

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

chapter 151

[ 726 words ]

She didn't have time to mourn. Overnight, she forced herself to grow up, taking on the responsibilities her parents left behind and building her own support system from the ground up.

To everyone else, though, she looked like a heartless ingrate. People whispered that she felt nothing, that she didn't even shed a tear for her parents. No one understood how much she was hurting inside.

Adolphus wrapped his arms around her, holding her close. He wanted her to feel him there, to remind her that she wasn't alone. She still had him. She could lean on him, if she wanted.

They just stood there, holding each other, neither saying a word. The silence was only broken when Laurinda's stomach let out a loud rumble. Adolphus couldn't help but laugh.

"Hungry?" he asked, his voice gentle. "Let's get something to eat."

"Okay," Laurinda said softly.

She slipped out of his arms. Her eyes flicked to the small, wet spot on his light sweater before she quickly looked away.

"Um... wait for me a sec. I need to go wash my face."

She hurried off to the bathroom, the glass door clicking softly behind her. Adolphus looked down at his chest, where her tears had left a mark.

He didn't realize how much her tears burned his heart. He wished he'd been more stubborn, insisted she leave with him. Maybe then she wouldn't have carried all of this by herself. Maybe he could have been there through the nightmares.

While she was gone, Adolphus started packing her things into her backpack. That's when he noticed a small bottle of pills buried at the bottom. He picked it up, read the label, and his heart sank. He put the bottle back, pretending he hadn't seen a thing, and waited for her to come out.

Laurinda came out looking more composed. Together they left the room. Adolphus suggested they check out of the hotel, and Laurinda agreed. Hand in hand, they strolled through the nearly empty streets, hoping to find somewhere that would satisfy their hunger.

They wandered past a row of busy restaurants and food stalls, lights twinkling in the night. Laurinda stopped in front of a bustling spot with barbecue, skewers, spicy hotpot, and all kinds of stir-fried seafood.

Her eyes sparkled as she looked up at Adolphus, silently asking what he thought.

He melted under that look. He tapped her nose, his voice warm but a little helpless. "Alright, we can eat here. But you've had way too much spicy food lately, so let's keep it on the mild side, okay?"

"Sure. You order, I'll go with whatever you pick."

If Adolphus was willing to compromise, she figured she could, too. As long as she got to eat, she didn't mind dialing down the spice.

Hand in hand, they went inside. Adolphus ordered plenty of dishes he knew she liked.

Laurinda's smile lit up her whole face, her eyes turning into little crescents. It felt like the dark cloud over her finally lifted. Maybe those famous doctors were onto something, she thought. Being in a healthy relationship really did make you happier.

While they waited for their food, a noisy group shuffled in from outside.

Laurinda spotted the guy leading them right away. He was Jeniffer's younger brother.

"Daniel, where could your sister have gone? We've been looking all afternoon and all night. Did she just vanish into thin air?" one of his friends complained.

"Yeah, Daniel, didn't you say your sister had a ton of money? You don't think she bailed just so she wouldn't have to buy you that apartment, do you? Jane's still waiting to get married and you can't tie the knot without a place to live if you miss this chance, who knows when the next one will come?" another piped up.

"Honestly, Daniel, I never believed her when she came back and promised to buy you a place. She lived it up with the Austin family Kall those years and never offered before. Now that the Austins are done for wheres

the supposed to get the money? I think she was just stringing you along, and when you pressed her, she ran."

"Look, I'm not trying to cause trouble," someone else chimed in, "but that driver, Faust, worked for Jeniffer's family for a few years and still managed to buy land and build a house back home. All you want is a nice apartment. That's nothing to her. And she still wouldn't do it."

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[ 567 words ]

"Oh, enough already. Are you eating or not? If not, just leave!"

Daniel finally lost his temper. Of course he knew Jeniffer was playing him, but he just couldn't let it go.

Jeniffer had stashed all her money in her son's overseas account. She never planned to help the family. In her mind, they were just dead weight.

To the outside world, she always claimed to be an orphan. The cash she sent her parents every month was hush money, nothing more.

Now, she didn't even want to pay that. Daniel couldn't accept it.

If he couldn't get money from Jeniffer, he'd go after her son. One way or another, he was getting the cash for that house.

Laurinda listened in while she ate, totally absorbed. She had no idea Jeniffer's drama was this juicy.

Adolphus saw the happy look on her face and spoke gently. "Eat a little faster, or your food will get cold."

The restaurant owner happened to walk by just then and overheard him. She came over, smiling.

"It's fine to eat slowly, don't rush her," she said warmly. "If your food gets cold, just ask a server and we'll heat it up for you. Do you want to try our vinegar pepper tofu? It's hot and really delicious."

Laurinda's eyes lit up at the mention of vinegar pepper tofu. She nodded right away. That was exactly what she'd been missing—a perfect side for barbecue.

"Yes, please. Thanks for the tip! I hope your business keeps booming."

The owner laughed. "You're such a sweet talker. This bowl's on the house. I'll tell the kitchen to make it right now."

"Thank you," Laurinda said, her eyes sparkling. The owner felt so delighted, she almost wanted to bring out another dish for her.

After Laurinda finished eating and had her fill of gossip, she left the restaurant with Adolphus, practically skipping.

Once they walked out of the busy food street, Adolphus led her to a Rolls-Royce parked nearby.

Sitting in the car, Laurinda was a bit surprised. She hadn't expected Adolphus to have connections in such a remote place.

He caught the curiosity in her eyes and explained patiently, "The Lane a branch office in this

Family

Wavelet

city Getting a car isn't a big deal."

She checked out the car's interior. It was nice, but not flashy, which matched what he said.

Laurinda straightened up and looked at him, raising her brows. "Aren't you curious about what I'm doing here?"

"I was about to ask, but I don't think it's something you did. I was just thinking about how to bring it up."

Adolphus's eyes were deep, always soft when he looked at her.

Every time she caught that look, Laurinda felt this wild urge to kiss him.

She cleared her throat and looked away, trying to sound casual.

"I was super annoyed that day. The kind of annoyed where you want to do something crazy. The school is my last straw, and when I heard Jeniffer got The Blair Family to

cause trouble there to

take care of her myself."

"So, I bought a ticket and flew over."

"I waited all night outside her building, finally saw her leave, but before I could do anything, someone else showed up and took her away."

"I was exhausted, so I found a hotel and crashed. Next thing I knew, you showed up."

Adolphus listened to her tell the

whole story as if it were nothing, and

thought about how frantic the guys the guys at Apex had been. He let out as

helpless sigh and pulled her gently into his arms.

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## Chapter 153

[ 696 words ]

"You have no idea how much you freaked everyone out when you suddenly left school and stopped answering your phone," he said. "Irvin was so stressed he actually broke out in cold sores. Poor guy. He used to be such a cute kid, now his face is all messed up."

Laurinda imagined Irvin with blisters on his lips and couldn't help but laugh. The thought was just too ridiculous.

"So, did you contact them?"

"I let them know you were safe as soon as I could. Irvin said your desk mate cried when she heard. And at dinner that night, she got so mad she knocked over the lunch trays of those kids who were sticking up for Bella."

Adolphus pulled out his phone and handed it to Laurinda, letting her read Irvin's message.

There was a flicker of emotion in Laurinda's eyes as she finished reading. It was small, but it was there.

"Class Three is really special," she said quietly. "My reputation at school was always terrible. Even back in middle school, there were all these rumors. Some said I was dumb, some said I didn't have parents, some said I was just rich with no brains. I heard it all. Of course, there were people who wanted to be friends just because I'm Laurinda."

"But I hate drama. I didn't want to deal with anyone, didn't want to make friends, so people thought I was stuck up, cold... whatever. My reputation just got worse."

"But Class Three is different. There are a few kids from powerful families, but honestly, most of them are scholarship students the school brought in to look good. About eighty percent."

"They only care about studying. They just want to do well so they can help their families. They don't have time for rumors, and they don't look at me any differently. Most of them don't even realize I'm that Laurinda everyone gossips about."

"The longer I spent with them, the more I realized how amazing they are. They only trust what they see for themselves. They never listen to what other people say about me. With them, I actually feel safe."

"So I started organizing the cafeteria project, just to help their families earn a bit more and make life a little better."

"And somewhere along the way, I became the class favorite. No matter what the rest of the school says about me, they're always there for me. They're my safe place."

"I used to be the one looking out for them. Now they're stronger, and they're starting to stand up for me. It's honestly the sweetest thing."

Thinking about her classmates

having her back, and the cafeteria staff always going out of their way to welcome her, Laurinda felt a

gentle warmth in her chest

made

all her efforts feel worth it

"They're good to you because you're good to them. You deserve it," Adolphus said softly.

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her forehead. In his heart, he was grateful to those classmates, too.

He understood that their support was what kept Laurinda's spirit from being swallowed up by darkness.

By the time they got back to Apex, it was already three in the morning Adolphus hadn't bothered asking anyone to pick them up he just parked his car at the airport and drove Laurinda home himself.

Once they got inside, he told Laurinda to go take a shower. Meanwhile, he headed to the kitchen and made her a bowl of tomato noodles.

After her shower, Laurinda changed into pajamas and came out to see Adolphus sitting at the table. She joined him, taking a seat.

"That smells so good," she said, pretending to pinch a double chin she didn't have.

"If you keep spoiling me like this, I'm going to get fat."

Adolphus laughed and put

chopsticks in her hand. "A little extra

weight would be good for you.

You're so tiny, a strong breeze could carry you away, I'd rather not have to put bricks in carry oockets every time

you leave the house."

They both laughed, the mood light and easy.

As Laurinda ate her noodles, her eyes stung just a little. It felt so good to have someone who cared.

When she'd finished, Laurinda lay in her room and sent a message to Bonnie. Not long after, there was a gentle knock at the door.

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## Chapter 154

[ 645 words ]

She thought maybe Adolphus needed something, so she got out of bed and opened the door. There he stood in his pajamas, hugging a pillow to his chest.

"Can I sleep with you tonight? I swear I won't try anything. Just want to sleep, that's all."

His ears turned a little red as he said it. He might have been working hard to make things official between them, but he'd never actually imagined sharing a bed with her.

He just worried she might not sleep well by herself.

He couldn't do much, but he wanted to be there for her.

Laurinda leaned against the doorframe, a lazy grin tugging at her lips as she eyed him up and down. "You say you're all innocent, but look at your ears, Adolphus. They're bright red. Not very convincing."

Busted, Adolphus didn't even try to deny it. Still holding his pillow with one hand, he wrapped his other arm around her, lifted her up so she straddled his waist, and nudged the door shut with his foot. He carried her straight back to the bed.

Their eyes met, and Adolphus could feel the heat coming off her body. He swallowed, his throat tight.

"We should really sleep now. Seriously. If we don't, I might actually explode."

He closed his eyes, pulling Laurinda close while she giggled like she didn't have a care in the world. He tried to keep his mind blank, silently scolding himself for walking right into this situation.

Laurinda rolled over in his arms and sprawled on his chest, her fingers sneaking under his shirt to draw lazy circles on his skin.

The silk pajamas barely kept out the warmth between them. As she felt his body heat climb, she pressed her lips close to his ear and whispered, "You know, I could help you out..."

Her words lit up his brain like fireworks and for a second, he just blanked out completely.

Adolphus forced himself to snap out of it, his voice rough. "You... I... I'll just go take a cold shower, okay?"

He practically bolted from the room. Laurinda flopped onto the bed, laughing so hard she could barely breathe. He was just too cute like this.

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Laurinda didn't wake up until noon. She was warm and comfortable, wrapped up in Adolphus's arms. When she opened her eyes, the first

think

saw was the stubble on

his chin. She couldn't help but reach up and touch it.

Adolphus let out a low, sleepy groan, clearly annoyed at having his dream interrupted.

Laurinda grinned and, feeling playful, leaned up and gave his chin a tiny bite. He sucked in a sharp breath, his arms tightening around her.

He held back, then buried his face in her neck and mumbled, "Let's just sleep a little longer. I'm exhausted."

She hugged his fuzzy head, said okay, and closed her eyes again.

That night, she'd finally slept soundly, without a single nightmare of blood or violence.

When they finally got up, it was already three in the afternoon. Adolphus made her spicy boiled

It wasn't

beef just like she want with

too hot, but Laurinda still ate with real satisfaction.

After they finished eating, Adolphus handed her some clothes he'd set out and told her to go change in the walk-in closet.

"Where are we going?" Laurinda asked, holding the clothes against her chest as she sat on the sofa, looking totally lost.

She really had no idea what he was planning. Was he taking her out for New Year's Eve or something?

"Are we going out for New Year's? Do you have friends here in Apex?"

"No, not for New Year's. I'm just taking you somewhere. Go get changed, quick."

Since he clearly wasn't going to say more, Laurinda didn't push. She took the clothes and went to change, then headed out with him.

Adolphus drove, and the car was stocked with water and snacks. Laurinda peeked in one of the bags, curiosity getting the better of her.

"Where are we going? Why'd you pack snacks? Is it far?"

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## Chapter 155

[ 646 words ]

"Yeah, it's a bit far. Probably a little over two hours. If you get bored, you can play some games or watch a show."

Laurinda listened, but his answer just made her even more curious. She racked her brain, trying to remember if there was any good place to spend New Year's within that distance, but nothing came to mind.

She sat in the passenger seat, not interested in games or TV. Instead, she and Adolphus made small talk, chatting about whatever popped into their heads.

They covered a lot of ground in those hours. Laurinda learned more about what was happening in Cabinda and got updated on all the latest news about the James family.

The traffic was heavier than usual, and it ended up taking Adolphus nearly three hours before they finally reached the base of a mountain. By then, the sky was already dark. He took Laurinda's hand as they stepped out of the car.

"Where are we?" she asked, looking around at the unfamiliar place. She had grown up in Apex her whole life, and she couldn't believe she'd never heard of this spot.

"It's a monastery," Adolphus said. "You keep dreaming about your parents because you haven't really moved on from what happened. And you still worry about them. We can

copy some Buddhist scriptures for them and ask the abbot to pray, so they can rest in peace."

Laurinda stared up at him, half in shock. She'd never thought of dealing with her grief this way and definitely didn't expect Adolphus to suggest it.

"Do you really think that could help?"

"If you're sincere, maybe it will. Let's try."

He held her hand as they started up the mountain trail. Laurinda trailed behind him, breathing in the crisp mountain air, feeling lighter with every step. It was almost like her soul was getting a gentle cleanse.

At the top, they knocked on the monastery gate. A young monk came and led them into a simple, peaceful room.

"Everything you need has been prepared," the monk said kindly. "Tomorrow, the abbot will personally chant for your departed loved ones and help them find peace."

"Thank you so much."

Adolphus handed him a small donation box he'd brought along. "Just a little something for incense."

"Thank you. If you need anything, just knock on the door next to this one." "Alright, we will."

Once the monk left, Adolphus and Laurinda sat down together. They spent the whole night quietly copying scriptures, the silence broken by the sound of their pens scratching the paper.

When the first sunlight slipped through the window, Laurinda finally put down her pen and stretched, feeling her shoulders ache a little.

"Gosh, I haven't written this much in forever."

Adolphus glanced over at her work. Her handwriting was strong and bold, every stroke confident and graceful. You could tell she'd practiced calligraphy.

"Your handwriting here looks nothing like what you write on your exams."

"Of course it doesn't," Laurinda

replied, rolling her eyes. "If I wrote this nicely on my test papers and still got a low score that'd be even more embarrassing, right?"

Talking about exams made her remember something. She realized she hadn't told Adolphus her latest results yet.

"Wait, let me tell you the good news. I scored one ninety-eight on the standardized test this time. Second-to-last in the whole grade!"

"Second-to-last? Weren't you always at the very bottom?"

Laurinda pouted, still annoyed. She couldn't believe Felice had skipped the exam and stolen her spot as the last place in the grade.

She told Adolphus everything that happened on exam day. He listened, frowning a little, surprised to hear how it all tied back to him.

"So you just let her get away with that?"

"Of course not. I've already got a plan. When finals come, I just won't show up. Then I'll be last again, no contest."

Laurinda lifted her chin, looking all smug and proud of herself. Adolphus tried not to laugh, but he nodded anyway.

"Yeah, that sounds like a genius plan."

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## Chapter 156

[ 596 words ]

A young monk knocked gently at the door. Adolphus stood and opened it, greeting him with a respectful nod, hands pressed together.

"Sir, lunch is ready. After the meal, the head monk will start the chanting session. We ask you both to join. The chanting takes a while, so you might want to get ready in advance."

"Thank you for letting us know. Here are the scriptures we copied," Laurinda replied, handing over the pages.

