minute stuff to deal with."

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[617 words]

"Go upstairs, wash up, and change into something comfy. I'll ask Elin to make you a bowl of noodles."

"Okay, wait for me. I'll be quick."

Adolphus leaned down and kissed the corner of Laurinda's lips, then straightened up and headed upstairs.

When he reached his room, he realized his things were missing from the guest room.

"Laurinda, where's my stuff?"

"I moved it next to my room."

Laurinda had expected him to be confused and couldn't help but smile.

After coming home, she'd suddenly felt like doing something nice for him. So she moved all his things up to the third floor and even had some new loungewear delivered.

She wasn't sure why, but she just wanted to treat Adolphus a little better.

When Adolphus realized he'd been moved right into Laurinda's personal space, he felt a thrill of happiness. Did this mean she was starting to accept him? Maybe the day she'd officially let him in wasn't so far away.

After his shower, Adolphus came downstairs wearing the comfortable clothes Laurinda had picked out for him. He kept touching the fabric, quietly soaking in this little bit of happiness.

Laurinda was already in the kitchen. She had a small bowl of noodles in front of her and across the table was a larger bowl, along with a few light side dishes.

"Hurry up, or the noodles will get mushy."

Laurinda waved him over, urging him to eat before the food got cold.

Adolphus sat down across from her and took the chopsticks she handed him.

"Try it. Elin makes the best noodles. When I was a kid and got sick, she'd always make me this."

Laurinda slurped up a mouthful, looking completely satisfied. She could never get tired of these noodles, no matter how many times she had them. Even on a full stomach, she could manage another bowl.

After eating, Adolphus pulled Laurinda into his arms as they curled up together on the couch.

"Are you really not coming back to Cabinda with me?"

"No, I'm not. I don't celebrate Christmas. Honestly, it feels like any other day to me."

Adolphus was caught off guard. He'd expected her to care about the holiday. Most of his family loved that time of year.

Laurinda noticed his surprise and laughed, resting her head against his chest.

"I just want to spend New Year's with you."

"Alright, we'll do New Year's together."

Just that one sentence made Adolphus's heart race. He almost forgot how to breathe for a second.

Laurinda hadn't expected him to react so strongly. She put a hand over his chest and laughed, carefree.

"Adolphus, your heart's beating so fast. Tell it to chill out."

He caught her hand in his, grinning. "It doesn't listen to me. Maybe you should try calming it down."

"You're so silly."

Laurinda gave his chest a gentle tap, checked the time, and then hugged him around the neck.

"I'm tired. Take me to my room."

Adolphus looked at her, his eyes soft. She was getting more and more comfortable being close to

him He scooped her close.

sofa and carried her upstairs.

The next morning, Adolphus came back from his run and was surprised to find work having breakfast in the dining room. He hasn't seen him at all the day before. fo
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"You just got here?"

"No, I came back with Laurinda yesterday afternoon. We're not staying in the main house, so you probably just missed me Want to Join me for breakfast? We could chat."

"Sure, let me just change first."

Adolphus ran upstairs, took a quick shower, and changed his clothes before coming back down.

As he walked into the dining room, the butler hurried off to the kitchen. Soon after, a fresh plate of breakfast landed in front of him.

Adolphus thanked him, picked up a piece of scallion pancake, and took a bite. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

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Chapter 137

[643 words]

"Let's talk about Mistfall Atoll. Things are a mess over there. Every faction is struggling, and even our business is getting dragged into it. Don't you think it's time to step back?"

Adolphus took a relaxed sip of his soup and shook his head. "Let's wait a little longer. It's not the right time yet. You're looking for saltpeter, aren't you?"

He'd already looked into Mistfall Atoll and knew exactly what that place was known for. The second York brought it up, saltpeter was the first thing that came to Adolphus's mind.

York touched his nose, realizing it was impossible to hide anything from someone as sharp as Adolphus. He nodded, not bothering to pretend.

"Yeah. Some of my projects need those materials."

"I'll give you a contact. You can get better stuff straight from him. The purity is higher than anything on Mistfall Atoll."

Adolphus grabbed his phone and sent York the contact info.

York's phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen, surprised. He hadn't realized Adolphus had such deep connections. Clearly, all his previous research barely scratched the surface.

"For now, stay away from business on Mistfall Atoll. That place is going to be chaotic for a while. If you need any other raw materials, just tell me. Maybe I can help."

As Adolphus talked about the chaos on the island, he couldn't help but smile a little. York saw it and felt a chill creep up his spine. Honestly, with these two teaming up, how was anyone else supposed to survive? He almost felt bad for the others.

After Laurinda woke up and finished getting ready, she came downstairs and immediately spotted Adolphus crouched by the big windows. She had no idea what he was up to.

She wandered over, leaned down, and wrapped her arms around his neck, resting her body against his back like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"What are you up to?"

"I brought home some herb seedlings from my mentor's place. They're good for cleaning the air. If you put them in your bedroom, they'll help you sleep, too. Once I'm done, I'll set a couple in your room. You could take one to your dorm, if you want."

"Okay."

Laurinda answered with a lazy hum, letting her head fall on his shoulder as she watched him work. Her eyes followed his hands, taking in the way his fingers moved.

set

She thought his hands were honestly gorgeous. The shape of his knuckles was perfect, and even with dirt all over them, they looked like they belonged in a museum.

Her mind started to drift. She imagined those big hands on her...

Suddenly, she snapped back to reality, jumping away from his back and smacking her own forehead with her palm.

Adolphus turned around, confused. "What's wrong? Your face is all red. Are you feeling sick?"

He dusted the dirt off his hands and got to his feet, checking her over. She was blushing so hard that even her neck and collarbones were turning pink.

"Do you have a fever? Did you catch a cold yesterday?"

Laurinda kept her eyes down, too mortified to speak. Adolphus grew anxious and went to wash his hands.

As soon as he left, she covered her face, dying of embarrassment. She wished she really did have a fever. That would be way less humiliating than him figuring out what she'd been thinking.

Adolphus came back with a thermometer, gently pressing it to her forehead. When it read normal, he looked even more confused.

"Your temperature's fine. Are you sure you're not feeling unwell anywhere?"

"No, I'm just a little groggy from waking up. It's nothing. Don't worry."

She flashed him her biggest, most innocent smile, determined not to let him know what was actually on her mind. That would be the end of her.

Adolphus rested his hand on her forehead one last time, making sure she was really okay, then seemed to relax. He didn't think much more of it.

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Chapter 138

[602 words]

"I have some herbal congee warming up for you in the kitchen. Eat a little to settle your stomach. We can have lunch soon."

Adolphus took Laurinda's hand and led her toward the dining room. She couldn't help but stare at his hand, feeling like she couldn't look at it without her mind running wild.

He placed the bowl in front of her and sat across the table, watching her cheeks turn pink. All he wanted was to pull her close and kiss her.

"I picked up the herbs Eaton prepared for you. When I get back, I'll make them into pills. You said the liquid medicine made you feel sick, right? Pills should be easier to handle."

The word "pills" snapped Laurinda out of her daydream. She wrinkled her nose, looking at him with a mix of dread and pleading.

"Do I really have to take them? I feel fine now. I'm eating, drinking, everything's good. Isn't the medicine kind of... optional? I really don't want to."

Just thinking about swallowing those huge, bitter pills every day was enough to ruin her mood.

She was already pushing her limits with this bland diet. If she had to choke down pills too, all her happiness would vanish.

"You have to take them. You still haven't recovered from the surgery, and your energy is way too low. Just the herbal congee won't be enough to fix that. Please, give me three months. I promise I'll help you get better."

Laurinda looked up and met his confident eyes. The words she wanted to say just wouldn't come out.

Thinking about her past and what was waiting for her ahead, she gave a reluctant nod.

"Alright. I trust you."

Once she'd finished her bowl, Adolphus didn't push her to eat more. They left the dining room together. Laurinda flopped onto the couch and started playing games while Adolphus tended to herbs by the big window.

After lunch, as Adolphus was applying her ointment, Laurinda's phone rang. She glanced at the unfamiliar number and rejected the call by instinct but the phone rang again right away:

Adolphus set down the ointment, picked up her phone, and answered. Before he could say anything, an urgent voice came through.

"Please don't hang up. This is the

prison. We're calling to let you know.. that Aiken wants to see you. He says it's about your parents."

Laurinda's lips curled into a sarcastic smile at the mention of Aiken, but it froze when she heard the message about her parents.

She didn't know if Aiken actually knew who her parents were, but she needed to find out if he had anything to do with what happened to them.

"When?" she asked.

"Anytime between two thirty and five this afternoon. Just sign in at the front desk when you arrive."

After the call, Adolphus watched Laurinda closely, worried about how she was taking it, wondering how to comfort her.

"What are you so nervous about?"

Laurinda looked up and caught Adolphus's anxious expression. She couldn't help but laugh a little.

"Relax. I've come to terms with everything about my parents. I'm just curious whether Aiken was really involved back then."

She glanced at her hand, checking if the ointment had dried, then leaned her elbow on the table and rested her chin in her palm.

"Honestly, I don't think Aiken ever

had it in him to hurt my parents. When they were still alive, I doubt he even realized who they really were. All his family cared about was money and status. The only thing that mattered to them was what kind of life my parents could give them. They were just greedy for comfort."

"Then why go see him? Isn't that just making trouble for yourself?"

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Chapter 139

[593 words]

Adolphus picked up a strawberry and held it out for Laurinda. She took a bite, then he popped the rest into his mouth. The way he did it was so smooth and easy, anyone from Cabinda would probably think he was a completely different person.

"I need to figure something out," Laurinda said quietly. "Did he find out I'm not really an Austin on his own, or did someone else tell him? I need to know if those people are back."

She lowered her gaze, but there was a dangerous glint in her dark eyes. If those people were trying to mess with her again, she wasn't just going to stand by and let it happen.

Adolphus couldn't see her eyes, but he felt a shift in the air around her. It was a vibe — like she was ready to burn everything down if she had to.

Laurinda never told him the whole truth about her past, but from what he'd picked up, her parents were far from ordinary.

He got up, walked over to her, and pulled her into his arms. His voice was gentle. "Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere."

Wrapped up in his warmth, Laurinda felt her guard drop. She hugged him back, not knowing how long she'd get to hold onto this feeling, but for now, she felt safe. It was like drifting and finally finding solid ground.

Laurinda and Adolphus showed up at the prison together. But because Aiken had asked, only Laurinda was allowed to go in with the guard to the meeting room.

When Aiken walked in, Laurinda almost didn't recognize him. He looked thin and drained, older than Baily, with none of his old confidence left.

"Aiken," she said, keeping her voice steady. "It's been a while. You look... rough. What happened to you?"

"Laurinda, was it you?" Aiken's voice cracked as he glared at her. "Did you have someone set me up? Did you get someone in here to destroy me? Laurinda, you're so cruel!"

He was unraveling, emotions all over the place. He'd never thought he'd end up like this. The moment things went wrong, he'd blamed Laurinda. He'd sent people after her that day, but it had all gone sideways. Instead, it turned into a mess with the Baker family's daughter and a crowd of reporters. There was no way out for him.

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A guard forced Aiken into his seat. His face twisted in anger, like he wanted to lunge across the table.

Laurinda sat opposite him, calm and collected. She looked at him the way someone might look at a wild animal trapped behind glass.