The monk accepted them and led the way to the dining hall, explaining the rules as they walked. "Take only what you can finish. No wasting food."

It was Laurinda's first time trying a monastery meal, and she was surprised by how good everything tasted. She ended up eating more than she expected.

When the meal was over, she lingered at the exit, still a little reluctant to leave. She leaned close to Adolphus and whispered, "Can we go home after lunch?"

He couldn't help but smile at how much she'd enjoyed herself. "They serve two meals a day. The next one isn't until three. Do you really want to wait that long?"

"No, that's too late. Never mind," Laurinda said, shaking her head. Suddenly, her eyes lit up and she caught his sleeve. "Wait. I almost forgot something important."

She straightened, looking at him with a bright, sincere smile. "Adolphus, it's a new year starting today. Happy New Year. I hope everything goes smoothly for you from now on."

Adolphus looked into her smiling face and felt something soften inside. He leaned in, meeting her gaze.

"Happy New Year, Laurinda. And not just today. I want you to be happy every day from now on."

"I will. We both will. Everything's going to work out," she said, giving his hand a squeeze. She caught her own reflection in his eyes and felt a weight lift from her shoulders. She was really moving on.

It was Adolphus who had helped her get there.

The chanting session lasted a long

time. By the time it ended, the afternoon meal was already being served. After they finished eating, Laurinda and Adolphus left the temple behind.

When their car pulled into the manor, the butler heard the engine and hurried outside, meeting them by the car.

Adolphus stepped out first and held a finger to his lips, asking for quiet. He opened the door, bent down, and carefully scooped Laurinda up in his arms.

"She's..."

"She's fine, just tired. I'll take her upstairs to rest," Adolphus explained, giving the butler a reassuring look.

He carried Laurinda up the stairs, took her to her room, helped her out of her coat, and tucked her into bed. He brushed her forehead with a soft kiss.

"Get some rest."

He quietly closed the door behind him, knowing people were waiting for an update. When he headed downstairs, he found Bonnie, Irvin, and York in the living room, along with a young woman he hadn't seen, before.

"She's okay," he said. "She went to a nearby city for a while. She was feeling down and turned her phone off."

"Can I see her? I promise I won't wake her," Shirley asked softly. She seemed nervous with Adolphus but was still worried about Laurinda.

"Go ahead. Irvin, take her up," Adolphus said, looking at Irvin.

Irvin got the message right away. He nodded and led Shirley upstairs.

York and Bonnie were both looking like they had questions. Adolphus nodded toward the study. "Let's talk in there."

The three headed into the study, the butler following with a tray of tea. He'd looked after Laurinda for years and knew that this time of year, always left her feeling low. He wanted to know what had happened too.

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## Chapter 157

[ 617 words ]

"She went to Emberfall to go after Jeniffer, but before she could make a move, another group showed up and took Jeniffer away. I had someone check it out. It was Baal's people."

York barely reacted to the mention of Baal. He had noticed for a while now that Baal had a weird interest in Laurinda and had already guessed a few things.

Bonnie caught the way York stayed so calm and jabbed him in the chest with her elbow. "Come on, you know something, don't you? What's the story with Baal and Laurinda? I saw him waiting for her outside the school on the security cameras. Who is he, really?"

York clutched his chest, putting on a dramatic face. "You have no idea how strong you are. I'm not going to die fighting enemies, I'll die from you beating me up first."

Bonnie didn't think she'd hit him that hard. She opened her mouth to argue, but York shot her a look, trying to signal something. She looked away and changed the subject.

"So, how's Laurinda? Did the Emberfall mess get sorted out?"

Adolphus rubbed his temples and let out a tired sigh, ignoring whatever was going on with York and Bonnie. "No one else is coming for Laurinda. Baal's people already took the Blair family and Jeniffer. Whatever's left is Jeniffer's family drama, nothing that should bother Laurinda. That's it. You two can go back to what you were doing."

Adolphus stood up and left the study. The butler followed, asking if he should prepare something for him and Laurinda to eat.

Bonnie stayed in her chair, staring at York, who was still pretending his chest hurt. "Oh, please, cut it out. Adolphus totally saw your little signal. If he can track down Laurinda, there's nothing he doesn't know. Why are you being all mysterious?"

York dropped his act, pulled a chair closer, and lowered his voice. "He might actually not know this one. I'm not about to say it in front of him. It's not exactly something to brag about Baal's interest in Laurinda might have to do with her mom."

"Wait, what? Baal's already married, isn't he? His oldest son is three years older than Laurinda. How does that even make sense? Are you sure you're not mixing things up?"

Bonnie looked genuinely shocked. She'd never met Laurinda's mother, but just from Laurinda's looks, it was obvious her mom must have been gorgeous: Did Baal really have thing for married women?

York saw the

e look on her face and

knew exactly what she was thinking. He reached over and tapped her gently on the head. "Don't go making up wild stories. Laurinda and are just guessing. There's no proof. That's also why Laurinda avoids him. Seriously, don't bring this up with her. She'll flip out."

"Okay, okay, relax. I'm not going to ask her," Bonnie promised. She understood how Laurinda felt about her parents. That was sacred ground, and she would never touch it.

"But honestly, how do you think Laurinda is holding up? Should we get more people to keep an eye on her? She seems pretty unstable lately."

"No need. Adolphus treats her like she's the most precious thing in the world. With him around, she's safe. Anyway, I've got stuff to deal with, so I'm heading out."

York stood up, and Bonnie quickly followed him. She didn't want to hang around either, just in case Laurinda caught her and started grilling her about Fabian.

As they left the study, they spotted Laurinda in the living room, lounging against Adolphus, looking completely relaxed. The two of them seemed even closer than before.

York and Bonnie glanced at each other at the same time. The look they shared said it all. Something was definitely up between those two.

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[ 594 words ]

Laurinda watched them sneaking around and asked quietly, "You two heading out?"

She didn't seem surprised by their attempt to dodge her. Her eyes lingered on both of them, like she had something on her mind.

"We're not leaving. We're just hungry, about to ask the butler if there's anything to eat. Why, are Irvin and Shirley going somewhere? I can walk them out if they are."

Bonnie definitely wasn't going to admit she was trying to escape. If Laurinda found out she'd been avoiding her on purpose, coming back next time would be nearly impossible.

"Is that so?"

Laurinda narrowed her eyes, smiling, but the smile didn't quite reach her eyes. The air in the room tightened, and Bonnie and York both felt a chill run down their spines for not telling the truth.

Bonnie's mind raced, already plotting how to get back in Laurinda's good graces. If she had to, she'd spill the beans about her plan for Fabian.

"Well..."

Laurinda suddenly grinned. "Come on, I'm just teasing you. There's still food in the kitchen. Go help yourselves. It's New Year's. Unless you've got something really important, stay and celebrate with us."

Laurinda didn't have many people she truly cared about. Her friends were scattered all over, but the ones she treasured most were right here. She wanted to make the most of it.

With Laurinda's invitation, York and Bonnie both agreed right away. Even if there was something urgent, they weren't about to leave today.

Soon everyone was sitting together, sharing a few drinks, and the mood brightened up right away.

Laurinda listened to York trying to talk Irvin into joining him at the lab. She glanced at Adolphus and caught him watching her. Their eyes met, and Laurinda felt her cheeks warm.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Because I want to. How are you feeling? Are you tired?"

Adolphus worried she hadn't rested enough, but seeing her so happy with everyone, he just stayed close by her side.

"I'm okay. Slept for ages in the car. But you look like you haven't slept at all. You should get some real rest later."

Irvin set down a plate of cherries in front of her. "Since when did you start reading faces, Laurinda?" He was tempted by York's idea, but wanted Laurinda's advice.

"I've always known how. And I can tell you want to check out the lab."

Irvin laughed. "You got me. I do want to take a look, but York's project will take forever. I'm worried it'll mess with my college entrance exams."

He knew exactly what the Main family wanted from him. The plan was for him to get into one of Cabinda's top four research institutes through the official exam. If the family found out he'd risked that just to work in a lab, they'd give his mom endless grief.

"There are other ways into

university. You could aim for a guaranteed spot. There's a national biology competition, in March. If you're confident, give it a shot. There are three guaranteed admissions up for grabs."

Irvin and Shirley both frowned in surprise. They hadn't expected Laurinda to know about the March competition.

"Do you think... I could actually pull it off?"

Irvin wasn't sure he was good enough. The competition would be brutal. It just didn't seem as safe as the exams.

"You can do it," Adolphus said from

beside them. His voice was calm but to Irvin it felt like a weight lifted. He knew just how capable Adolphus was. "Just do your best in the Competition. I'll handle the rest."

Irvin nodded, finally feeling reassured. "Alright. I'll talk to my teacher tomorrow and go to the lab with York."

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## Chapter 159

[ 640 words ]

Irvin's eyes sparkled. The last time Laurinda asked him to run an experiment, he'd already guessed what direction the project was headed. He'd been hooked ever since. Getting to work on it would feel like a real achievement for him.

Shirley listened to them talk, but honestly, she couldn't follow a thing. The gap between her and them felt massive.

Before she arrived, she'd actually been worrying about Laurinda, wondering if she should invite her to stay at her place for a bit. But then she walked into the manor and found out it belonged to Laurinda. That completely shattered everything she'd pictured.

Laurinda wasn't just doing okay. She was living the good life. Actually, way better than just good.

"What's on your mind?"

Laurinda noticed Shirley zoning out and snapped her fingers in front of her.

"Nothing... I'm just kind of shocked. I never realized you all had so many secrets."

Laurinda burst out laughing at Shirley's dazed look. She sat up, reached over, and pinched Shirley's cheek, her voice full of affection.

"What's wrong? Is your dad not important enough for you anymore? Go home and push Odom to work harder."

"Oh, come on, Laurinda. My dad's over fifty. How much harder do you want him to try?"

"Fifty is still young. I heard Odom's getting transferred to Cabinda this year. When you get into university there, your family can see each other all the time."

Shirley's dad's transfer wasn't a secret. He'd already started handing over his work. Shirley nodded.

"Yeah, he's leaving after the handover, before the Spring Festival. But my mom, my brother, and I are staying in Apex. We'll probably all move to Cabinda after I finish my college entrance exams."

"That works too. Just keep at it and you'll get into the program you want."

Shirley's exam scores were out. With her results so far, she could easily get into The Cabinda University, but the finance program needed a few more points. She'd have to work harder.

After chatting for a while, Laurinda pulled everyone into a game of cards. The moment the butler heard "cards," he was the first one out the door.

He refused to play with Laurinda. Every time he did, his little savings stash took a major hit.

They played until way past midnight.

By the end, both Shirley and Irvine

had their faces covered in strips of paper from losing so much.

Laurinda was just as tired and waved them off.

"I'm done. I can't stay up anymore. Keep playing if you want, but I'm going to bed."

"I'm sleeping with Laurinda!" Shirley shouted, latching onto Laurinda's arm. Finally, the endless card game was over.

She felt completely dazed. She'd always thought of herself as smart, but after just one night, she realized she didn't have a clue it was like they always knew what cards she was holding.

Irvin lost just as badly as she did, but she knew he was letting her win on purpose to make her feel better.

Honestly, she felt like crying. Who knew playing cards could make someone question their whole life?

"Alright, Shirley and I are heading upstairs. You guys keep going if you want."

Laurinda led Shirley upstairs. Adolphus watched her leave, then got up too.

"I'm heading to bed as well. You all should get some rest soon."

The three left in the living room glanced at each other, confused about why Adolphus suddenly seemed so down.

\*\*\*

The new year slipped by quietly, and everyone got back to their routines.

Laurinda stepped out of the study when she heard the front door open.

She looked up and saw Adolphus

who she hadn't seen in three days

"Why didn't you let me know you were coming back?"

Laurinda walked over, but Adolphus moved aside a little. "I'm freezing. Let me warm up before I hug you."

Hearing that, she took a step back. She hated the cold and really didn't want his icy chill anywhere near her.

"So? Did you get everything sorted out?"

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## Chapter 160

[ 711 words ]

"Yeah, I'm done with work. The Lane family had some trouble with a shipment at the port, but it's all sorted now. I actually ran into Jeniffer and the Blairs while I was there."

Adolphus lingered by the fireplace, letting the warmth chase away the last of the cold from his coat. When he was finally comfortable, he walked over to Laurinda, scooped her up in his arms, and carried her straight to the sofa in the living room.

Laurinda wrapped her arms around his neck, already feeling her curiosity kick in. Ever since she found out Baal was involved, she hadn't bothered to keep tabs on what happened next. But now, she wanted to know exactly what Baal had done.

"So... did they get sent away?"

"Pretty much. I had Foley look into it. Turns out those people were shipped off to the NF Mine for forced labor. Baal doesn't play around."

"Knew it. Baal's definitely bad news."

A sharp, cold glint flickered in Laurinda's eyes. She always suspected there was a reason her father refused to talk about Baal.

Things were definitely getting interesting. She wondered if Baal could actually take down Finn. If he did, that would save her a whole lot of trouble.

"And the Baker family? They're a mess too. Adelaide and Graham ran off together. They even got a hundred-year marriage contract in Ireland."

Laurinda's mouth dropped open in shock.

She seriously never saw that coming. Those two together, and with a contract like that? Had they completely lost it?

"So, what happens to the Baker family now?"

"I don't know the details. But I do know Baal managed to steal a contract from the Gates family. It's tied to a project they're doing with Frostford. If Finn can't fix this, the losses will be huge."

Laurinda leaned against Adolphus's shoulder, her big, pretty eyes darting as she started plotting. She was already thinking about how to stir up even more trouble for the Gates Group.

She hopped off his lap and stretched. "I need to talk to York about something. You should go upstairs and wash up. Dinner's almost ready."

Adolphus watched her go, smiling to himself at the mischievous glint in her eyes. He shook his head fondly, then headed upstairs.

\*\*\*

York's voice came crackling through the phone, full of disbelief. "Hold on, what did you just say? You want to launch our product ahead of schedule?"

"Yep. The Gates family is about to release some fancy new software right before the Spring Festival. So why not beat them to the punch? Ours way better anyway. If we get there first, their new faunch is toast The Gates family will lose a lot more than they think."

York stared at the test report on his desk, jaw clenched.

"Give me a week. I'll talk to the engineers and see what we can do."

"Deal. If you run into any problems, just let me know. And don't worry, promise won't be lazy this time. Laurinda said, sounding totally sincere.

York almost laughed. Normally, getting her to do anything required endless begging and bribes. Now she was offering to help before he even asked.

People always seemed to have all the energy in the world when it came to causing trouble.

"Alright then, I won't hold back. I just picked up a job on the dark web. Take care of it for me, will you?". Yorkstone was teasing if he was going to be busy she might as well be busy too.

"No problem. I'll check it out soon. You get back to work. I won't bug you anymore."

Laurinda hung up and wasted no time. She logged into York's dark web account and started going through the job details.

After reading the message, she let out a frustrated sigh and cursed under her breath.

She could just tell York had set this up for her. That job was clearly meant for her to take.

\*\*\*

At dinner, Laurinda kept sneaking glances at Adolphus. He noticed, picked up a piece of pork rib, and put it in her bowl with a soft chuckle.

"If you've got something to say, just say it. I might not agree with you, but I'll do my best to respect your decision."

His words made her light up instantly. She put down her chopsticks, straightened up, and got a little more serious.

"I need to go on a trip. To Northland."

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## chapter 161

"Northland?"

Adolphus repeated the name, almost like he needed to hear it twice to believe it. Why would Laurinda go somewhere like that?

"Yeah, I've got some things to take care of," Laurinda said, keeping her tone casual.

She really didn't want to go into details with Adolphus, but she knew if she didn't explain herself, he'd never let her leave.

Laurinda lowered her gaze, thinking hard about what excuse would work, something that wouldn't give away what she was really up to.

Adolphus caught the hesitation and let out a quiet sigh. "I'll go with you."

"No, it's better if I go alone. Too many people might attract attention. I know some jewelers over there, they can help me out."

She shut him down right away. From the start, she never planned on bringing him along. Northland was kind of her old turf, and she wanted to keep it that way.

Adolphus noticed her reluctance and decided not to push her. He just sighed again, softer this time.

"So when are you leaving? And how long will you be gone?"

"My flight's after midnight. If everything goes well, I'll be back in a week, maybe two at most."

"That soon?" Adolphus frowned, not ready for her to be gone so suddenly. Then he remembered the injuries she'd just recovered from.

"You're not going to end up hurt again, are you?"

He held his breath, worried she'd end up in danger. The thought of something happening to her made his chest tight.

"I'll be fine. It's just something small, nothing serious." Laurinda sounded so breezy about it, like it was no big deal at all. She really didn't see any risk; worst case, it'd just take up some of her time.

Handling the paperwork was simple for her. The only tricky part was getting people and goods back, but she had other contacts who could help.

Once Adolphus was sure Laurinda wasn't just pretending to be strong, he relaxed a bit, though he still didn't want her to go.

"I'll drive you to the airport later," he said quietly.

"Okay," Laurinda replied, her tone light. She grinned and slipped a piece of beef onto his plate. "Try this. My chef's really proud of it."

Adolphus watched her, the way she tried to cheer him up, and for a moment that heavy feeling in his chest faded. He smiled back at her, a little softer.

"Honestly, is there anything your chef isn't amazing at? The butler told me his family used to cook for royalty."

Adolphus was from Cabinda, and he

knew a thing or two about food. The first bite had tasted f

wasn't surprised by the chef's impressive background.

After dinner, Adolphus helped Laurinda pack her bags. When she was almost finished, he handed her a small bottle of pills and tucked it into her suitcase.

"I made these for you. Take them on time, okay? They'll help you heal."

"I know, I will." This time, Laurinda didn't argue. She really did want to get healthy, to be able to live her life well.

She looked at him, her eyes shining. Adolphus felt like a burst of sunlight in her

world. For the first time, she wanted to live for herself.

At the airport, Adolphus walked her

to the gate. There was no big, emotional goodbye, just a quiet exchange of reminders to stay safe and look after themselves.

Once Laurinda boarded, she asked a flight attendant for a blanket, closed her eyes, and drifted off to sleep. She only woke up when the landing... announcement came on.

As she walked out of the airport, a tall man with mixed features appeared and took

her suitcase like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Laurinda, do you want to go to the branch first or the hotel? I've set up your meeting for tomorrow at three."

Laurinda glanced at the clock in the terminal and adjusted her watch to match the local time. She still had plenty of time to spare.

## - Chapter 162

### Chapter 162

[ 624 words ]

"Let's head to the hotel so I can freshen up. The gem market opens today and I want to check it out soon."

"Sure, I'll take you over."

Leo led Laurinda to a sleek van and dropped her off at the hotel. He waited for her in the lobby, making sure she had some food to eat while she got ready. Thoughtful as always.

Laurinda changed quickly and came downstairs. She didn't waste any time after eating, heading straight for the gem market.

Northland's gem market was the biggest in the area. Jewelers from nearby countries all came here to buy raw stones and jade. On opening day, the place was absolutely packed. Laurinda squeezed through the crowd, taking everything in, until something caught her eye—a huge rough stone sitting in a corner, away from the main displays.

She managed to make her way over, crouched down, and started examining the stone's surface. When she confirmed it was black jade, she pulled a high-powered flashlight from her backpack and shined it over the stone, checking it from every angle.

Her careful inspection drew a crowd, and soon people around her were talking, voices rising in curiosity and skepticism.

Laurinda couldn't understand the local language. She signaled to Leo, leaning in to speak quietly. "Can you find a local interpreter for me? And bring over the owner of this stone. I want to buy it."

Someone in the crowd understood Mandarin and laughed out loud when he heard Laurinda wanted to buy what he thought was a worthless rock.

The laugh was loud, cutting through the noise. Laurinda heard it and looked up, catching the mocking look in the man's eyes.

That only made her more curious. What were they saying about this stone? Did they really think it was useless?

While Laurinda was still focused on the stone, Leo returned with a local interpreter and the owner of the rough stone.

The owner looked hopeful, expecting a big sale. When he saw Laurinda tapping and inspecting what he considered junk, his face fell. He couldn't stop himself from thinking, She must be a total amateur just pretending she knows what she's doing.

"Laurinda, this is the owner. You can tell him what you need," Leo said.

Laurinda nodded politely to the owner and pointed at the stone near her feet. "I want this one. What's your price?"

The interpreter relayed her words. The owner looked at her like she was out of her mind. In his head, he thought Laurinda was crazy—who would actually want to buy something that was nothing but a guaranteed loss? It made no sense.

"You sure you want this one? It's been sitting here almost ten years. I don't even remember which mine my dad got it from. Nobody's ever wanted it. If you really want it, just pay the cost price, three and a half million."

The price was way lower than Laurinda expected. She frowned a little but didn't say anything.

The owner saw her reaction and guessed the price was still too high. He let out a sigh. "Alright, just give me three million and take it. Honestly, I don't want it anymore. But just so you know, our rule is

once you buy it, it's yours win or lose, it's got nothing to do with me."

Laurinda didn't really get why he lowered the price himself, but she respected his decision and nodded.

"Deal. Please have it packed up for me. Also, do you have any other material good for making bracelets or dragon pendants? I'd like to buy two more pieces."

"Of course, come with me."

Feeling a little guilty for selling

Laurinda what he thought was useless, the owner took her straight to his storeroom where he kept his best jade. Laurinda held up her

flashlight, examining each piece with the practiced eye of a true expert.

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[ 657 words ]

Laurinda's careful way of looking over the stones made the shop owner crack a smile. She was an odd one, he thought. She bought the so-called junk piece without hesitation, yet she picked through his best stones like she was hunting for flaws. He really couldn't figure her out.

While the owner watched, full of questions, Laurinda finally picked out two top- quality pieces.

"These two," she said.

"You have a sharp eye. Both together are eight million. With the rough stone you bought earlier, that brings you to eleven million. How would you like to pay?"

"Card," Laurinda replied.

The price was exactly what she expected, so she didn't bother bargaining. She just followed the owner and paid.

The other shopkeepers watching from the side couldn't help feeling a little jealous. Here was a customer who didn't even try to haggle. They all wished they had more clients like her, people who spent big without blinking.

Once she finished shopping, Laurinda went back to her hotel. Leo made sure everything, including the rough stone and the other jade, got shipped back home.

"Laurinda, some of the chapter heads want to meet you. Do you want to come back for dinner tonight?" Leo asked.

"Not tonight. I'll come once I finish things up here," she said.

She and Leo chatted a bit more about the next day's plans, then Laurinda returned to her room. Her phone was full of missed calls from someone she couldn't ignore much longer. If she didn't call back soon, he might just show up in person.

She connected the video call. Adolphus was sitting in his car. Laurinda looked at him, a little confused. "Are you out somewhere?"

"Yeah, still wrapping up a few things. How's it going over there?" Adolphus replied, watching her closely to see if she was okay, if she'd been sleeping well.

"I'm good. After I landed, I cleaned up and visited the local jade market. Picked up a few pieces."

"That kind of thing can get complicated. Be careful while you're out. Let me know when you're heading back, I'll come pick you up at the airport."

"Got it. I should go. I need another shower. The crowds were unreal, I feel gross."

Adolphus laughed at her scrunched-up face. "Go on, then. Just remember to eat something and rest."

"I will, promise."

Laurinda showered and passed out, not waking up until noon the next day.

After getting herself together, she walked out to the hotel lobby and spotted Leo standing there along with a handsome guy with blond hair and blue eyes.

The guy saw Laurinda and immediately went in for a hug, but she stepped away before he could get close.

"Why did you bring him?" she asked Leo, her tone just a little accusing.

She was here for work, not to see friends. The last thing she needed was more distractions.

"Leo didn't bring me. I came on my own after seeing your message. Laurinda, you're so cold. If I hadn't come here to look for jade, I wouldn't have even known you were here. Do you have any idea how

much I've suffered without your

design drafts? When are you finally

going to send them to me?"

Laurinda frowned at his theatrics. It hit her that she really hadn't handed in any sketches for ages.

Not that it was all her fault. She'd been sleeping like a rock lately, not staying up late to draw like she used to.

"I'll get to it after I'm back. I'm still busy here, so I don't have time to sketch right now..."

She paused, remembering what Henry just said, and felt even more confused.

"Wait, why are you out here buying jade anyway? Our collection is all diamonds. Is there a problem getting diamonds?"

"No, that's not it. We're planning to stay in the Cabinda market

long-term. People here love jade way more than diamonds. I wanted to talk to you about it. I'm thinking of launching a special New Year's collection something with a classic Wibe, super high end, with emerald as the main feature. What do you think?"

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## Chapter 164

[ 610 words ]

As Henry shared his thoughts, Laurinda felt a spark of excitement. The project sounded like it could really work. She'd actually been toying with the same idea herself, thinking about designing a set of jade jewelry when she was picking out materials. It turned out Henry was on the exact same page as her.

"How long are you staying?" she asked.

"A week, tops. That's all I've got. The Spring Festival is just two months away, and our new collection needs to hit the shelves a full two weeks before the holiday. That gives us, what, a month at most."

"Laurinda, Queen isn't just my brand, you know. I need you to step up a bit..."

Hearing Henry's gentle accusation, Laurinda felt her cheeks get hot. She rubbed her nose, suddenly aware that she'd really been slacking off lately. With forty-nine percent of the company, she should be pulling her weight.

"Um... okay, here's the plan. Before you leave, I'll have a set of designs ready for you. You just got here, right? Did you find any good jade yet? If not, I can hook you up with a local supplier. I've got a contact on WeChat, he's pretty reliable."

That same supplier would nearly have a heart attack later, once he realized the naive girl he'd underestimated was actually his biggest client. He'd totally misread the situation and almost lost his golden goose.

Henry was clearly pleased with Laurinda's promise to send over the designs. He turned down her dinner invitation, grabbed the contact info, and headed straight for the jade market, determined not to waste another second.

Leo, meanwhile, couldn't help but feel uneasy whenever he remembered the raw jade purchase. He wasn't a local, but he could catch enough of the gossip to know that everyone thought Laurinda had bought a dud. Still, he kept his mouth shut. All he could do was sigh inside and admit that Queen's success was all thanks to Henry's hard work.

By three in the afternoon, Laurinda and Leo showed up at the abandoned factory where they'd agreed to meet. Laurinda glanced around at the empty, run-down place, then shot Leo a look.

"Are you sure we're not about to get murdered out here?" she joked, half-serious. She was here to solve a problem, not to end up in the middle of some crime scene.

"Relax. This place is ours now. I bought it just last week. Trust me, Laurinda, as long as I'm here, nothing is going to happen to you."

Leo puffed out his chest, trying to

sound confident. If anything

happened to Laurinda on his watch give

York would never

im and

the rest of the guys wouldn't let it slide either. He wasn't about to risk

her safety.

Just as he finished, a van pulled up to the factory gate. Six men with rifles stepped out, looking like they meant business.

Laurinda took in the scene, then glanced at Leo, raising an eyebrow. Was he still feeling so sure of himself?

Leo kept his cool and stepped in front of Laurinda protectively, eyes locked on a man following behind the armed group.

"Patton, you're not playing by the rules. We agreed-one person each. What's this supposed to be?"

The short, stocky man named Patton just smirked, clearly unimpressed by Leo. His eyes settled on Laurinda.

"So this is your technical expert? She doesn't look like much. Are you sure she can solve my problem? If she can't you're not getting your person or your goods."

Laurinda looked Patton up and down, sizing him up. He didn't strike her as someone who honored his word. She shrugged and replied, "Let's just see how it goes. can it, you deliver what you promised If not, you can go find someone else."

fix

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## Chapter 165

[ 669 words ]

"Are you messing with me? Every day you waste is money out of my pocket. If you can't get this done, I'll just sell you off to the compounds up north and make up my losses that way."

Patton shot Laurinda a furious glare, but the moment he saw her face, he paused, already sizing up how much she might be worth. Suddenly, he realized this deal wasn't a loss no matter how it turned out. He might even walk away with a nice bonus.

Laurinda noticed the way Patton looked her over, like she was some item up for auction. That look sparked a cold anger in her, but instead of showing it, she let another idea take hold, something far more entertaining.

"You want to know if I can do it? Why don't we just try and see?" she said, her voice calm and steady. "Let's go."

She stepped right up to Patton, eyes drifting to the rifle in the hand of the guy next to him. Patton caught her gaze. There wasn't a hint of fear in her, just a spark of curiosity. He found it oddly refreshing.

"What's the deal? You curious?"

"Not really. I just think your weapons are kind of outdated. You say you make all this money, but you can't afford anything better? These old things don't really suit your style."

Laurinda eyed the worn-out rifles with open disdain, trying to get a read on what kind of firepower Patton actually had. If all he had was this junk, she figured her odds just got a little better.

Patton's pride took a hit. He spat on the ground, muttering, "It's those damn arms dealers. They don't care about my business, say my orders are too small. But when I get bigger, they'll be chasing me for deals."

Laurinda almost laughed. Now she understood what kind of guy she was dealing with. This was going to get interesting.

"You think this is funny?" Patton snarled, pulling a handgun from his waistband and pressing it against Laurinda's head. He'd been mocked enough in his life, and he wasn't about to take it from some kid.

Leo's heart skipped a beat when Patton did that. Everyone knew what happened to the last person who

ried to threaten Lauring who

there

was probably a forest of weeds growing over that guy's grave by now.

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"Patton, cool it. Let's not do anything stupid," Leo said, hurrying forward and gently pushing Patton's hand down. "She's just a kid. She doesn't know any better. Put the gun away, alright?"

"Let's not waste any more time here," Leo added, trying to keep things moving. "You said it yourself—every minute we waste is money lost."

Patton looked at Laurinda's cold, unreadable face and assumed he'd finally scared her. With a satisfied grunt, he tucked the gun away and shot her a warning. "Watch yourself. Push

I've got a short fuse me, and

I'll toss you in with the gators."

Laurinda just stared at him, her eyes flat and cold, the look of someone who already knew how this story would end. If she didn't have bigger plans, Patton wouldn't be walking out of here alive.

A black hood was yanked over her head, and another over Leo's. Both of them were dragged into a waiting car.

It was impossible to tell how long they drove. When they finally stopped, Laurinda found herself in a compound surrounded by electric fencing. She took in everything she could.

"Don't bother looking around," someone barked. "Just do what you came here to do. When you're done, you can leave."

Laurinda didn't move. She lifted her head and fixed Patton with a lazy stare. "I want to see the people and the goods you took."

Patton was clearly thrown. He hadn't expected anyone to make demands here, on his turf. He flicked his half-lit cigarette to the ground and scowled.

"What makes you think I'm in a good mood? You think you can make demands? Stop wasting my time and get inside. If you try anything, don't care if you fix my problem or not. You're not walking out of here."

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## Chapter 166

[ 606 words ]

"Patton, we're already on your turf. Got a problem with us checking on the person we came for? If I can't be sure they're safe and the goods are fine, I can't help with whatever mess you've landed in."

Laurinda leaned against the car door, pulled a lollipop from her pocket, and unwrapped it with a lazy flick of her wrist. She popped it into her mouth, totally unfazed by Patton, acting like he was barely worth her attention.

Patton wasn't used to people like her. He glanced over at Leo, who looked tense and ready for anything. At least someone here still seemed to respect his authority. If not for that, Patton might have wondered if he'd lost his edge.

He was about to turn Laurinda down flat when someone rushed over and whispered urgently in his ear. Patton's face changed instantly.

He looked at Laurinda, jaw tight. "You can see the person, but the goods aren't yours yet. Prove you can handle my problem, then we'll talk."

"Fine. Just let me make sure the person's alive."

Since Patton had backed down a little, Laurinda didn't push further. The two of them agreed quickly.

It wasn't long before they brought out the person Laurinda had come for. He was beaten up, hardly recognizable, his breathing shallow and weak.

Laurinda's hand balled into a fist inside her pocket. She knew now wasn't the time to argue. As long as he was alive, that was enough for now.

"Alright, I've seen him. Let's get to your problem."

Patton narrowed his eyes, watching her. He'd expected her to demand medical help for the guy, but she didn't even mention it. Maybe she wasn't as soft as he'd thought.

Without another word, he led her into the heart of the facility, straight to the core server room.

Laurinda's gaze swept over the rows of massive computers. Her eyes sharpened as she silently calculated her odds of taking over the whole place. She wondered if her team outside had gotten her signal.

She slid into the desk chair and started typing, her fingers flying over the keys. Patton couldn't follow what she was doing, but even he could see she was a pro.

A new thought popped into Patton's

mind. Maybe he shouldn't let her leave. Someone with skills like hers could be a real asset. She could make this place even more valuable.

"Ever think about staying here and working for me? I'd make sure you're well taken care of. Just name your price."

Laurinda didn't pause, but a playful smile tugged at her lips. "Actually, I want your whole facility. How about that?"

She turned to face him, her smile gone and her eyes cold and intense.

Patton stared back, realizing she was dead serious. She really wanted to take the whole operation from him.

He couldn't help but be intrigued. He liked ambitious people. He'd spent years clawing his way to the top seen all kinds of opponents and

wasn't about to take a challenge from some young woman seriously.