"What are you talking about, Aiken? I

don't get it. Your people acted on

your orders: How is that my fault? I'm only here because you said you had something to tell me

parents. Opare you about my

saying you had.

something to do with their

accident?"

Aiken froze, caught off guard. He hadn't expected Laurinda to flip things on him

now. His tone changed fast, turning desperate.

"I just said that about your parents because I wanted you to come see me. Laurinda, please, help me. You know I was set up, right?"

He tried to sound pitiful, hoping she'd take pity on him. Right now, Laurinda was his only chance.

Laurinda watched him switch

tactics, her voice icy. "Set up? You know exactly what you did. Twenty-five years is way too easy for someone like you. Don't wor though

find more evidence and

make sure you never get out."

"No... you can't do this, Laurinda! You lived with the Austin family for eighteen years.

Please, help me. If Abbott were still here, he'd help me. Laurinda, don't turn your back on me!"

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Chapter 140

[538 words]

Aiken was genuinely scared now. Deep down, he knew the crimes he got caught for were just the tip of the iceberg. If anyone ever uncovered everything, he'd rot in prison for life. No way. He couldn't let that happen.

Laurinda watched as Aiken began to unravel. She tapped her fingers on the table, a quiet signal for him to pay attention.

"I'm going to ask you a few questions. If you answer honestly, I'll call in a few favors and make sure things go easier for you in here."

Aiken didn't like the offer, but he could see this was the best Laurinda was willing to give. He clenched his jaw and nodded.

"Go ahead. I won't hold anything back."

"I hope you mean that. Were you involved in my parents' car accident?"

"No... but... when I walked through the parking lot, I saw someone messing with their car. I didn't think much of it then. It was only after the accident that I remembered what I saw. Laurinda, you have to believe me. I never wanted to hurt Abbott or Florrie. I knew as long as they were around, my life would be easy."

Aiken looked at her, desperate for her trust. Maybe he felt a little guilty after the accident, but his life barely changed after Abbott and Florrie died. Whatever regret he had disappeared almost instantly.

Laurinda just snorted. She knew better. She should have never expected anything decent from someone like him.

"Then how did you find out who I really am? Who told you to expose me and let your illegitimate daughter take my place as the Austin heir?"

"You... you know about that?"

Aiken froze, looking at her like he'd seen a ghost. He'd been so proud of his secret plots. Now he just looked ridiculous.

"Shocked? even know you told Laura to go after Fabian. Aiken, tricks are

nothing to me. Didoet

really think you were clever

you

Laurinda's eyes were full of amusement. There was no way he could have pulled this off on his own.

"Then why didn't you call me out? Why would you just hand over the Austin family to us?"

Aiken still couldn't wrap his head around it. Why would Laurinda give up the Austin Group? Wasn't it worth fighting for?

"Because I wanted to cut you all off. Your family is rotten to the core. A selfish grandfather. A greedy, womanizing father like you. A

mother who hooked up with the

driver, all ambition and zero brains. Why would want to stay in a family like that? So you could albleed me dry?"

"Aiken, honestly, I should thank you for that lovely gift you gave me at my eighteenth birthday. Ever since I left the Austin family, the air just feels fresher."

Laurinda's words made Aiken's throat close up, a metallic taste rising in his mouth. She really knew how to hit where it hurt.

"So who put you up to this? There's no way you came up with all this on your own." Aiken coughed hard, then suddenly collapsed, eyes rolling back as he passed out. Laurinda watched him slump over and let out a frustrated sigh. She left the room and waved over Adolphus, who was waiting outside.

He hurried over, lowering his voice. "What happened?"

"Aiken fainted. Get him up. I'm not finished with him yet."

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[684 words]

"Okay."

Adolphus pulled out a set of disposable acupuncture needles from his pocket and headed into the visiting room. He spotted two prison guards about to take someone out and quickly called out to stop them.

"Hey, I'm a doctor. I know some emergency care. You can leave him with me."

The guards glanced at the ID in Adolphus's hand, then set Aiken back down and stepped aside, giving Adolphus space to work.

One precise needle was all it took. Aiken's eyes fluttered open, dazed at first, then filled with dread when he saw Laurinda standing nearby. Regret washed over him. He wished he'd never asked to see her.

"Aiken, quit pretending. My friend here is an expert at acupuncture, and trust me, he knows exactly where to poke to make it hurt. If you don't want to suffer, just be straight with me. Who put you up to this?"

Aiken refused to meet Laurinda's eyes. He squeezed them shut, desperate, but he knew he couldn't avoid answering her.

"I don't know who he was. He just showed up out of nowhere, handed me your medical records, and told me you aren't Abbott's real daughter. He said if I got you kicked out of the Austin family, I could take over and everything would be mine."

"He also told me that once I was in charge, he'd help me out. He wanted me to find a way to marry into the Gates family, promised he'd help me climb even higher. He even said I might get the chance to go to Cabinda for bigger opportunities."

"I was in debt back then. I needed the money, so I did what he said. I had no idea where Abbott's real daughter was, so I just brought Laura in....."

Laurinda could tell Aiken wasn't lying. She got up and turned to Adolphus. "Let's go. That's all he knows."

As they left, Aiken managed to sit up and shout after her, his voice echoing in the room. "Laurinda, don't forget what you promised me. Make things a little easier for me in here!"

Once they were out and in the car, Adolphus took Laurinda's hand. "Are you okay? Does this bother you?"

"No. Actually, I feel good. Aiken is finally facing the consequences for everything he's done going to hand over the evidence I have on Abbott and Fidelia. It's time to put an end to this."

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Laurinda had been waiting for the right moment, holding back until Aiken reached out to her. Now that he had, she was ready to let things play out.

"So, what's next? Are you going to try to figure out who gave Aiken the information?"

"There's no need. I'm right here in

the open. My enemies are hiding, but

if they want to come after me,

sooner or

or later they make a move, just have to be patient. There's no point rushing or worrying. Right now,

I just want to live my life and enjoy the moment."

Laurinda lifted her eyebrows, a small smile tugging at her lips when she caught the surprise in Adolphus's eyes.

"Don't think I'm weird for handling it

this way. Some people are like rats hiding in the dark. The more you chase them, the faster they run. Sometimes if you just wait, they'll come crawling out on their own.

There's no

reason to waste time on people like that."

Listening to her, Adolphus felt a sharp ache in his chest. Laurinda had a way of seeing straight through things, and it hurt to think about what she must have gone through to get there.

When they reached Aeterna, Adolphus stayed in the car. He hesitated, then couldn't stop himself from asking, "Are you sure you don't want to come with me to Cabinda for a bit?"

"No, my grades come out tomorrow. I need to pick up my report card. Be careful on the road, and have a safe trip."

Laurinda waved at him before turning and walking into Aeterna.

Adolphus watched her go, lost in his thoughts. Next time, he promised himself, he'd make sure Laurinda came with him.

Inside the hall Laurinda had booked ahead of time, classmates were already gathering. Shirley spotted her and hurried over, clutching a big, shiny red apple.

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[570 words]

"Happy Christmas Eve, Laurinda. Wishing you a safe and peaceful future."

"Happy Christmas Eve, Laurinda. Stay safe!"

Each classmate approached Laurinda, holding out a shiny red apple. Looking at their gifts, Laurinda couldn't help but smile, her eyes curving with warmth.

"Thank you all for your sweet wishes. Let's ask the waiter to take these apples to the kitchen and slice them up for a fruit platter we can all share. There's no way I could eat all these apples by myself."

She waved over a waiter and handed off the apples. The group settled in together, chatting and laughing without any hurry.

Before long, the rest of the students and teachers arrived. The meal turned into an easygoing gathering. Teachers shared a few pieces of advice about schoolwork, but mostly everyone just enjoyed the food and the company.

As the meal was winding down, Laurinda slipped away to pay the bill. Harden followed her out.

"Laurinda, let me take care of it today. I'm new to the class, and everyone's been so kind to me. I'd like to treat everyone this time."

"That's not necessary. If you want to treat everyone, just pick another day and invite us again."

Laurinda didn't bother with small talk. She handed her card to the waiter and paid for the meal.

When she turned around, Harden was still standing nearby, not moving. She frowned. "Was there something else?"

"I brought you a party favor from yesterday's celebration, thought you'd like it."

He handed her a gift bag. Laurinda opened it right there, revealing a bracelet she recognized immediately.

"So Finn really is doing well. Giving away the latest Queen bracelet as a party favor. That's what it means to be part of a powerful family, I guess. I like it. Thanks."

She put the bracelet in her backpack, tossed the empty gift bag into the trash, and headed back to the private room without another word.

Harden just stood there, watching her walk away. He wasn't sure what he'd just seen, but when Laurinda opened, the box there hadn't been

arty hint of surprise in her eyes. If anything, she'd looked almost mocking.

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Was she making fun of him?

When the party finally wound down, the homeroom teacher gathered everyone and started sending

people home Soon, only Laurinda, Irvin, Harden, and the teacher were left outside the restaurant.

"Laurinda, let me give you a ride home. My driver is here."

Harden had been waiting for this chance, hanging back until everyone else had left so he could offer.

He'd been watching all evening. The school doctor never showed up.

"Thanks, but that's alright. My car's here too. Teacher, do you want to ride with me?"

Laurinda didn't spare Harden a glance, just turned to her teacher.

The teacher looked between

Laurinda and Harden, then smiled

gently. "Since you're turning Harden

down, I'll take him up on his offer. Harden, would you mind giving me a ride?"

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Irvin, who had been quietly watching all of this, almost burst out laughing. Seeing Harden's face go stiff was just too satisfying.

He'd noticed Harden sneaking looks at Laurinda all night. The guy wasn't subtle. Trying to move in on Adolphus's girl, though? That took nerve.

Harden said nothing, just stared at the teacher. Laurinda smiled, calm and polite.

"Since the teacher's riding with Harden, Irvin and I will head out first. See you tomorrow, Harden. Teacher."

Laurinda and Irvin walked off together. When they passed the trash can, Laurinda paused, pulled out the gift box from her backpack, and dropped it in. She didn't look back.

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[634 words]

Harden couldn't take his eyes off Laurinda. He watched, stunned, as she tossed

aside the bracelet he'd carefully picked out for her. His hands curled tightly, knuckles white. He never thought she'd actually do it.

The homeroom teacher, completely unaware of Harden's mood, gave him a gentle pat on the shoulder. "Harden, are we ready to go?"

Harden forced down the anger simmering inside him and nodded. "Yeah, let's get in the car."

Irvin collapsed into the passenger seat, laughing so hard he could barely breathe. Laurinda didn't even look up. She was glued to her phone, scrolling through the tour schedule that Lea had sent her. She needed to make sure Jasper had protection lined up. There was no way she'd let anything happen to him.

"Laurinda, did you see Harden's face? He looked like he just ate something disgusting. And our teacher... he's honestly clueless. Can't he see Harden doesn't want to give him a ride?"

Laurinda smirked. "He's always been like that. Back in sophomore year, a parent complained that their kid's bad grades were his fault. So what did he do? He started showing up at their house every weekend to tutor the kid. The student ended up transferring schools. I heard the whole family moved just to get away from him."

Their homeroom teacher really was dedicated, maybe too much so. He just had zero social awareness.

With Adolphus out of town for a few days, Laurinda felt totally free. Every day after class, she made a straight line for the cafeteria, finally eating everything she'd been craving for weeks.

One afternoon, while Laurinda was enjoying her meal, a security guard came up to her. He told her there was a woman at the main gate who wanted to see her.