"Oh? You want my facility? Then you'd better prove you've got what it takes. A guy like me..."

Patton's words cut off as his body suddenly locked up. He stiffened and dropped right out of his chair, thudding to the floor.

Laurinda toyed with a small white porcelain vial, watching as Patton tried to move.

"What do you think? Am I good enough?"

She got up, crouched beside him, and pulled the gun from his jacket slipping it into her backpack. Then she found some old network cables in the corner and tied him up tight.

"Surprised, Patton? Didn't expect to end up like this, did you? You said you had crocodiles here, right? Maybe you can give me a live demonstration."

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## Chapter 167

[ 628 words ]

Patton stared at Laurinda, eyes wide with shock and fear. Out of all the ways things could have gone wrong, he never imagined he'd end up at the mercy of a young

woman.

He tried to say something, but all that came out were muffled, panicked noises.

Laurinda smiled, her tone almost playful as she looked down at him. "Relax. I'll try not to make this hurt. Just give me a minute. Once I've restored the data on your main server, I'll take care of you. It'll all be over soon."

She gave Patton a rough kick, then sat back down at the computer. Her fingers danced across the keyboard, moving so fast they blurred, as she worked to break through the virus and recover the files before time ran out.

The door swung open and Leo stepped in, taking in the scene at a glance. Patton was tied up and motionless on the floor. Laurinda was focused at the computer, lost in her work.

He hurried to her side, worry written all over his face as he checked her over, trying to make sure she was alright. "Laurinda, what happened? Did he do something to you?"

She didn't even look away from the screen. "Nope. I just decided I want this factory. He already signed the transfer. Go get the paperwork sorted out."

Leo blinked, thrown off by how casually she said it. "Wait, what did you just say? Did I hear that right?"

He couldn't wrap his head around it. He knew Laurinda was talented, but he'd never seen her just take over an entire facility like it was nothing. Patton was well-known around here, and a move like this could stir up a lot of trouble.

Laurinda's eyes stayed glued to the computer, her hands moving nonstop. "I said I'm taking over this place. Get the paperwork done. Our people are on the way, so go meet them outside."

The second Patton tried anything shady with her, his fate was sealed. The only reason he was still breathing was because she still had a use for him.

Laurinda finally paused, glancing up at Leo, who still looked shell-shocked. She handed him a property transfer agreement, already stamped and signed with a thumbprint.

Leo took it, still-in disbelief, and scanned the document. His jaw dropped. Everything was in order, perfectly legit, all in less time than it took him to catch his breath. With the official seal and Patton's fingerprint, what looked like a

forceful takeover now read as a

voluntary transfer.

He shot Patton a sympathetic look, already feeling sorry for the guy. Running into Laurinda was just his bad luck.

Laurinda noticed Leo hadn't moved

and nudged him again. "Don't just stand there. Go file the transfer. Let our people in, clear out the upper management. If anyone wants to stay, retrain them, not pay them off and let them go."

"And get the injured guy to the hospital. If he dies before we finish, we don't get paid."

With that, she turned back to the computer. In less than an hour, she had the entire facility's systems up and running again.

While she was checking the

machines, Laurinda came across a

folder on Patton's computer. She clicked it open, finding files packed with evidence of the manager's crimes: photos, records, even logs of Patton's trafficking deals.

After going through everything, Laurinda changed her mind about Patton's fate.

She picked up her phone and called Interpol, sending over all the evidence. They replied almost immediately, thanking her and promising to send agents to deal with the case.

Not long after, Leo rushed back in with his crew, dragging several people with them. "Laurinda, we caught these guys trying to blow up the factory. They didn't believe Patton gave it up willingly. They wanted to take you down with them. Good thing our team found out in time."

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## Chapter 168

[ 585 words ]

Laurinda gave the group a quick look, then stood up and nudged Patton, who was stiff as a board.

"Your boss is right here. It's true he didn't exactly hand over this place out of the goodness of his heart, but that's his thumbprint on the contract and he gave me the company seal. So really, it's no different from him giving it up willingly."

"You don't have to worry. I'll make sure each of you ends up somewhere appropriate. Everything you've done these last few years? He kept detailed records on his computer. I've already sorted through it all and sent it to the police. It won't be long before someone comes to take you away."

One of the men let out a mocking laugh, his face full of arrogance.

"You're too naive. You honestly think you can get rid of us? You think we got this far by playing nice? Don't kid yourself. The local police are on our side."

Laurinda didn't bother arguing. She just nodded, almost agreeing with him. She knew they had people protecting them, but she hadn't called the local police. "You're right. You do have someone looking out for you. But I'm not handing you over to the local cops. What you've done crosses borders. You trafficked people from several countries. I called Interpol. Sorry, but your connections can't help you now."

As soon as she said Interpol, the smugness drained from their faces. They went pale, and panic flickered in their eyes. They knew what it meant if Interpol got involved. One of them tried to speak, but his voice shook.

"Who are you? Why are you doing this to us?"

"You did this to yourselves. No more talking. Get ready for your new life."

After going through the files on Patton's computer, Laurinda was more certain than ever that he had to be put away for good. She wasn't planning to take matters into her own hands. She wanted Patton to face justice and maybe give his victims a chance for closure.

Laurinda's team took control of the facility in no time. Soon after, Interpol arrived and took Patton and his group into custody.

It was already late. Laurinda decided

to stay for the night. She found an empty office, pulled out her sketchbook, and started working on the designs she'd promised Henry.

One day turned into five. Laurinda barely slept, pouring all her energy into her work. In five days, she finished a full set of jewelry designs inspired by the twelve zodiac animals.

She stretched, feeling every muscle protest, then sent the designs to Henry.

Henry saw the designs and nearly jumped out of his chair, staring at his phone in awe.

No wonder she was Queen's chief designer and founder. The designs alone took his breath away. He couldn't even imagine how stunning the real pieces would look.

Laurinda, you're incredible! These are amazing! I'm heading back to headquarters with the jade and your designs right now.

Laurinda smiled at his message, put her phone down, and laid her head on the desk for a quick nap.

She was just starting to drift off when someone knocked on the door. She called out for them to come in. It was Leo.

The reorganization was finished, and Leo set a report down on her desk.

"Patton's place was set up for contract manufacturing of AI robots. The factory's still in the early stages, so a lot of the machines are secondhand. We want to keep this business going, we need to upgrade the equipment. Otherwise, we're going to see way too many defective parts."

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## Chapter 169

[ 614 words ]

Laurinda picked up the report from the desk and skimmed through a few pages. York's message from that morning popped into her head, so she set the report aside and looked up.

"Go ahead and replace the equipment as requested. For any funding issues, just reach out to York. I'm handing everything over to you now. I can't stick around any longer, I'm leaving today."

She still had a product launch to attend, and someone was definitely going to get restless if she lingered any more. She promised him she'd leave today.

"Alright. You get your things together and I'll arrange the car to take you."

Laurinda packed up her drawing tools, swung her backpack on, and walked out of the office.

Leo followed behind, rolling her suitcase. He loaded it into the car and the two of them drove straight to the airport.

When they arrived, Laurinda told Leo to stay in the car. She walked into the terminal alone, suitcase in tow. As soon as she looked up, she spotted a strikingly handsome man standing right by the entrance. She hurried over, dragging her suitcase behind her.

"What are you doing here?"

Laurinda was genuinely surprised to see Adolphus. She'd expected he might wait for her at the Apex airport, but she never thought he'd show up in Northland.

Adolphus took one look at her tired face, handed her a warm milk tea, gently held her cheeks, and leaned down to give her a soft kiss.

"I heard things were getting a bit messy in Northland. I couldn't help worrying about you, so I came to check on you myself. Come on, let's go home."

Adolphus passed her suitcase to a man standing nearby. The man greeted her right away.

"Hi Laurinda, I'm Orlando."

"Hi, Laurinda."

Just then, an announcement rang through the hall for Laurinda's flight. She looked up at Adolphus. "Are you on the same flight as me?"

"I can be. Let's get you checked in."

Adolphus took her ticket and passport, then slid his hand into hers and led her toward the counter.

The check in process was quick. Soon after, Laurinda and Adolphus were settled into business class Laurinda leaned against his shoulder, looking completely exhausted.

Adolphus looked at her and let out a small, annoyed huff.

"If you ever work yourself this hard again, I'm not letting you out of my sight."

He sounded like he was scolding her, but his hand was gentle as he checked her pulse. He relaxed when he realized she was fine.

Her pulse was steady, which meant she'd been taking her medicine and taking care of herself.

He wanted to say something else, but then he noticed her breathing had slowed and evened out against his chest.

He glanced down and saw she'd already fallen asleep in his arms. Sighing quietly, he tucked the blanket around her so she could rest comfortably.

During the flight, Laurinda woke for a

bit when the plane hit some turbulence. She ate a little, went to the restroom, then slept the rest of the way

By the time they landed, Laurinda was wide awake and seemed refreshed. Her

lively expression made Adolphus lose focus for a moment.

"Adolphus, let's get hotpot, okay? Not the spicy kind, just the classic copper pot like you have in Cabinda."

Laurinda let Adolphus hold her hand as they walked out of the airport. It was still early, so she brought up her craving.

Adolphus noticed the way she

swallowed and smiled, a little

indulgent. He nodded

Sure, but i

don't think there are any really good"

copper pot places in Apex

Laurinda's eyes lit up. She actually did know a great spot. She hugged his arm and pressed her cheek to his shoulder.

"I know a place. It's not exactly as authentic as Cabinda's, but it's still pretty good. Come on, let's go try it."

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## Chapter 170

[ 644 words ]

Just thinking about hotpot made Laurinda's mouth water. The food she'd had these past few days just wasn't cutting it for her, no matter how hard Leo tried to make her comfortable. Local dishes had their own flavor, and there was nothing anyone could do about that.

Orlando pulled the car to a stop at the mouth of a narrow alley. He looked around, not spotting the little restaurant Laurinda had talked about. "Laurinda, is this it?" he asked, sounding unsure.

"This is the spot. The copper pot hotpot is really something. It's just a small place, but it used to go viral online. Tons of people came just to check it out. Go ahead and park here and we'll walk the rest of the way," Laurinda replied.

She pushed open the car door and was instantly greeted by a rush of cold air that made her shiver.

Adolphus came over and gently wrapped a blanket from the car around her shoulders. "It snowed again a couple of days ago. It's even colder than when you left," he said.

Laurinda gripped the blanket with one hand and reached for Adolphus's hand with the other. "Let's walk a little faster, it won't feel so cold. The restaurant's just up ahead."

Inside, the little hotpot shop was quiet and not too crowded. Adolphus took in the place, noticing how clean everything was, from the dishes to the tables and chairs. It even reminded him a little of the private restaurants back in Cabinda.

Laurinda noticed his curious look and leaned in close, lowering her voice. "It's nice, right? This is the old part of town. It used to be packed, sometimes you'd have to line up to get in. But after they tore down the apartment complex in the south, people started saying it's too out of the way, so fewer folks come now."

While Laurinda was talking, the owner came over with three bowls of dipping sauce and three plates of lamb. She smiled at them, her voice warm and friendly. "Most of our customers are regulars. The menu's pretty simple, so we don't get a lot of young people or new faces. There was a time when social media brought in a crowd, but the buzz has died down. Now it's just us and our regulars."

"My husband and I are getting older. Running a small place like this is just enough to cover our daily bills. You three enjoy your meal. If you want more meat, just give us a shout."

"Thank you so much," Laurinda said, smiling back.

The owner gave her a knowing look. She might not come by often, but Laurinda was the kind of person you remembered. "No trouble at all. Eat up."

Adolphus took over at the table, cooking the meat for Laurinda. Every time she finished her bowl, he made sure to fill it again.

He really knew what he was doing. The lamb came out tender, juicy, and full of flavor. Before she realized it, Laurinda had eaten way too much.

"Full?" Adolphus asked softly, noticing her rubbing her stomach.

"I'm stuffed. You've been taking care of me the whole time and barely touched your own food. Eat something yourself now," she urged, nudging him to eat.

He nodded and finally started cooking some meat for himself.

Orlando watched all this with a helpless smile. Just watching Adolphus take care of someone like this was enough to make him feel full. He almost wanted to tell someone about it, but who would dare gossip about Adolphus?

After dinner, Laurinda and Adolphus went back to his place. Laurinda soaked in a hot bath, feeling perfectly content. She barely managed a few words with.. Adolphus before falling sound asleep.

Adolphus sat by her bedside,

watching her quietly for a long

moment before going to his study to on, work. He had managed

catch up

some business while staying in Northland, but there were still plenty of things waiting for him.

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## Chapter 171

[ 667 words ]

Laurinda woke up to the sound of her phone buzzing. It was York calling, saying he needed to talk. Still half asleep, she dragged herself out of bed and headed back to the manor.

The butler looked genuinely surprised when she showed up alone. He quickly approached her.

"Laurinda, you're back. Didn't Adolphus come with you?"

She handed him her backpack and flopped onto the sofa, looking relaxed and not the least bit bothered. "He's got things to deal with. He might drop by tonight. Where's York? Wasn't he supposed to wait for me?"

"York was just here, but he stepped out after a phone call. Laurinda, would you like some pear soup? I had the kitchen bake some pears for you."

"Not now. I'm going up to the study. When York gets back, tell him to come find me there."

Laurinda got up, grabbed her backpack from the butler, and headed upstairs.

When York finally came in, Laurinda was deep in her programming. He walked over, glanced at the wall of code on her screen, then sat down across from her.

"You really stirred things up on your trip. Northland was almost turned upside down because of you. Impressive."

Laurinda didn't even bother to look up, just let out a dry laugh. "Well, they only have themselves to blame. If anyone's at fault, it's Patton. The only reason everything fell apart for them is because Patton had collected so much evidence. He didn't even spare himself. Every single thing he did wrong, written out in plain detail. There was no way for him to talk his way out of it."

When Laurinda got to Patton's factory, the first thing she did was share her plan with York. The asset transfer agreement had actually been prepped and sent over by someone on York's team. Without that, there was no way she could have pulled everything off so fast by herself.

She finally paused her typing, propped her chin on her hand, and stared at York with those sharp, dark eyes. "That was your whole plan, wasn't it? Don't pretend you're innocent. I know what you're up to. I'm guessing only Leo was left in the dark. The people who came to help me got there way too quickly. That was no last-minute rescue."

York realized there was no point in hiding anymore. He leaned back in his chair, all casual. "I've been watching Patton for a while. Ever since he started stealing my orders last year we wanted to take over his factory. He's slippery, though. It's almost impossible to catch him doing anything wrong."

"He climbed up from the bottom, so he's paranoid about everything. I figured that if you went instead of

Lof

me, he'd let his guard down. You could get close enough to find what we needed."

"And, well, it worked."

Laurinda looked at York's smug face and let out a laugh, but it was more exasperated than amused. She should have seen this coming. She'd just been too caught up to notice.

"Weren't you worried I'd get burned in all this?"

"Not at all. With your skills, Patton never stood a chance. And besides... Adolphus would never let anything happen to you. The day you left, he flew his private jet straight to Northland."

York's face turned serious for a moment. He only found out that Adolphus was in Northland too when he checked the travel records. It was obvious why he'd gone.

"Wait, Adolphus followed me to Northland?"

Laurinda blinked in surprise. She hadn't known he'd gone that far.

"Yeah, but I don't know exactly what he did there. I'm sure he was there to keep you safe."

Laurinda didn't know what to feel. She'd never imagined someone would go that far for her. Why was he doing all this?

York, watching her face, decided to break the tension. "Hey, don't overthink it. I'm not telling you this to stress you out. Let's talk about the new product launch instead. We'll hold the press conference at Apex.; Let Finn see for himself how big the gap really is between him and real tech."

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## Chapter 172

[ 624 words ]

Laurinda and York spent the whole afternoon holed up in the study, only coming out when dinner was ready.

As Laurinda stepped into the living room, she saw the butler setting out tea, snacks, and all sorts of fresh fruit.

"Are we expecting guests?" she asked, a little confused by all the fuss. They hardly ever had visitors.

The butler shook his head. "No guests, Laurinda. Jasper called earlier. He said his piano performance is being live-streamed tonight and asked us to watch. I thought I'd set up some treats for you to enjoy while you watch."

"Oh? Jasper's already got a performance lined up? That's impressive. His last competition went viral online. With all that buzz, he could debut anytime he wanted."

Laurinda smiled, genuinely happy for him.

"Well, that's up to him," York replied. "If he wants, we can set up an entertainment company so he can debut whenever he likes."

They started chatting excitedly about Jasper's future. Only the butler seemed a little downcast. Laurinda noticed and turned to him. "Is something wrong? You don't look very happy."