Laurinda couldn't guess who this might be. She wasn't curious enough to care, so she just asked the guard to tell the woman she wasn't coming out.

But Bella wasn't giving up. She waited at the gate and, by chance, flagged down the homeroom teacher as he was coming back to campus.

"Excuse me, do you know Laurinda? I really need to talk to her. It's urgent."

The teacher looked her over, taking in her anxious face and simple clothes. She didn't seem dangerous.

"What's your relationship with Laurinda?"

"I'm her aunt, We haven't talked much since her parents passed away, but the family still thinks about her. Her grandmother is sick and wants to see her. Please, could you help me get Laurinda to come out? I just want to explain the situation. Whether she visits her grandmother or not, that's up to her."

The teacher's heart softened right away. He agreed without hesitation.

"Alright, wait here. I'll go find Laurinda."

He hopped on his scooter and zipped into the school, heading straight for Laurinda's classroom. He didn't want to waste a second.

But Laurinda wasn't in the classroom. She was in the infirmary, working on an experiment with Irvin. She'd asked York to bring over some lab equipment from the research institute.

Laurinda watched Irvin work, eyes bright with admiration. He moved with such confidence and skill, like he'd been doing this his whole life.

"All done. Should we grab a couple of lab mice to test it out?" Irvin waved a test tube in front of her, the yellow liquid catching the light.

Laurinda's eyes lit up. "No need. York

will be here soon to take it back to the institute. They'll do all the testing

there Irvin, you're amazing. No wonder Adolphus calls you a little genius."

She gave him an excited pat on the shoulder, already making a silent promise to herself. She had to bring Irvin into her research team. There into was no way she'd let such a talented guy slip away.

Irvin just smiled at her praise, thinking she was like a clever little fox, always plotting something in that sharp mind of hers.

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Chapter 144

[635 words]

When Irvin heard York was coming, he quickly packed away the vial he'd been working with and dragged a chair over to sit down. Through the window, he caught a glimpse of Foley rushing around outside, looking as busy as ever.

He turned to Laurinda and asked, "Wasn't Adolphus's family dinner supposed to be over by now? Why isn't he back yet?"

"He said he'll be back around the thirtieth. He's got some things to sort out," Laurinda replied, barely glancing up. Her attention was still locked on the carefully packed vial, like it was some kind of treasure.

Irvin frowned. "It's taking that long? You don't think he's run into trouble, right? Want me to check around for you?"

He had heard Cabinda had been a mess lately. Was Adolphus caught up in all that? It didn't add up. The Lane family elders adored Adolphus. There was no way they'd let him get pushed around, or force him into anything he hated.

Laurinda shook her head. "No need. He said it's not family stuff, just something personal. But you know people in Cabinda. Have you heard anything about Aileen? That scandal was everywhere. Did Bagot seriously just accept it?"

Exposing Aileen's private life had been a move to ruin her and shake up the Charles and Gates families. Laurinda hadn't heard any follow-up, and honestly, she was getting impatient.

Irvin's lips twitched. "Funny you ask, actually. I did hear some things. Bagot's got a thick skin. He didn't divorce Aileen. Instead, he came out himself to say all those photos online were fake, that someone was trying to set her up."

"But Aileen's still having a rough time. She got kicked out of the pianist association. All her daughter's piano awards were taken away too. Bribing judges was just the tip of the iceberg. Right now, their reputations are pretty much ruined."

Laurinda's eyes widened. She really didn't expect the Charles family to handle it that way. It made her wonder if Bagot and Aileen were bound together by something deeper. Otherwise, what kind of man could live with that?

Irvin noticed her thoughtful look and gave a quiet laugh. "That's the curse of big families. Sometimes you just don't get to choose. All they care about is benefit and profit. Sometimes you have to put up with things, just for the family."

Laurinda looked at him, noticing a sadness in his eyes. He seemed worried, but not for himself. "What about you? Are you going to have to live like that too?"

He paused, then gave a small, self-deprecating smile. "Probably. My dad was the odd one out in our family. That's why I was born in a lab instead of at home. Later because I was the only boy in the Main family, my grandfather made sure I was brought back, and only then did my mom get accepted by the family."

"My sister is the perfect example. The Main family needed a marriage alliance, so she was forced to be with Sam. When they broke up, my grandfather just found her someone else. She didn't even get to say no."

Irvin's smile turned bitter. He could never understand why the older generation didn't just work to make the family stronger and protect their kids. Instead they forced their children to sacrifice their own happiness for the family's status. It was twisted.

Laurinda reached out and patted his shoulder. "Then you've got to make yourself stronger. When you're

strong enough, you can protect the people you care about. When you're

on top, you get a real say in your

own life. That's how you break free." Content

Irvin nodded. "I will, Laurinda. I know Adolphus cares about you a lot, but be careful, okay? There are plenty of people in the Lane family who don't want him to do well. I just hope you always stay true to yourself."

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Chapter 145

[522 words]

When Laurinda met Irvin's worried eyes, she knew he was genuinely concerned. This time, she didn't brush him off. She spoke clearly. "Don't worry about me. I've always been in charge of my own life. If anyone wants to control me, they better be ready to risk everything."

York came over to collect the test tube, and Laurinda walked back to class with Irvin. As soon as she sat down, Shirley leaned over and whispered that the homeroom teacher had come by looking for her more than once.

Laurinda frowned, not sure why the teacher wanted her. She stood up and headed to the staff office.

When she pushed open the office door, the room was empty except for one woman sitting at the teacher's desk.

Before Laurinda could say a word, the woman rushed toward her. Laurinda instinctively stepped back, putting space between them.

Catching Laurinda's reaction, the woman stopped about a meter away with a nervous smile plastered across her face.

"Laurinda, right? Do you remember me? I'm your aunt!"

"Aunt?" Laurinda looked her up and down. The woman did look a bit like Florrie, but Laurinda had never heard anything about Florrie's family. For someone to show up now just felt off.

"I don't remember you. I've never even heard I had an aunt. You've got the wrong person anyway. I'm not part of the Austin family anymore. At my coming-of-age, they announced I was switched at birth. I was kicked out."

Laurinda watched the woman-Bella-go from awkward to shocked to skeptical.

Bella clearly didn't want to believe

her. She shook her head, still

pushing "You're not an Austin- anymore? But when you left, they must have given you something valuable, right?"

Now Laurinda understood what this was about. Bella wasn't here for a reunion, just money. That explained a lot.

Laurinda leaned against the math

teacher's desk and answered

casually, "Nef with nothing. The Austins didn't even let me keep my clothes. If you don't believe me, ask Bally at the hospital or Arkenin prison. I have nothing to do with them anymore. If that's all, I'll be leaving."

As Laurinda turned to go, Bella suddenly got frantic and jumped in front of her.

"No way. That's not possible. Jeniffer said your mom left you a lot of money. You're lying to me, right? How could you not have any money?"

Laurinda paused, hearing Jeniffer's name. No wonder Bella had shown up- someone was egging her on.

"So Jeniffer told you I had money and you just believed her? Use your head."

Bella's face twisted with frustration. Her eyes darted around the room and landed on a fruit knife on the desk. She snatched it up, pointing it at Laurinda with trembling hands.

"I don't care. I want money. I want a million. Look at your clothes. You don't look broke. If you don't give me the money, I'll... I'll..."

Bella's voice started to shake, and she waved the knife in Laurinda's direction in a panic. It was obvious she'd never tried something like this before. She was scared her bluff, wouldn't work and she'd leave with nothing.

Laurinda took in Bella's wild expression and decided not to agitate her any further.

She just let out a quiet, steady sigh.

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Chapter 146

[605 words]

"What's the matter? Couldn't get money so now you're trying to rob me? Do you even realize what you're doing? The second you picked up that knife, it stopped being a joke. You're committing a crime."

Hearing the word "crime," Bella's hands shook even harder. Suddenly, she spun the knife around and aimed it at herself.

"Fine, then. If you won't give me the money, I'll just kill myself right here. I'll make sure everyone at school knows you drove your own aunt to her death. Let's see how you live with that."

She pressed the blade to her own neck. Whether she was actually serious or just panicking, a thin red line appeared where the knife touched her skin.

Laurinda narrowed her eyes and glanced up at the security camera in the corner, wondering why no one from security had shown up yet.

A shrill scream erupted from behind her before she could figure out what to do next. Laurinda turned and saw the teacher from the next class standing outside the office, frozen with terror.

Laurinda pointed to the teacher, whose face had gone pale. "Look at what you're doing. You're scaring the teachers now. Put the knife down. If you keep this up, the security guards will come and you'll end up at the police station."

"No. I'm not threatening you. I can kill myself if I want. Laurinda, you're not even Florrie's real daughter. What right do you have to her inheritance? Give me back Florrie's money."

With an audience watching now, Bella's performance kicked into high gear. She acted like she didn't even feel the pain, gripping the knife tighter until blood trickled down her neck.

Before, when there was no one around, she didn't know what to say or do. Now, with a growing crowd at the door, she started playing the victim even harder, painting Laurinda as the villain who stole her family's money.

Listening to it all, Laurinda finally understood what was really going on.

After she was kicked out of the Austin family, the monthly payments to the Blair family stopped. With no money coming in and Jeniffer egging them on Bella had come straight to her for cash.

Laurinda rubbed her aching temples, frustrated that the school had even let someone like Bella onto campus.

Just then, the dean pushed his way through the door. He stepped in front of Laurinda to shield her, then spoke softly to Bella, trying to calm her down.

"Ma'am, please. Your neck is bleeding. Don't hurt yourself. Let's just sit down and talk about this, okay? Whatever you need, we can figure it out together."

"I don't care," Bella shouted. "I just want Laurinda to give me back Florrie's inheritance. That was Florrie's money. She's just a fake. Why should she get it?"

People in the crowd started

whispering and glancing at Laurinda. They'd all seen her coming to school in fancy cars. Even after being

thrown out of the Austin family her clothes and shoes were still designer labels. It wasn't hard for them to believe she was keeping Florrie's fortune for herself.

"Laurinda, come on. Just give her back the inheritance," someone in the crowd called out. Technically, your aunt is the one who should have your mom's money since you're not even her real daughter."

"Yeah, Bella's so pitiful. And your grandma's sick, too. You can't just ignore your family and live the good life by yourself."

"Bella's already been pushed so far. Laurinda, are you made of stone? Can't you just be a little kinder to them?"

Hearing the voices from the crowd, Bella's whole attitude changed. The pitiful act vanished. She straightened up and glared at Laurinda, her voice full of defiance.

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Chapter 147

[565 words]

"See, Laurinda? Even your classmates think I'm right. You should just hand over Florrie's inheritance. If you give me the rest, I'll let go of what you already spent."

Laurinda couldn't help laughing at how shameless Bella was. She had to admit, Jeniffer really outdid herself by finding someone this stubborn.

"I can give you money."

Harden squeezed through the crowd, holding out a black credit card to Bella.

"There's two million dollars on this card. Take it, and leave. This isn't the place for your drama."

He shoved the card into Bella's hand and turned to Laurinda, trying to look all soft and concerned.

Laurinda almost gagged. She rolled her eyes, completely done with his self-important attitude.

"The police are here. Move aside, everyone, let them through!"

At the sound of that, students and teachers quickly stepped back, giving the police a clear path.

Bella suddenly looked panicked. She gripped the credit card tightly and glared at Laurinda.