The butler sighed. "I just feel for you, Laurinda. If you hadn't given up piano and violin back then, you'd be shining even brighter now."

His words made York fall silent, too. He knew Laurinda's talent. Even Jasper might not be able to match her. But that was all in the past.

Laurinda shrugged. "There's nothing to feel bad about. Everyone has their own path. I'm happy with where I am now. Music isn't the only thing that matters to me."

She really meant it. She was truly happy these days, especially with the plans she had in mind. The Gates family wanted to mess with her? She'd make sure Finn paid the price and learned his lesson.

After dinner, Laurinda and the butler settled down in front of the TV. York had things to handle, so he left the estate.

The butler sat beside Laurinda, gently cracking open sunflower seeds for her. She'd told him not to so many times, but he always insisted. He said he liked looking after her and hoped he could keep doing it for as long as possible.

The performance started. After Lea played the opening piece, Jasper walked onto the stage. His version of "Croatian Rhapsody" electrified the crowd. Clips of his performance started popping up everywhere ver online, flooding social media and making Jasper an instant sensation.

Laurinda watched the hype build online, her eyes narrowing. Something felt off, like someone was using Jasper as a tool for attention.

As she considered whether to step in and cool things down, her phone rang.

Jasper's name flashed on the screen.

"Laurinda, I need to deal with all the stuff online. It's getting out of hand."

"Do you want my help?" she asked, not at all surprised by how quickly he'd reacted. Jasper was young, but he was more sensitive to this kind of thing than most people she knew.

"No, I've got it. I just wanted to let you know so you wouldn't worry."

Backstage at the concert hall, Jasper sat with a small monitor on his lap His cheeks still had a hint of

baby fat, but his expression was all

business, way too serious for his age.

"Alright, then. Handle it your way. If anything comes up, just call me."

"Will do. I won't keep you. I'm hanging up now."

After they hung up, Laurinda stretched out on the sofa, watching as the news and videos about Jasper quietly disappeared from the internet, one by one.

Soon, it was like Jasper's performance had never happened. Not a single trace remained online.

Meanwhile, Sam was sitting in Adolphus's office, staring at the screen as every bit of news about Jasper vanished. He shot up from the sofa, startled.

Adolphus, still in the middle of a video meeting, looked up and glanced at him. "What's wrong?"

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## Chapter 173

[ 634 words ]

Sam could feel Adolphus watching him, which made him realize he'd definitely overreacted. He offered up a sheepish grin, hoping to smooth things over.

He plopped back down on the sofa and started scrolling through his phone, trying to find any updates about Jasper. Nothing. Not a single piece of news. Sam's face went blank and he couldn't help but wish he knew the genius who'd managed the online cleanup.

Adolphus wrapped up his video call, took a sip from his water, then reached for his coat hanging over the chair. He was clearly getting ready to head out.

"Adolphus, are you going to see Laurinda?" Sam asked, trying to sound casual but failing miserably.

Adolphus paused, caught by the tone in Sam's voice. He glanced back, one eyebrow raised. "What's up?"

"It's nothing big. I just wanted to ask... Laurinda's really good with computers, isn't she?"

"She's amazing. Last time you went missing, she was the one who tracked you down. If you have something to say, just say it."

Adolphus leaned back against his desk, eyeing Sam. It was obvious Sam was holding something back.

"Come on, out with it. If you don't, I'm leaving."

Sam hesitated, then finally said, "I was hoping Laurinda could help crack a code. My dad's company has been stuck with it for ages. They've hired all kinds of experts, but no one's figured it out. Do you think Laurinda might be willing to take a look?"

Adolphus slipped on his coat, pulled out his phone, and called Laurinda.

When she picked up, her voice sounded sleepy and muffled. "Are you about to go to bed?"

"No, I'm reading. Are you coming back tonight?" Laurinda asked, her voice soft. Hearing her, Adolphus remembered what York had told him. He'd gone all the way

to Northland for Laurinda, quietly protecting her without her knowing.

"I'll be home soon. Sam needs help with a code. Do you have time?"

"Not tomorrow, but the day after is fine. Does that work?"

"Definitely works," Sam jumped in before Adolphus could even respond. As long as Laurinda was willing to help, he didn't care about the timing.

Adolphus hung up, noticing how Sam's whole face lit up. He grabbed his car keys and headed for the

door, calling back, "Tomorrow, amet

check with the detective divisio There should be rews from Ivory Fangs."

When Adolphus finally got back to the manor, it was close to midnight. He stepped into the living room and saw Laurinda curled up on the sofa with her tablet. He shrugged off his coat and went straight to her.

"Why are you still up?"

"I was waiting for you," Laurinda said, putting her tablet aside and reaching out to wrap her arms around

his neck. The way she

was so natural and close, it made

his heart skip a beat.

Adolphus sat down and pulled Laurinda into his lap. He could tell she was acting a little different tonight, so he gently rubbed her back.

"Did something happen today? You seem off."

She heard the worry in his voice and buried her face in his shoulder, letting out a soft laugh. "No, nothing happened. I just missed you a little, that's all. Haven't seen you all day."

Her voice was gentle, with just a hint of playfulness. It made Adolphus's chest feel warm and soft, and for a second, he wanted to just blurt out everything he felt for her.

"Laurinda."

"Yeah?" She answered, her voice lazy and sweet, sending a little shiver down his spine. He swallowed, hard, his Adam's apple bobbing.

"What's got into you?" Laurinda looked up, noticing how red his ears were.

That's when she realized how close they were, how intimate this was. He was a normal guy, she was an adult. She understood what she was doing.

"Um... do you want a late-night snack? We had barbecue earlier and the butler saved you some. I can go heat it up if you're hungry."

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## Chapter 174

[ 634 words ]

Laurinda hopped off Adolphus's lap and made a quick escape to the kitchen before he could catch her.

Adolphus watched her flustered retreat, a soft laugh escaping him. He reached for the glass on the coffee table and finished the last of his water. The subtle taste of roses lingered, reminding him of her.

In the kitchen, Laurinda pressed her warm cheeks with her palms. She could feel herself getting bolder each day. Before, she only let her mind wander. Now, hugging him felt so natural, almost as if she'd crossed a line she never meant to.

Adolphus slipped in behind her, noticing how she stared off at the oven, lost in thought. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her back against his chest.

He brushed a gentle kiss on the tip of her ear, his voice soft and low. "What's on your mind?"

Laurinda fumbled for something to say. "I was just thinking..... um..... maybe I could share half a flatbread with you."

Adolphus let out a laugh. "So you're thinking about flatbread?"

She nodded, latching onto the topic. "Yeah, it's really good. When it's fresh out of the oven, it gets all crispy and smells amazing."

Inside, Laurinda let out a shaky breath. She'd almost blurted out what she was really thinking. She muttered under her breath, half-annoyed with herself.

Adolphus is such a tease, always making it hard for me to think straight. He's too much.

Adolphus seemed to read her thoughts. He laughed, his warm breath dancing over her neck, sending a shiver down her spine.

He decided not to push his luck, sensing she was about to get flustered enough to snap. He let go of her waist, stepping back a little, his tone gentle. "I'll get the barbecue and flatbread. Go wait for me at the table."

Laurinda nodded and took her seat at the table, pressing her hands to her face. Embarrassment washed over her. What was she doing, getting her hopes up like that? Was she really waiting for him to make another move?

Adolphus brought the barbecue over and set it down, then poured her a glass of warm milk and placed it by her hand before sitting across from her.

"You said you could eat half a flatbread, right? Don't overdo it. Have a little, then get some sleep."

Laurinda accepted the piece he handed her and looked up into his eyes. His gaze was so warm it felt like it could melt her.

"Your eyes are something else," she grumbled, taking a bite of flatbread. "You could look at a stray dog and still look that loving."

The idea of him using that look on someone else made her chest tighten with jealousy. She wasn't sure when she had started wanting him all to herself.

"Looking at a dog with love? What are you talking about? I only look at you this way. I don't even notice anyone else."

Adolphus couldn't help but feel a little helpless at her words. Was he not making her feel secure enough? Why else would she think that?

His honest words made Laurinda's heart flutter. She already knew how he felt, but she still wanted to hear it, to test him, just a little more.

She ducked her head and nibbled on

her flatbread, not saying a word. Adolphus didn't mind. He

understood her hesitance. The more

he learned about her, the more he

wanted to protect her, to give her time to get used to him.

This was enough for now. She let him in, waited for him, even missed him. He couldn't ask for more.

He picked up a piece of meat, holding it up to her lips with a teasing grin. "Come on, my little puppy, have some meat."

Laurinda glanced up at him, catching his playful smile, and rolled her eyes at him. "You're so annoying. Eat yourself I'm going upstairs to Shower and get some sleep."

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## Chapter 175

[ 613 words ]

Laurinda got up from the table, ready to head upstairs, but Adolphus gently caught her wrist. His voice was soft, almost teasing. "Finish your milk before you go rest."

She picked up the glass, took a few sips, but only managed to drink half before putting it back on the table. "I can't drink any more. You eat, I'll go up first."

"Okay."

He let go without insisting, knowing she always struggled to fall asleep. The sooner she got to bed, the better. Adolphus finished a few bites of barbecue, polished off the rest of

her milk, then headed upstairs. After showering and changing into pajamas, he stood outside Laurinda's door, listening. He was worried she might have another restless night or wake up from a nightmare.

He waited there a long time, but everything was quiet. Just as he turned to leave, her door opened. He looked back, and their eyes met in the hall.

Laurinda looked a little embarrassed. "Um... I can't sleep. Do you have any sleeping pills? Just half, that's enough."

"I don't, but I could give you a massage. Want to try that instead?"

Adolphus saw the tired red in her eyes and felt a wave of concern. Before she could answer, he scooped her up and carried her inside.

"I'll press a few spots that help with sleep. See if it helps, okay?"

He laid her down gently, made sure she was comfortable, then started to massage a few acupressure points. It was quiet for a while, the only sound was Laurinda's breathing, which eventually grew slow and steady.

When she finally drifted off, Adolphus pulled his hands away. He watched her for a moment, his gaze soft, then stood up and left the room. Back in his own room, he grabbed his phone and made a call.

It took three tries before someone answered, sounding half-awake. "Adolphus? Why are you calling so late?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm in town. Did something happen?"

"I need you to come by tomorrow. My girlfriend's having trouble sleeping. Can you take a look at her?"

There was a stunned silence on the other end. Girlfriend? When did Adolphus get a girlfriend? But the guy didn't dare ask.

"Adolphus, you're so good at medicine. Insomnia shouldn't be hard for you. Why do you need me for "

He stopped himself, seemed to realize something, and quickly changed his tone. "Just send me the address. I'll be there tomorrow."

Harrell knew Adolphus wouldn't ask for help unless it was something he couldn't handle himself. This had to be more than just a physical

problem. It was probably something deeper.

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"I'm at the Apex. Contact Foley when you get here. We'll grab dinner together."

After the call, Adolphus quietly

returned to Laurinda's room. He sat on the edge of her bed watching her sleep. Even then, her eyebrows were scrunched together like she was fighting off a bad dream.

He lay down next to her, gently pulled her into his arms, and held her close. Her situation was worse than he'd thought.

The next morning, Laurinda woke up in his arms. She blinked at his pale collarbone, a little confused about how he'd ended up in her bed again.

With temptation right in front of her, Laurinda couldn't resist. Her hand slipped under his shirt, fingers tracing over his toned abs.

Adolphus froze, his whole body

going tense. Laurinda looked up, her face a little guilty, and met his dark eyes sharp and intense watching.

her like she was something he

wanted to devour.

She tried to give him an innocent smile and started to pull her hand away, but he caught her wrist, pressing her palm firmly against his stomach.

"So? Do you like what you feel?" he asked, his voice low.

She giggled. "Yeah... I like it... Uh, it's getting late, I should..."

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## Chapter 176

[ 622 words ]

Adolphus didn't even let Laurinda finish her sentence. He flipped her over, pinning her gently beneath him, and pressed his lips to hers. Their breaths tangled together, slow and warm.

Laurinda perched on the edge of the sink, watching as Adolphus washed her hands for her. She bit her lip, cheeks still bright pink, soft and tempting like a summer peach.

"I'll be careful next time," she mumbled.

Adolphus bent down, aiming for another kiss, but she dodged out of the way. She shook her hands dry and pushed lightly at his chest, putting some space between them.

"Come on, move. I need to get ready," she said, rolling her eyes.

Adolphus could tell she was annoyed. He gave her a soft, indulgent smile, squeezed toothpaste onto her electric toothbrush, and handed it over.

"You go ahead. I'll get changed," he said.

Laurinda ignored him, focusing on her morning routine. Adolphus chuckled quietly and slipped out of the bathroom.

After breakfast, Laurinda noticed Adolphus still lounging on the sofa. She frowned, a little confused. "Don't you have work today? Aren't you heading out?"

"Not today. I want to spend time with you," he replied.

He reached out for her hand, but she pulled away before he could catch it.

"I have to go out," she said.

She hadn't planned on bringing Adolphus along, but with the way he watched her, those dark eyes focused only on her, she couldn't bring herself to say no. She swallowed her protest and changed her mind.

"York's company is having a product launch today. I'm going to check it out. Do you want to come with me?" she asked.

Adolphus brightened. "Yeah, just give me a minute. I'll go change."

He ran upstairs. Laurinda sat down, pulled out her phone, and sent York a quick message. She let him know she and Adolphus would be coming, and asked him to save two seats for them in the audience.

When they arrived at the launch,  
they both paused, taking in the sight.

The place was packed. Expensive cars lined the street, and important people from every corner of the Industry gathered outside chatting and laughing. Laurinda even recognized a few faces she'd only ever seen on the news.

She could already imagine how Finn would react once he saw the coverage of this event. It would definitely leave him with mixed feelings.

Adolphus was surprised too. He realized only now that the big multi-agent systems launch he'd heard about yesterday was actually York's project. He hadn't expected them to be working on something this impressive.

Just as Laurinda thought of Finn, she heard his familiar voice behind her.

"Laurinda, you're here too?"

She turned and saw Finn walking over with Harden. A few men who looked like engineers followed them.

"Finn, I didn't expect you at the FarrVector launch. I heard The Gates Group has something new coming out too. Is it similar to what FarrVector is doing?" Laurinda asked, her tone casual.

Finn's smile faltered for a second,

but he quickly recovered. "Ours is still in testing, so there's no release date yet. By the way, Harden

mentioned you haven't been

at

school much lately. Is everything okay?"

He clearly didn't want to talk about the new products. In his mind, Laurinda was still just a kid, not worth having a real business conversation with. He was more interested in pushing her and Harden together.

Laurinda noticed the shift and

decided not to push. She smiled politely. "Thanks for asking, Finn. The troublemakers at school have been dealt with I just wonder who would go out of their way to stir up drama for me."

Her gaze flickered between Finn and Harden, a spark of playful suspicion in her eyes.

Ever since Harden had handed Benita that credit card, Laurinda knew there was more going on beneath the surface. She was just waiting for the truth to come out.

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## Chapter 177

[ 623 words ]

Laurinda's investigation confirmed what she'd suspected. Someone from Finn's side had reached out to Jeniffer, and that same day, Jeniffer's bank account fattened up by five million dollars.

Not that it did her much good. Jeniffer never got a chance to enjoy the money. Laurinda sometimes wondered if, while working some off-the-books job, Jeniffer ever regretted how things had played out.

Harden caught Laurinda's eye from across the room. He remembered what she'd said to him that day, and the words stung more with Adolphus there at her side. Harden felt a flush of defiance rise inside him, so he stepped forward.

"Laurinda, I finished organizing my notes. I can give them to you. Even if you're not in class right now, you shouldn't give up on your studies. The teachers all say you're smart. If you put in some effort, getting into college won't be hard."

Laurinda couldn't help but laugh a little. She'd heard plenty of people try to talk her back into studying, but never quite like this.

"Thanks, Harden, but you should probably hang on to your notes. You're giving me, the girl at the very bottom of the class, way too much credit. Still, I appreciate it. That day when the Blair family cornered me, you stepped in with a two-million-dollar black card. But you remember what I said, don't you?"

She looked straight at Finn, making it clear her words weren't just for Harden. It was a reminder for him and a warning for Finn-she wasn't going to let them get away with any shady moves.

"Finn, my friend and I are going inside now. The presentation is about to start."

She nodded politely, then reached for Adolphus's hand. Together, they walked into the venue, whispering to each other with an easy closeness that was hard to ignore. People couldn't help but feel a little envious seeing them together.

As soon as Laurinda was gone, Finn's face clouded over. He glanced up at Harden, who was taller than him by half a head.

"What did she say to you? What did you do to make her so cold?"