"You... you really called the police?"

"You waved a knife around. Why wouldn't I? This is a society with laws. It's my right to protect myself with them. Did you think I was hanging around here for fun?"

The second Bella picked up the knife, Laurinda had already called her police contact. She knew he'd get what was really going on. They had that kind of understanding.

He walked into the office and saw Bella with a knife at her throat while Laurinda stood calmly nearby.

Once he saw Laurinda was okay, he let out a breath and asked, his voice rough, "What happened here?"

He looked straight at Laurinda, who told him the whole story, no sugarcoating. Listening to Laurinda talk, Bella got desperate. She jumped in, voice shaking.

"She's lying. That's not what happened. My mother's really sick, and I was just begging her for Florrie's inheritance. I didn't want to rob anyone, and I never threatened her with a knife. Look at my neck, ke only hurt myself."

"We can just check the security footage if you don't believe me," Laurinda cut her off, pointing to the camera in the corner. She'd stayed in the Office because she knew it was recording. She didn't want any confusion about what really happened.

The officer had someone pull up the footage. After watching it all, he had his partner take the knife from Bella and led her away.

"Wait."

Laurinda stepped over, pried the credit card from Bella's hand, and ignored her as she broke down, screaming.

"You're so heartless, Laurinda. You deserved to grow up with no parents. You deserved to get kicked out of the Austin family. You deserved to have no one."

Laurinda didn't even flinch at Bella's curses. She walked over to Harden and pressed the card firmly against his chest.

"Stop acting like you're some hero. Don't stand here feeling proud of yourself, and quit looking at me like that. Let's get something straight—I'm not into you. Not even a little."

Harden's face drained of color. He never thought Laurinda would reject him like this. He tried to say something, but Laurinda cut him off with a quick gesture.

"Don't talk. You make me sick."

Laurinda turned to the students who'd tried to stand up for Bella, her eyes cold.

"The next time you want to judge

me, remember where your dorms come from, your desks, your library your cafeteria, even your meal subsidies. If I ever hear you talking behind my back again, all of that goes away Laurinda, and mean what I say."

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Chapter 148

[672 words]

Laurinda slipped out of the crowd and left the office behind her. When she looked up, the principal was already hurrying over. She couldn't help but smirk. "Principal, you're fast today. Maybe I should get you a golf cart. Forty minutes just to walk from the main building to here? Impressive."

"We were in a meeting. We came as soon as we heard," the principal said. He wiped at his forehead, even though there was no sweat. The way he looked at Laurinda was careful, almost nervous, like he was terrified something might have happened to her. If anything did, he'd have to answer to the Adams family and the school doctor, and he didn't want to mess with either of them.

"I'm fine," Laurinda said. "I just hope the security guard and the teacher who let that crazy woman in are okay." She didn't bother looking back as she walked away, heading straight for her classroom. She was still mad about what happened. She'd always thought school was supposed to be safe, a place where you didn't have to worry. But drama had a way of finding her, no matter where she went. Was it really too much to ask for a little peace and quiet?

She paused outside her classroom and knocked. The teacher called her in, so she slipped inside. As soon as she entered, Bonnie spotted her. Laurinda's face said it all. Someone had definitely ticked off their little princess. Bonnie didn't say anything, just kept teaching. She figured she'd buy Laurinda a milk tea after class, something to help her feel better.

Laurinda sat down, and right away she saw a note from Shirley on her desk.

What happened? Are you okay? We tried to go check on you, but Bonnie stopped us. She said you'd handle it.

It's fine now, Laurinda wrote back. I don't want to talk about it. You can find out what happened after class.

She didn't mind her friends gossiping behind her back, but she just didn't feel like explaining. Letting them dig up the details themselves would probably make them even happier.

Laurinda wrapped herself tighter in her puffy jacket and laid her head down on her desk. She tried to calm the storm of negative feelings swirling inside her. The closer that day got, the more on edge she felt. She hadn't been sleeping well lately, and not even the herbal pillow Adolphus gave her was helping anymore.

When the last bell rang, Laurinda went straight to the office. She needed to ask for some time off. She just didn't want to risk snapping at someone who didn't deserve it.

She pushed open the office door and saw her homeroom teacher packing up his things. She frowned and walked over.

"Sir, are you leaving?"

He looked up, guilt written all over his face. "Laurinda, I'm so sorry. I never should have brought Bella to school. I caused you trouble, and I've already applied for a suspension..."

So it was him who let Bella in. Laurinda just stared for a second, speechless. She and Irvin had joked about how clueless he could be, and now she wasn't even surprised.

"I actually came to ask for some time off," Laurinda said. "If you're stepping down because of me, you really don't have to. Our class needs you right now. If the principal is giving you trouble, I can talk to for you."

Her teacher looked shocked that Laurinda wasn't mad. He looked both grateful and a little

embarrassed, like a kid caught doing something wrong. "She said she was your aunt and your grandmother was very sick, I just didn't want you to regret not seeing her so let her in. I never thought it would almost get you hurt."

"It's okay, sir. I know you meant well. Sometimes you just can't tell what people are really like. This wasn't your fault." Laurinda really didn't want to get into details. Honestly, she doubted even her own parents

knew everything about that family.

"I need to take a leave of absence," Laurinda said. "I don't know when I'll be back,

but I'll keep in touch."

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Chapter 149

[638 words]

Laurinda's homeroom teacher caught the tired look on her face and knew the day had really gotten to her. He set aside the papers on his desk and quietly wrote her a leave slip.

"The class and I will be waiting for you to come back."

Laurinda nodded. "Okay. I'll be back soon." With the leave slip in hand, she left the office, already thinking she'd come back once she felt a little better. Honestly, she'd miss her classmates.

Back at the dorm, she tossed a few things into her bag, shouldered it, and headed out of the school.