Harden stared at the floor. He couldn't look Finn in the eye. The truth was, he'd lied.

Back when Finn first asked how

Finn

Laurinda reacted after Harden tried

to help her. Harden said she was touched and that things were better between them. He never expected

Laurinda to show in today and call him out right in front of everyone.

"I'm sorry. I lied. Laurinda didn't want my help. She even warned me not to get any ideas about her."

Finn wasn't surprised. Laurinda had turned down Fabian for years, so it made sense she'd ignore Harden after just a few meetings. Still, Finn couldn't stand the idea of his own son losing out to a nobody school doctor.

"She's sharp. What she said just now wasn't just a warning for you. She was letting me know, too. She probably already knows we went to Jennifer. She's a real fox."

"For now, just stay away from her. I'll make sure you have more resources. Work hard. I refuse to believe my son can't measure up to some school doctor. Come on, let's check out this product launch."

Harden just nodded, barely hiding his frustration. He couldn't accept that even if he improved himself, Laurinda would still brush him off. The school doctor might be good looking, but Harden didn't think he was lacking, either.

Once they were seated, Adolphus played with Laurinda's soft hand, his fingers tracing along the scar in her palm as if he was lost in thought.

Laurinda glanced over the schedule York had sent, then turned to Adolphus. He'd hardly said a word since running into Finn and Harden.

"What's on your mind?"

He looked at her, and that familiar, mischievous smile crept across his face.

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## Chapter 178

[ 608 words ]

"I'm just thinking about how to deal with anyone who dares go after my girl. What exactly did he do at school?"

Laurinda was surprised he was still stuck on that. She let out a quiet laugh and rested her head on Adolphus's shoulder, telling him the story of what happened that day in a relaxed, almost absentminded way.

Adolphus's face grew cold. It was like everyone had decided he didn't exist. People were bold enough to try stealing his girlfriend right in front of him.

"So what are you going to do?" Laurinda teased. "Should I ask Irvin for a few bottles of his special stuff? His inventions actually work. He really is a genius."

Thinking back to how easily she'd handled Patton in Northland, Laurinda couldn't help but praise Irvin. She was genuinely grateful for what he'd given her. If she'd had those powders before, she probably wouldn't have gotten hurt at all, and that guy never would have gotten away. Next time she ran into him, she definitely wouldn't let that happen.

As Laurinda spoke fondly about Irvin, Adolphus could only sigh to himself. The thing he worried about most had happened after all. Irvin was clearly a bad influence on her.

"That stuff isn't something you should mess around with. What if you get hurt?" Adolphus said quietly.

"I'll be careful, I promise. Besides, Irvin has improved the powders, and now there's even an antidote. There's nothing to worry about," Laurinda replied, her eyes bright with excitement. It was obvious she already loved using Irvin's creations. No amount of warning from Adolphus would change her mind.

Up in the front row, Harden turned and caught a glimpse of Laurinda's happy, glowing smile. He felt a pang. Too bad that smile wasn't meant for him.

The launch event started soon after. The project manager took the stage and began introducing all the new fields where the multi-agent system could be put to use.

As they listened, everyone in the audience—experts and non-experts alike— couldn't help but whisper in awe. It was easy to imagine just how far this project could go, and how many spin-off products might follow.

Competitors in the crowd were starting to panic. If they couldn't come up with something better, they'd have no choice but to watch FarrVector dominate the entire market.

Out of everyone there, Finn looked

the most miserable. His tech company had been working on a similar project for five years, pouring thirty percent of The Gates Group's profits into research. Just when they were finally making progress, FarrVector showed up with a

finished product—and their

technology was on a whole different level.

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Finn could already picture how things would play out. By the time his team finally released their version, nobody would care. Worse, people might even laugh at them.

"This is on purpose. FarrVector definitely planned this. They picked this exact moment just to steal the market from us. I know it." Finn clenched his fists on his lap, trying to keep his anger in check.

He'd never thought of FarrVector as real competition before. He couldn't believe a company known for video games actually had such a strong research team. No way a small company should be able to pull this off.

The presentation lasted two hours,

covering everything from

commercial aerospace and AI to

low altitude economy, urban transportation and enterprise automation. All throughout the event, people whispered and chatted, especially when something related to their own field came up. Nobody wanted to miss a thing.

When it all wrapped up, there was no question-the launch was a huge success. Laurinda could already see what the future held. With this project FarrVector wasn't just here to stay. They were about to become a household name.

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## Chapter 179

[ 609 words ]

The press conference had just wrapped up and Laurinda was getting ready to leave when her phone buzzed. York's name flashed on the screen. She picked up.

"Laurinda, are you coming to the celebration dinner? Everyone's hoping to see you." His excitement was obvious, and Laurinda glanced at the time.

"I think I'll skip it. I want to visit Fidelia at the care home. She needs to hear today's good news from me."

York paused, and she could almost hear the smile in his voice.

"Can you pass along a message for me? Tell Fidelia, none of this would have happened without her and our mentor. The success of the project is really us fulfilling his last wish. I hope she comes back to the team soon."

York's voice caught a little when he mentioned their mentor. He missed the man who had treated him like family, and he was relieved he hadn't let him down.

"I'll tell her, promise. You guys enjoy the party. Put everything on my tab."

After hanging up, Laurinda walked over to Adolphus and slipped her hand into his without thinking twice.

"I'm taking you to see Fidelia."

He smiled and wrapped his fingers around hers.

"Let's go."

Adolphus led her toward the parking lot, their hands still joined. As they passed by, Harden caught sight of them. His expression darkened and he couldn't figure out what Laurinda saw in the campus doctor.

At the airport, Harrell walked out of the terminal and spotted Sam waiting for him. He lifted an eyebrow.

"What brings you to Apex? Who else is here? This place is starting to feel like a reunion."

Sam grinned and gave Harrell's shoulder a friendly nudge.

"I'm here with Adolphus for a case. Your timing's perfect. We're stuck-we can't tell if the suspect's telling the truth or not. We need your help."

Before Harrell could say a word, Sam was already steering him out the door. It wasn't until they were in the car that Harrell realized he'd been played Yesterday when gam offered to pick him up, he thought it was just brotherly affection. Now he saw it was all about business.

"Sam, you remember my fee, right?"

"Trust me, Adolphus is good for it. Solve the case, and you'll be well taken care of."

Harrell didn't bother arguing. Getting paid by Adolphus was never as easy as it sounded.

He suddenly remembered a rumor he'd heard and couldn't resist poking around. He was dying to know who could have tamed someone like Adolphus.

"So what's this about Adolphus having a girlfriend? Last I checked, the Lane family was supposed to be setting up some marriage thing with the Charles family. Now there's a girlfriend too? Is he just keeping his options open?"

Sam was quiet for a second, as if processing the question. But he knew all about the Charles family drama.

"Don't go spreading rumors, unless you want Adolphus coming after you. There's no way Adah would ever get his attention that gossip came straight from the Charles family."

"As for the girlfriend, pretty sure it's Laurinda. If Adolphus is calling her that, their relationship must really be moving forward."

"I don't actually know Laurinda all that well. You'll meet her at dinner tonight, then you can see for yourself what kind of person she is."

"Come on, just give me a hint," Harrell pressed, curiosity getting the better of him.

Sam just laughed, making Harrell even more desperate for details. Opportunities to dig up dirt on Adolphus didn't come around often and he wasn't about to let this one

go.

Adolphus and Laurinda arrived at the

care home, Laurinda carried a

bouquet of red king lilies, Fidelia's favorite Adolphus had a basket of fruit in one hand and Laurinda's hand in the other as they walked inside together.

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[ 599 words ]

As they neared Fidelia's room, Laurinda spotted Earl slipping out, deep in

conversation with his assistant. His voice was low, his face set with that serious look Laurinda knew all too well. Back when Fidelia first came to the hospital, Earl had worn that same expression almost every time he spoke to her.

A wave of worry hit Laurinda. She hurried over, unable to keep the anxiety out of her voice. "Is something wrong? Has Fidelia taken a turn for the worse?"

Earl looked up, surprised, and his gaze landed on the man standing just behind her. He hesitated, clearly caught off guard, before finding his words. "Adolphus... What brings you here?"

Adolphus wasn't in the mood for small talk. He just glanced at Laurinda, concern etched on his face. "I came with Laurinda to see Fidelia. How is she doing?"

"Oh, Fidelia's alright. I was just dealing with another patient," Earl replied, then turned to Laurinda and managed a sheepish smile. The sight of the two of them together had clearly thrown him. "How come you two showed up together?"

Relief washed over Laurinda. She gave Earl a small smile. "I thought he'd want to see how Fidelia was doing. Is she in her room right now?"

"She is," Earl said, nodding. "And you're just in time. Fidelia hasn't had much of an appetite lately. The meds are really wearing her down. Maybe your friend can help."

He assumed Adolphus was a doctor Laurinda had brought in for Fidelia. Honestly, it made sense-Laurinda had a way of convincing even the busiest people to help.

Earl told his assistant to head off, then led Laurinda and Adolphus down the hall, filling them in as they walked. "Fidelia's been doing better mentally. She's gone out for walks, even chatted with people she runs into. It's a big step for her."

He paused. "Physically, she's okay too. She's gained a bit of weight, but her appetite's still not great. It's a side effect of the medication. Not much we can do about that."

Laurinda shot Adolphus a quick look. He offered her a reassuring nod. "I'll check on her in a bit. Maybe I can come up with some meal ideas that won't add to her medication

load. She really doesn't need more strain on her stomach."

Just hearing him say that made Laurinda feel lighter. For reasons she couldn't explain, having Adolphus there always calmed her.

When they reached Fidelia's room, Laurinda knocked softly. The door opened almost at once, and Fidelia's whole face lit up when she saw her.

"You're here, sweetheart," Fidelia said, reaching out her arms.

Laurinda tucked the lilies she'd brought into Fidelia's arms and wrapped her in a gentle hug. "I've missed you, Fidelia."

"You say that, but it's been ages since you visited," Fidelia teased, but her voice was warm. "I know you're busy, though. I've been taking care of myself so you won't have to worry."

Hand in hand, Fidelia pulled Laurinda into the room, set the flowers on the coffee table, and tugged her down to sit beside her. They chatted for few moments, catching up, before Fidelia finally noticed the twomen standing nearby.

"Sweetheart, who's this gentleman?" she asked.

Laurinda noticed there was no sign of recognition in Fidelia's eyes when she looked at Adolphus She let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. She started to introduce him. "Fidelia, this is-

"He's the doctor Laurinda brought to help with your appetite," Earl cut in, explaining before Laurinda could finish. "Would it be alright if he took a look at you?"

Adolphus's brows drew together, just a hint of annoyance showing. He could see right through Earl's intentions.

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## Chapter 181

[ 616 words ]

Adolphus wasn't the type to just sit and wait for things to happen. After Earl finished talking, Adolphus jumped in to explain.

"Hi, Fidelia. I'm not the doctor Laurinda invited. I'm actually her boyfriend. I came today just to visit you. I heard you haven't been feeling well, and since I know a bit about medicine, I thought I could help you feel better."

The word "boyfriend" hung in the air. All three people in the room were a little taken aback.

Laurinda was the first to recover. Remembering what happened that morning, she felt her ears burn. Honestly, she couldn't even blame him for calling himself her boyfriend at this point.

Earl just couldn't wrap his head around the idea. He blurted out, his voice a little rushed, "Adolphus, how could you and Laurinda be together? Aren't you...?"

He looked at Laurinda, searching for any sign she'd deny it. She didn't say a word. That silence hit him hard. He never would've guessed Laurinda would end up with someone like Adolphus.

He wanted to ask her if she really knew what kind of person Adolphus was.

Adolphus remembered Earl mentioning the whole thing with Adah, and a small smile tugged at his lips. He raised his brows at Earl.

"That arranged marriage was just something your aunt and your mom wanted. I never agreed to it. No one can force that on me. Not them, not anyone."

Earl stared at Adolphus, suddenly feeling a chill he couldn't explain. When had Adolphus gotten so intimidating?

"Maybe I misunderstood," Earl said, his voice a little stiff. "Since you're here for Fidelia, I'll leave you to it."

His expression was awkward as he glanced at Laurinda, then turned and walked out quickly.

Adolphus nodded with a smile, which to Earl looked like pure provocation. Earl left without another word.

Laurinda caught every little thing Adolphus did, and she couldn't help but smile. It was rare to see him act this way, almost like a kid trying to show off.

She could also tell something was bothering Earl. She made a mental note to talk to him when she got the chance.

"Young man, come have a seat. I didn't realize you were Earl's uncle. Are you a doctor too?" Fidelia asked.

"Yes, I'm a surgeon. I also know a bit

about holistic medicine. Hello, Fidelia. I'm Adolphus, Laurinda's boyfriend," he replied, taking a seat across from her with perfect posture, looking like the model student.

Laurinda couldn't hold back a laugh. Seeing Adolphus drop his usual serious vibe to play the polite guest was a first for her.

When he noticed her laughing at him, Adolphus shot her an affectionate look and whispered, "Try to look serious. I'm meeting the family here."

He was so sincere that Laurinda couldn't help but laugh again.

She hugged Fidelia and teased, "Fidelia, he says he's here to meet the family. You should give him a hard time."

Fidelia smiled at Laurinda's playful energy. It had been so long since she'd seen Laurinda so bright and lively.

She realized how much she'd shut herself off, forgetting the people around her who cared so much.

Fidelia squeezed Laurinda's hand gently, her eyes soft and full of meaning. She looked at Adolphus, then back at Laurinda.

"He's a good one."

Laurinda knew exactly what Fidelia meant and smiled.

"He really is. And he's a great doctor too. Fidelia, why not let him check your pulse and help you feel better?"

"Then I'll leave myself in your hands, Adolphus," Fidelia said, holding out her wrist.

Adolphus placed his long fingers

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doctor

gently on Fidelia's wrist, his face instantly switching to serious mode. He looked every bit the seasoned professional. .net

Watching him, Laurinda thought he looked just like his mentor. It made her wonder if learning how to manage your expressions was part of medical school too.

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[ 634 words ]

Adolphus gently let go of Fidelia's wrist. Laurinda leaned forward, her voice anxious. "How is she?"

"Fidelia's not doing well," Adolphus said quietly. "She's got problems with several organs. I'll put together a prescription to help her recover, and I want her to follow a special diet too."

He had more on his mind, but he needed to talk to Earl about Fidelia's situation before he made any big decisions.

"Don't worry. I'll handle this. I'm going to see Earl. Stay here and keep Fidelia company."

Adolphus stood, smoothed down his clothes, and walked out, heading for Earl's office.

Laurinda watched him go, a small sense of relief blooming in her chest. She wrapped her arms around Fidelia, resting her head gently on Fidelia's shoulder.

"Hey, you're going to be okay. I promise, I won't let anything happen to you. As soon as you feel up to it, I'll bring you home to the estate. Josh and Elin have been waiting for you."

Fidelia managed a faint smile. "Alright. Once I'm feeling better, I'll come home with you."

The idea of leaving didn't scare Fidelia anymore. She was thinking more clearly these days, realizing how much she'd let her talents slip. Once she was strong enough, she could finally help Laurinda again.

Laurinda's heart lifted at Fidelia's words. She started chatting about the FarrVector press conference, even pulling up a video for Fidelia to watch.

Seeing her and her husband's designs come to life left Fidelia stunned and overjoyed. It really did feel like watching a child of theirs being born.

Tears spilled down her cheeks before she could stop them. She never imagined she'd live to see this day. The new generation was so talented, so full of promise.

Laurinda just sat with her, quietly holding her hand and letting Fidelia cry out all the pain she'd been carrying. Maybe, just maybe, this was what Fidelia needed to finally heal.

"Fidelia, I'm going to make things right for Farr. I swear, none of the people who hurt my parents or Farr are going to get away with it."

"Aiken's trial is still ongoing. He's done more than enough to spend the rest of his life in prison. Baily's been sent back to her hometown, She'll spend her days in a nursing home."

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"The Austin family is finished. Everyone's found their ending."

As Laurinda spoke, Fidelia's tears faded. She pulled Laurinda close and whispered,

"You did it, sweetheart. You finally got out. Thank you, my darling, and congratulations."

Laurinda shook her head, her eyes shining. "I should be thanking you. If you hadn't protected me, I wouldn't be here. If you hadn't kept fighting, I wouldn't have had the courage either. Fidélia, you have to get better.

We have so much more ahead of us.

FarrVector is waiting for you to

come back. Uncle would want to see

you make your dream come true."

Fidelia clung to Laurinda, silent, but her arms spoke for her. She wanted to go back.

She wanted to finish what they started, together.