Just outside the gate, she spotted Baal. He stood a little ways off, cigarette in hand, looking like he was waiting for someone. When he saw Laurinda, he stubbed out the cigarette and hurried over, worry written all over his face.

"I heard the Blair family came around looking for you. Are you alright?"

Laurinda's gaze sharpened. "You get news pretty fast. Where'd you hear that from?" She couldn't stand feeling like she was being watched.

Baal picked up on her mood right away and scrambled for an excuse. "Don't get the wrong idea. I was in a meeting with York and overheard someone mention the Blairs came by your school. I just asked about it."

He lowered his voice a little. "I wanted to tell you, Florrie cut ties with the Blair family after her oldest son died. Eva took money from Belinda to force Florrie to keep things quiet, but when Florrie wouldn't let it go, the Blair family officially cut her off."

Laurinda rolled her eyes, already tired of hearing about the Austin family drama. She lifted her hand to interrupt him. "You don't need to explain. The woman who came today

got taken away by the police, and I'm making sure she doesn't get out. As for the rest of the Blair family... if they want trouble, they can come find me."

She didn't wait for Baal to respond. The car she'd called pulled up, and she slipped inside, leaving Baal standing alone on the sidewalk.

After she left, Baal's assistant came over. "We found the Blair family. What should we do next?"

"Make sure they never make it out of that place. No need for them to cause more trouble. And what about Jeniffer? Did you find her?"

"We did. She's at her parents' house, same town as the Blairs."

"Deal with her too. Laurinda doesn't need to be bothered by these people."

Laurinda went off the grid for a whole day and night. Irvin was beside himself with worry. As soon as he heard Adolphus was back, he rushed straight to the infirmary.

"Adolphus, thank goodness you're

here. Laurinda left school the night before last and turned off her phone. checked with the housekeeper, she never went home. York and Bonnie can't find her either. Do you have any way to reach her?"

Adolphus frowned. "What do you mean she disappeared? What happened?" He'd been on a plane and hadn't heard about the school incident. His chest tightened as he pulled out his phone and dialed Laurinda's number.

No luck. The call wouldn't go through. He took a deep breath and listened as Irvin explained everything that had happened.

"Alright. Go back to class. I'll find her."

With his jacket in one hand and his car keys in the other, Adolphus left the infirmary at a near run.

Foley wanted to follow but couldn't leave the patients who were still getting IVs. "Foley, do you think Adolphus can bring Laurinda back?"

Foley watched the door thoughtfully. He wasn't really thinking about whether Laurinda would return. He was more focused on Adolphus and how he seemed almost too invested in her.

Adolphus drove straight to the

airport. He'd already called ahead to the airline and got himself on the fastest flight to the neighboring city. When he landed, he headed straight for the area near Jeniffer's house. Emberfall.

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Chapter 150

[580 words]

"Adolphus, we've looked into it. Jeniffer went out early this morning to buy groceries, but she never came back."

Adolphus frowned, feeling that familiar weight settle in his chest. The thing he'd been worried about was happening.

He'd always sensed something wild and unpredictable simmering under Laurinda's calm surface. He wasn't afraid she'd actually do something crazy, just that if she did, he might not get there in time to help her pick up the pieces.

"Find out everywhere Laurinda's been today."

He called her again. The phone rang, and on the fourth try she finally picked up. Her voice came through, sleepy and a little lazy.

"You're back?"

"Yeah. I'm in Emberfall. Where are you?"

Laurinda jolted awake. She sat up in bed and stared at her phone, not quite believing the time.

"Wait... why are you in Emberfall? Are you here for work or...?"

The realization hit her in a rush. Of course he was here for her. But...

"How did you even know I was here?"

She sounded so calm that Adolphus felt the tension in his chest ease a bit. At least it didn't sound like she'd done anything reckless.

"Irvin told me what happened at school. I got in touch with York, and he said Jeniffer was involved. No one could reach you, and I figured you might come here. Are you okay?"

His last words were soft. All he really cared about was how she was doing. Nothing else mattered to him. Honestly, even if Laurinda upended the world, he'd find a way to keep her safe.

"I'm fine. It's kind of hard to explain on the phone. I'll send you my location. Just come over."

Laurinda sent her location, and less than fifteen minutes later, Adolphus was knocking softly at her door.

She opened it to find him glancing around, clearly unimpressed with the motel. His eyebrows were knit together in a way that said he wasn't thrilled with her choice of accommodations.

"Motel life in a small town. Come in."

As soon as he stepped inside, the musty smell hit him. Without thinking, Adolphus pulled Laurinda into his arms, holding her close, his grip tighter than usual.

"This place is terrible. Let's just go home."

Laurinda blinked in surprise. She'd expected his first question to be about why she was here, not him worrying about the state of her room.

"It's really not that bad. This is one of the best motels in town. Anyway, it's late and there aren't any flights now. We'll go back tomorrow."

"Flights aren't a problem. If you want to leave, we can go whenever."

He let her go and gently turned her to face him, cupping her face in his

hands. When he saw the dark circles

under her eyes, his gaze softened and a little crease formed between his brows.

"What's wrong? You're not sleeping again? The herbal packs and pillow aren't helping anymore?"

He knew Laurinda wasn't the impulsive type. For her to leave school, travel all this way, and cut off contact, something serious must have happened.

Feeling suddenly exposed,

Laurinda's heart started to race. She tilted her head up and met his worried eyes. A sad smile flickered across her lips, and she let herself sink into his chest, letting down her guard for just a moment.

"Tomorrow's the day my parents died. I keep dreaming about them lately. I just... can't sleep."

No matter how tough Laurinda

acted, she'd still just been a kid

when she lost her parents. Her whole world had collapsed. But she'd had to get strong to keep the wrong people away, to keep her younger brother safe. She'd never really had a choice.

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