\*\*\*

Adolphus paused outside Earl's office and knocked softly.

"Come in," Earl called, not looking away from his computer screen.

Adolphus stepped inside, pulled out a chair, and sat right across from him.

"Can we talk about Fidelia's condition?"

Earl's grip on his mouse tightened. He stared at the screen, silent for so long that the clock on the wall ticked loudly in the quiet room. Finally, he said, "Why did you have to come to Apex? Why are you with Laurinda? I've tried my best to stay away from you, so why are you still messing up my life?"

He just couldn't figure it out. Adolphus always seemed to show up, like a shadow he couldn't shake.

Adolphus had always outshined him, even as kids. The mentor Earl desperately wanted chose Adolphus instead.

Adolphus was the youngest son of the Lane family, spoiled and loved by everyone, given every opportunity and resource he could ever want.

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## Chapter 183

[ 789 words ]

He'd spent his whole life trying to be better, always pushing himself, but it never seemed to matter. No matter how hard he tried, he could never beat Adolphus. And to make things worse, his mom never let him forget it, always telling him to learn from Adolphus, as if he wasn't enough on his own.

Then, one day, he found out Adolphus didn't care about psychology at all. That was when he decided to drop surgery and switch to studying psychology and psychiatry. His family thought he was wasting his potential, throwing away his future for something that made no sense to them. But none of them really knew the truth. If he hadn't made that change, he probably would have lost his mind. He couldn't take the endless comparisons, everyone acting like Adolphus was the standard and he was just trying to keep up.

That was why he let go of everything he had lined up in Cabinda and stayed in Apex. He was done living in Adolphus's shadow. Or at least, that's what he thought.

But Adolphus still showed up. Worse than that, he ended up with Laurinda.

Earl just stood there, silent, not trusting himself to speak. Adolphus was the first to break the silence.

"My dad sent me to Apex. I told you before I came, remember? You said you didn't mind."

He could tell what Earl was upset about, but he really hadn't meant to take anything from him. When he realized his presence was messing with Earl, he had tried to step back. It didn't matter. Somehow, they still ended up here.

"I didn't know you'd get with Laurinda," Earl said, his voice rough. "Do you have any idea how hard I worked just to get her to be my friend? The second you showed up, it was like... like none of it mattered."

He trailed off, not willing to say it out loud. He didn't want to admit what was happening between Adolphus and Laurinda. He'd planned everything out, waiting for Laurinda's exams to finish before telling her how he felt. But as soon as Adolphus appeared, it was over before it even began.

"So you told her I was engaged to Adah on purpose? Just to make her think I was taken and keep her away from me?"

Adolphus let out a low laugh and grabbed a cigarette from the table. He lit it, then took a slow drag, looking way too relaxed for Earl's liking.

Watching him act so calm made Earl feel like the universe was mocking him. No matter how hard he worked, Adolphus always seemed to win without even trying.

"Yeah, I did it on purpose," Adolphus said, not even bothering to deny it. "I also had my mom convince your aunt to set you up with someone from the Charles family. If you got married, then maybe I'd finally get a chance to go back to Cabinda and build something for myself."

"What are you so afraid of?" Adolphus asked, blowing out a ring of smoke. His voice was steady, no hint of anger or excitement, like none of it really touched him.

That was what Earl hated most. It always felt like Adolphus got everything handed to him, and then acted like he didn't even care.

"Why aren't you saying anything? Worried that any girl you bring home will end up liking me more?"

Adolphus looked at him with a cold smirk.

"You're being ridiculous, Earl. Laurinda isn't someone you can control or win like a prize. She's her own person, and she makes her own choices. Even if I wasn't here, do you really think you could make her fall for you?"

"When you act like this, you're just putting yourself down, and you're disrespecting Laurinda too. If she really liked you, nothing Leid would have changed that. People don't just switch their feelings like flipping a switch."

"You don't have to keep seeing me as your rival. I've told you a thousand times, I didn't go into medicine because of you, and I never wanted to compete. If I did, I wouldn't have skipped the entrance exams and just left."

He stubbed out his cigarette and finally looked straight at Earl.

"We used to be best friends, you know? I don't even remember when things changed. Maybe just having me around really does make things harder for you, but

that's not something I can fix. I'm not going anywhere."

"I didn't come here to rehash the

past or fix whatever's going on between us: I came to talk to you about Fidelia, If your personal feelings are going to get in the way of her treatment, then I'll have to

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consider transferring her somewhere else."

"Psychiatric cases are delicate. It's too easy for mistakes to happen. I don't want to see you mess this up."

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## Chapter 184

[ 573 words ]

Adolphus's voice carried a warning, and Earl lifted his head to meet Adolphus's gaze. There was a storm brewing in his eyes.

"Are you doubting my professional judgment?"

"No, nothing like that. I just want to make sure nothing goes wrong. Fidelia means everything to Laurinda. You wouldn't use Fidelia to get to Laurinda, would you?" Adolphus stared at him, his expression hard to read.

Under the weight of that look, Earl nodded.

"You don't have to worry. Fidelia is my patient, and I'll do right by her. I won't let my personal feelings interfere. As for Laurinda, I respect her choices. I'd never do anything to hurt her."

"That's good enough for me. Let's talk about Fidelia's condition. I've come up with a prescription based on her current health. Take a look and tell me if there's anything you think we should change."

Adolphus scribbled down the prescription and handed it over. Earl scanned the list, and his eyes brightened with genuine admiration. He had to admit, Adolphus really was a genius. He was just as skilled with traditional medicine as he was with modern treatments.

"No issues with the meds. Are you thinking of making them into a soup, or pills? Anything she should avoid eating?"

Now that things had calmed down, Earl was able to talk through Fidelia's case without any tension.

"A soup would be best. As for food, just the usual restrictions. And I also have this recipe for medicinal meals. If you cook for her following this, she'll recover even faster."

Earl took the recipe, glancing over the ingredients and combinations. Even if he'd felt a little stubborn before, he couldn't argue with the results. Adolphus knew his stuff better than he'd imagined.

"Alright, I think I've covered everything. I'll stop by again next week to check Fidelia's pulse and adjust her treatment if needed."

He was giving Earl a heads-up, hoping to avoid any awkwardness later.

"Got it. We're out of medicine here, though. Are you sending someone over, or should I order from the pharmacy?"

"I'll handle it. Someone will deliver everything you need."

Adolphus stood up, straightening his clothes. He hesitated for a second, then looked at Earl.

"I can tell Laurinda trusts you. I hope my being here doesn't mess up your friendship with her."

Earl hadn't expected him to say that. His hands paused over his keyboard.

"I know. Just don't hurt her. Anyone

who makes her cry is going to have

to answer

me. Even if you're my

uncle."

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"Don't worry. That's never going to happen."

Adolphus left Earl's office, a small smile tugging at his lips. He actually looked pretty pleased.

He walked down the hall and found Laurinda sitting on a bench outside Fidelia's room.

"Why aren't you inside?"

"Fidelia cried herself to sleep. I was going to find you and talk to Earl about what she wants, but I heard him complaining about you through the door so I stayed out here. Are you guys okay?"

Adolphus sat down beside her, taking her hand and holding it gently.

"We're fine, I think. I didn't realize he had so much resentment toward me. I've said everything I can. Whether he works through it is up to him. I gave him the prescription, and I'll have the herbs delivered. Fidelia will get better."

Laurinda trusted Adolphus's medical skills, and she knew she could rely on Earl.

"You two talked for so long, we missed lunch. I'm starving. Want to get something to eat?"

"Absolutely. And after lunch, I'll take you to a movie."

"Deal. Let me check what's showing."

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## Chapter 185

[ 626 words ]

Adolphus stood up, still holding Laurinda's hand, and together they left the care center, fingers laced and steps in sync.

Earl lingered by the window, watching them walk away. His emotions tangled together, bittersweet and heavy. Only now did he admit to himself that Adolphus had been right all along. Laurinda saw him as a friend, just a friend. Nothing more.

Maybe that wasn't such a bad thing. Their friendship was something genuine, something that could last a lifetime if he let it. He took comfort in that thought.

"Earl, you missed lunch in the cafeteria, so I brought you something." The head nurse stood in the doorway, her cheeks rosy, a shy smile lighting up her round face as she looked at him with hopeful eyes. "Are you hungry?"

"Thanks, but I had a late breakfast. I'm not hungry yet." Earl kept his tone gentle as he turned her down. He couldn't lead someone on when he knew he couldn't offer anything real in return.

That realization made him laugh softly. Funny how everything suddenly made sense. Wasn't this the same reason he'd never confessed his feelings to Laurinda? Even if she had been interested, he couldn't promise her a future where his family wouldn't cause her pain.

But Adolphus could. He had complete control in the Lane family. No one would dare give Laurinda a hard time while he was around.

In a way, Earl felt relieved. The Austin family was gone, but Laurinda had someone who could look out for her now. That was a good thing.

\*\*\*

Laurinda sat in the car, scrolling through her phone and chatting with Adolphus about what movies were playing after dinner. Their laughter filled the quiet car, and everything felt easy for a moment.

Meanwhile, back at the Gates Group, chaos had taken over the tech department. Finn's sudden appearance had everyone on edge, especially the engineers who'd watched the FarrVector launch.

Finn slammed the folder his assistant handed him onto the conference table. His glare swept over the room, landing on the engineers and project managers who seemed to shrink under his stare.

"This is what you've done with three years and all my investment? Do you even realize how much I've put into this? And this is all you have to show for it?"

If he hadn't seen FarrVector's new product that morning, Finn might have still believed their own research

was groundbreaking, maybe even

industry-leading. But now, staring at the reality, he felt like everything he'd invested was just gone.

"Finn, we..."

"I don't want to hear it. I want to see something that beats FarrVector. Even if it's not better, it can't be worse. You have one month. If you don't deliver, the whole team is done" Finn dropped the ultimatum and walked out, not looking back. The room fell silent as the engineers

stared at each other, stunned.

They all thought Finn had lost it. One month? Even with another three years, they couldn't catch up to FarrVector.

Finn had barely stepped out of the building when his phone rang. It was Aileen, and he could hear her crying on the other end.

"Finn, Bagot wants a divorce. He took the kids for a paternity test....."

Her voice, all shaky and miserable, made Finn's frustration boil over. He wanted to shout, "Then just get divorced, but he bit his tongue, thinking about the partnership between the Gates and Charles families.

"Don't make a scene. What matters right now is keeping Bagot calm. The kids are his, right?"

Finn couldn't believe Aileen had gotten herself into this mess. He'd barely managed to bury the scandal with Aiken years ago. Now she was making the same mistakes all over again.

"They should be..... I think they're his....." Aileen sounded scared, her words trailing off. Even she didn't seem sure anymore, and her excuses were falling flat.

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[ 590 words ]

She was freaking out. If she got divorced, her life would be over.

"Should? Aileen, are you serious right now? Listen to me. I don't care what you have to do, that baby has to be Bagot's. I shouldn't have to explain how you make that happen, right?"

"I'll call Bagot, try to calm him down. And you need to get a grip on your temper. He's got a short fuse as it is, so don't go pushing his buttons."

Before Aileen could get another word in, Finn ended the call. He immediately dialed Bagot, but the phone just rang and rang. No answer.

Finn set his phone down and rubbed his temples, feeling the headache pulsing behind his eyes. Lately, it felt like everything was falling apart and nothing was working out the way he needed.

Ever since the Baker family took over the Austin Group, Baal seemed to have found new confidence, always coming up with ways to make Finn's life harder.

Thinking about the Austin family brought Laurinda's smug face to his mind. Regret washed over him. He wished he'd seen through that girl from the very start.

He should've been tougher, used the engagement to keep her and Fabian together, never letting Laura come in and mess things up.

He should've helped Laurinda tighten her hold on the Austin family. That way, the Austins would be a real ally for him.

But now, Fabian was a mess, and Laurinda was only getting stronger.

Finn still couldn't figure out how Laurinda had become even more impressive after leaving the Austin family. Was she hiding something all along?

Then it hit him. Maybe he finally understood Laurinda's secret. The urge to get her on his side got even stronger.

"Take me to the villa outside the city. I want to see Fabian."

The driver didn't hesitate. At the next traffic light, he turned the car around and headed toward the Gates family's estate on the outskirts.

Forty minutes later, Finn walked into the villa. Fabian was sprawled on the couch, looking totally out of it. The sight made anger bubble up in Finn's chest.

"How long are you gonna keep sulking like this? I told you, if you'd just get yourself together, I could help you get your life back. Do you have to give up like this?"

Fabian didn't react. He just rolled over and said nothing.

Finn couldn't take it anymore. He grabbed Fabian by the collar and pulled him up off the sofa.

"Who are you trying to impress with this pathetic act? I warned you that night to stay away from taura. I told you she wasn't good news, but you didn't listen. You just had to go chasing some romantic snowstorm fantasy."

"Fine, I can chalk that up to being young and stupid, wanting what you want. But why drag Laurinda into this? Can't you see it? Laurinda's life didn't change at all after she left the Austin family. That's because she's got power. She's the one holding the real core of the Austins."

For a long moment, Fabian just stared at him, dazed. Then he finally spoke.

"You're saying Laurinda did this to me? Seriously? Dad, you've got to be kidding. Laurinda's just a stray the Austins kicked out. You really think she could ruin me?"

Fabian pulled away from Finn's grip. He could accept that he'd been destroyed, but he refused to believe Laurinda had anything to do with it.

Deep down, he couldn't help but look down on her. To him, Laurinda was just someone the Austins had

thrown away There was no way she

Could be powerful enough to bring him this low.

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[ 602 words ]

Finn could see that Fabian wasn't listening, so he changed tactics.

"Don't you want to get back at Laurinda? Even if she didn't do this to you directly, she's involved. Aren't you going to do something about it?"

Fabian's eyes flashed. "I want her to suffer. I want her on her knees, begging for mercy. I want her to feel everything Laura and I went through. I want to ruin her."

It was the first time since everything happened that Fabian looked like he actually wanted to do something. Of course he wanted revenge. Laurinda had messed up his and Laura's lives, and the only way to get rid of the anger burning in his chest was to make her pay.

"What do I need to do?" he asked.

"If you want revenge, you have to listen to me. Go pack your things and come home. I'll tell you what to do next."

Finn told him to get changed. He refused to believe that his carefully raised son was truly hopeless.

He still believed Fabian had potential. If they could bring Laurinda down, everything she held would be his.

\*\*\*

Laurinda and Adolphus stepped out of the movie theater just as her phone buzzed. She fished it out of her pocket, glanced at the screen, and her eyes narrowed a little. Adolphus caught the look on her face. "What's up?"

"Finn's taken Fabian out. No idea what they're planning yet."

At the mention of Fabian, Adolphus frowned. "Are you going to do something about it?"

He watched her closely, waiting for her answer. From her expression, he could tell she was ready for some fun.

"Hmm... not yet. I want to see what Finn's up to first. It would be such a shame to ruin all the plotting of a fifty-year-old man before he even gets started."

Laurinda let out a laugh. Just

e|↑

thinking about how many times Finn had failed because of her was hilarious. Now, she was even a little excited to see what he try next

"Alright. When you're done playing, just let me know. I'll take care of them," Adolphus said, his tone gentle.

He always made it clear he'd handle whatever mess she left behind. As long as he was around, she never had to hold back.

Hearing him say that sent a sweet

warmth through her. She didn't actually need anyone to clean up after her but it still felt different when he said it. She stepped closer, tilting her head up to meet his eyes.

"So, you really can handle anything I do?" she teased.

"Absolutely. Anything that makes you happy, I'll handle it. No questions asked."

He looked completely serious. He wasn't just making empty promises. With his power now, he could cover for anything she did.

And even if she ever caused trouble that was too much for him, he'd just work harder until he could deal with it.

Laurinda couldn't help but smile at his earnest look. She reached up, pinched his chin, and stretched up to press a soft kiss to his lips.

"Adolphus, you might regret saying that. I never think about the consequences. One day I might really bring the world down."

He grinned. "Then I'll just have to be strong enough to hold up the sky for you."

He loved it when she got that sly, foxy lookin her eyes. She was so clever and adorable at the same time. He always had this urge to keep her all to himself, to hide this side of her away from everyone else.

Laurinda and Adolphus spent a while playing games at the arcade. Then Adolphus's phone rang. He picked up, and Sam's voice came through the line.

"Adolphus, we're at Aeterna. When are you and Laurinda coming?"

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[ 573 words ]

"We'll be there soon."

Adolphus glanced at Laurinda, who was completely caught up in playing the claw machine. He couldn't help but smile a little. It was rare to see her so into something, and he wanted her to enjoy herself for a bit longer.

After hanging up the phone, Adolphus walked over and saw Laurinda chatting with a little girl. The girl was pointing at a doll inside the machine, eyes shining with hope.

Laurinda crouched down and talked with her for a moment, then started feeding coins into the machine. She tried a few times, missing each one, but finally, she managed to snag the doll the little girl wanted.

The girl squealed with happiness, threw her arms around Laurinda's leg, and thanked her in a sweet, gentle voice. Before leaving, she dug into her pocket, pulled out a lollipop, and handed it to Laurinda as a thank you.

Laurinda took the lollipop, ruffled the girl's hair, and thanked her right back, waving as the girl skipped off.

Once she was alone, Laurinda unwrapped the candy and popped it in her mouth. The sweet, creamy taste made her smile. For a moment, she just stood there, feeling completely content.

When she turned around, she caught Adolphus watching her, a warm smile in his eyes.

"How long have you been standing there?" she asked, grinning. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"I was just watching my girl make someone else's day. Didn't want to ruin the moment."

Adolphus stepped closer and gently draped his jacket over her shoulders, helping her slip her arms through the sleeves.

"Sam and the others are waiting for us at Aeterna," he said. "Ready to go?"

Laurinda nodded. "Yeah, let's go."

They got out of the car at Aeterna and headed inside. Spotting some familiar faces, Laurinda nudged Adolphus and whispered, "Did Sam invite the police department to dinner?"

Adolphus glanced at the group and shook his head. "I don't think so. Maybe they're just having a team dinner or something."

He seemed just as puzzled.

"We'll ask Sam when we see him," Laurinda said.

"Sounds good."

Her curiosity faded just as quickly as it came.

They walked to their private room. As soon as Laurinda pushed open the door she spotted Kinsey sitting next to Sam. She stopped them tracks, suddenly not wanting to go in at all.

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The sound of the door made everyone look over. Laurinda met their eyes and gave an awkward little laugh. "Uh... sorry, wrong room."

Sam immediately stood up, all

smiles, and waved her in. "Laurinda,

it's not the wrong room! I booked this one for us. Come on, both of you!"

Laurinda's eyes found Kinsey, who was already watching her. She really didn't want to step inside.

Adolphus leaned in, speaking softly. "What's wrong?"

Kinsey chimed in with a teasing smile, though his eyes looked

anythi

but playful. "Yeah, what's

the matter? Scared I'm going to call you out or something?"

His gaze was sharp, and Laurinda suddenly felt the urge to bolt.

Before she could move, Kinsey stood up and walked over. He put a hand on her shoulder. "Come with me. We need to talk."

Everyone else in the room exchanged looks. It was clear they all knew who Kinsey was.

Sam glanced at Adolphus. "Wait, Laurinda knows Kinsey?"

Adolphus just watched Laurinda's back as she walked away, not saying a word. Honestly, he was just as surprised.

Out on the balcony, Laurinda followed Kinsey, dragging her feet a little. The cold wind made her shiver.

Kinsey noticed and, instead of scolding her like he probably planned, his tone softened without even realizing it.

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## Chapter 189

[ 610 words ]

"You really know how to keep things interesting. You've barely recovered, and I could maybe forgive you for the fight at Apex, but what were you doing in Northland? If Interpol hadn't gotten in touch, I wouldn't even know you'd run off again. Seriously, Laurinda, do you have a death wish or something?"

Laurinda blinked at Kinsey's exasperated face and tried to look innocent. He wasn't having it.

"Listen, I get that you want to catch those people, but your main priority right now is getting healthy. Do what people your age are supposed to do and let us handle the rest. I promise, if we hear anything, you'll be the first to know."

Laurinda nodded, all sweet and obedient. She reached out and patted his arm gently.

"I hear you, Kinsey. See? I'm back safe and sound. I swear, I won't sneak off again. But look at you, getting all worked up. If you make yourself sick worrying about me, what am I supposed to tell your wife?"

She gave him a cheeky grin, and Kinsey just couldn't stay mad at her. She always had that mischievous spark in her eyes. But when he remembered she'd shown up with Adolphus, his brow furrowed again.

"I haven't been around Apex lately. How did you end up hanging out with those people? They're all from Cabinda, and none of them are simple."

Laurinda understood what he was really saying. He wanted her to be careful.

"The guy who came with me is the school doctor. He's actually really good, been helping me get back on my feet. Need a checkup, Kinsey? I can set you up with an appointment."

Kinsey gave her a look. "Cut it out. Just... be careful with them, alright? They're not exactly ordinary people."

"I know. But I don't think any of them would hurt me. I mean, I'm just too adorable, right?"

Kinsey looked at her, and the worry in his eyes only deepened. He sighed, shaking his head.

"Your dad had it easy, you know.

He's gone, so now he's left me to deal with the stress of watching you grow up. Seriously, if something happens, call me. Don't try to handle

These

everything by yourself.

people... well, just promise me you'll be careful."

Laurinda grinned. "Don't worry, Kinsey. If something comes up that I can't handle, I'll definitely call you. Uncle, how's the situation with Aiken? Is the case about to be transferred?"

She hadn't forgotten her promise to Aiken-she'd told him she'd take care of him. No way she was letting him have it easy.

Kinsey shook his head. "His case is still under review. He keeps appealing, even tried to sue you, saying you had someone deal with him inside. But trust me, no matter what he tries, he's not getting out."

That was exactly what Laurinda wanted to hear. She glanced up at the sky, and even though it was gray and gloomy, she thought it looked pretty nice.

"Alright, that's enough lecturing from me. It's freezing out here. Go inside, and remember to take care of yourself. No more drama, okay?"

Laurinda smiled. "Got it. You don't need to worry. I'm fine."

Laurinda and Kinsey headed back inside. When they reached the private dining room, they said their goodbyes. Tonight was the police department's annual dinner -no wonder everyone was here.

As soon as Laurinda walked back in, everyone's attention shifted to her. She quickly noticed there were a few unfamiliar faces.

Adolphus stood up and came over, casually slipping his arm around her waist and pulling her a little closer.

"Let me introduce you," he said, his tone easy "These are my friends from Cabinda-Edison, Hale, Orville, and arrell They're here visiting Sam, so we figured wed all get together for a meal."

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[ 520 words ]

Laurinda nodded politely to the group. Adolphus took her hand and looked worried. "Your hands are freezing."

He guided her to a seat, poured her some hot tea, and gently placed the cup in her hands so she could warm up.

Everyone stared, completely stunned. Seeing Adolphus, usually so cool and distant, fussing over someone like this was almost unbelievable. If they tried to tell anyone back in Cabinda, no one would buy it.

This trip had already paid off. They came for the FarrVector product launch, but getting a glimpse of this side of Adolphus was way more interesting.

"Adolphus, you've introduced us to each other, but aren't you going to tell us who this lovely lady is?" Hale asked, giving the others a look.

"She's my girlfriend. Laurinda." Adolphus said, his eyes never leaving her face, as if he was worried she might feel awkward.

Laurinda caught the tension in his gaze. Holding the warm cup, she wondered if she should make things official, since this kind of felt like meeting the family. She paused for just a moment, then raised her cup with a confident smile.

"Nice to meet you all. I hope you'll look out for me in the future."

"No need to be so polite! You're Adolphus's girlfriend now. Anytime you visit

Cabinda, we'll take care of you. Don't even think about being a stranger," someone chimed in.

Everyone lifted their cups for a toast, grinning from ear to ear. They were buzzing with excitement, thrilled to have front-row seats to the hottest new gossip. They couldn't wait to brag about this back home.

Laurinda didn't really get why they were so hyped. She glanced at Adolphus, who was giving her such a goofy smile that she wondered if there was something in the water at Aeterna. How was everyone acting tipsy before dinner had even started?

Meanwhile, Harrell had been quietly watching Laurinda. He couldn't spot anything strange about her, but he wasn't sure if that was because she was hiding it too well.

After they'd finished eating, Laurinda excused herself to the bathroom. Adolphus and Harrell slipped out of the private room and stood by the window.

Harrell spoke quietly. "I didn't see anything off about her. Maybe she's just really good at hiding it, or maybe there's nothing wrong."

"We probably just haven't touched at nerve," Adolphus replied. "Her sleep issues aren't physical, it's more mental. I took her to a temple a few days ago. She seemed a bit better after that. I'll keep an eye on things. Are you traveling again soon?"

Harrell shook his head. "Not for a while. If you need anything, just call me. I'll come running."

"Thanks. I hope I never have to take you up on that."

"Same here. I'd rather never earn a cent from you."

They both smiled. All they really wanted was for the people around them to be happy and healthy, never needing a doctor's help.

Dinner was over, but nobody felt like calling it a night. Laurinda and Adolphus didn't want to kill the vibe, so they all headed out together to Apex's biggest club.

Just as they were about to head in, they ran into someone none of them expected to see.

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## Chapter 191

[ 614 words ]

Orville stood at the entrance of Azure Heights and pulled a sleek black card from his pocket. He handed it to the receptionist, and just like that, the staff led their group straight up to a private suite on the top floor.

Laurinda didn't come to places like this often, but she definitely knew about Azure Heights. It was famous for a reason. She remembered how Fabian had once tried to impress her by dropping thirty million on a membership, but even that only got him into a regular VIP room. The suite they were in now was on a whole different level.

Noticing her curiosity, Adolphus leaned down and spoke softly right beside her ear. "Azure Heights belongs to the Williams Family. It's the same series as The Summit in Cabinda."

Laurinda couldn't help but be a little surprised. Her own businesses had nothing to do with entertainment, but everyone knew how much money there was in this industry, and The Summit was basically at the top of the game. The profits must be insane.

As Laurinda tried to wrap her head around how big the Williams Family's empire really was, Orville walked over and handed her the black card the staff had just returned to him.

"Laurinda, since it's our first time meeting and I didn't bring a gift, take this. You can use it at any Williams Group club, and you'll never have to pay a cent. Everything's on the house."

Laurinda stared at him, stunned. That was way too generous for a first meeting. She was just about to politely turn it down when Adolphus took the card for her. "Keep it," he said. "This is nothing to him."

Orville just grinned, not the least bit offended. If anything, he seemed even more pleased.

"He's right. For you, Laurinda, this is just a little something. Next time you're in Cabinda, I'll make sure you get an even bigger gift. Seriously, don't stand on ceremony. Our friendship with Adolphus goes way beyond stuff like this."

Laurinda could tell he meant every word, so she simply took the card from Adolphus, thanked Orville, and slipped it into her pocket.

The suite at the top of Azure Heights was packed with everything you could want for a good time. There were separate areas for karaoke, gaming, dancing, pool, chess, and even card games.

Someone suggested a game of pool, and before anyone knew it, they were betting ten thousand a shot.

Laurinda lounged against Adolphus, her eyes following the balls on the pool table, a flicker of excitement in her gaze.

Adolphus leaned in and asked, "Want me to play a round with you?"

Laurinda laughed, tilting her head up to meet his eyes. "How about a million per shot?"

He smiled. "You're on. Let's go."

He took her hand and led her over to another pool table, letting her pick whichever cue she wanted.

Laurinda glanced at the cues lined up on the rack. To her, they all looked pretty much the same, so she just picked one at random.

Everyone watching assumed she

was a total beginner. They crowded around eager to see what would happen – and probably hoping

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Adolphus would let her win.

"Laurinda, that cue's not great. Use mine, it's better," Orville offered, handing his over.

A few others joined in, grinning.

"Yeah, take Orville's. Adolphus is way too good. You'll stand a better chance with that one."

Laurinda shot a look at Adolphus, who was standing by with a slight, knowing smile. If he was really the skilled, she definitely couldn't afford to let her guard down.

She accepted Orville's cue with a thank you and took her place at the table, ready to make the first shot.

Sam quickly set up the balls for her, then stepped back and gave her an encouraging nod.

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## Chapter 192

[ 618 words ]

Laurinda bent over the pool table, cue in hand, and took the break shot like she owned the place. Everyone watched her, a little too sure she'd mess up, but her smooth, confident moves caught them off guard. Even Adolphus looked surprised. He clearly hadn't realized she actually knew how to play.

She cleared the table in the first round. Nobody said a thing. Orville swallowed hard, totally speechless. Laurinda made even the trickiest shots look easy, like she had an answer for every impossible angle.

"Laurinda, it's not that you can't pick a good cue," someone finally managed, "it's just that you can win with any cue, right?"

Laurinda met their shocked stares and just laughed. "Not really. I just got lucky today. Plus, Orville's cue is pretty great. That's probably why I managed it."

Adolphus watched her, calm and collected as everyone showered her with praise. His gaze softened, and he pulled out his phone, sending her the money from their bet.

Laurinda's phone buzzed. She glanced down, saw the transfer from Adolphus, and blinked at the number on the screen.

"How did you send so much? Don't you have a limit? My account hits the cap every year."

"I don't," Adolphus replied, smiling as he set up the balls for the next game.

The group exchanged glances, feeling almost attacked by the sweetness. Was it even possible for a couple to be this cute? It was like a sugar overload.

Game after game, Laurinda and Adolphus traded shots, perfectly matched. But each time, right at the end, Adolphus would let Laurinda sink the last ball.

The single guys got less interested the longer it went on, but none of them wanted to leave. Sure, the lovey-dovey stuff was a bit much, but you had to admit, their pool skills were next level.

Finally, Laurinda decided she'd won enough. She'd made a cool twenty million and set her cue aside with a grin.

"I'm done. If I play any more, I'll feel guilty about taking your money."

Everyone rolled their eyes. The two of them weren't just sweet-they were almost toxic. Was the goal to make everyone else jealous?

Adolphus didn't seem to care about the teasing. He just looked at Laurinda, his eyes soft, a gentle smile tugging at his lips.

"Anyone else think Adolphus is acting different tonight?" someone whispered.

People noticed, but nobody dared say anything negative about him out loud. They just gossiped quietly.

Sam, who'd known Adolphus the longest, was the only one brave enough to poke fun.

"He's basically floating. You guys don't see how gooey he gets every time he looks at Laurinda? Seriously, enough staring. And keep this to yourselves, okay? Whatever's going on with them, let's not spread it around."

The group all mimed zipping their lips, then slipped out to the lounge, ordered drinks, and left the couple to themselves.

With everyone gone, Laurinda

walked up to Adolphus. He was still grinning like an idiot. She went up on tiptoe, arms around his neck and he bent down to meet her.

"Can you stop smiling like that? You've had that goofy look on your face all night. Get a grip, will you?"

Adolphus just laughed, wrapped his arms

upound her waist, and lifted her

up onto the pool table. He leaned in, brushing his lips against hers in gentle lingering Kiss content

This one felt different—so soft and slow, like she was the most precious thing in his world.

Laurinda held onto his shoulders, worried she might slide right off and make a scene.

When they finally came up for air, both a little breathless, Adolphus pressed his forehead to hers.

"Hi, girlfriend," he whispered, voice low and a little rough. "I'm Adolphus. Really nice to meet you."

Laurinda's eyes shimmered, making her look even more irresistible, like she was glowing from the inside out.

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## Chapter 193

[ 709 words ]

She tipped her head up and brushed a soft kiss over his lips, her voice gentle and playful.

"Hi, boyfriend. I feel so lucky to be spoiled by you. Take care of me, okay?"

They shared a look that said everything, happiness lighting up their faces, like the rest of the world had faded away until it was just the two of them.

After a little more time lost in each other, Adolphus laced his fingers with Laurinda's and led her out. He glanced over at the group already drinking and waved to Harrell, who was sitting quietly in the corner.

"It's getting late. We're heading home," he called.

Harrell just nodded, choosing not to stand up and risk interrupting the others, who were still having a great time.

Once Laurinda and Adolphus stepped out of the elevator, someone suddenly rushed toward them.

"Adolphus!"

Laurinda's expression turned cold as she watched the woman float over, all flutter and fake sweetness. She recognized her instantly. It really was Adah.

Even though Laurinda had half-expected to see her, it was still a surprise. Hadn't Adah gotten the message last time? Did she really have the nerve to show up again?

Adah caught sight of Laurinda and shot her a glare before turning away with a little huff. Then she turned back to Adolphus, her whole face changing into a sugary smile.

"Adolphus," she practically purred.

Laurinda felt a chill at the way Adah said his name. Her fingers twitched, itching for a reason to put Adah in her place.

Just as Laurinda started to lift her hand, Adolphus's voice cut through the tension, deep and sharp.

"Stop. That's disgusting. You don't know me well enough to talk to me like that. If you're sick, go see a doctor. Don't come out here and make everyone else miserable."

Before Adah could get another word in, Adolphus squeezed Laurinda's hand and guided her away.

Laurinda's hand curled into a fist inside her pocket. What a waste. She didn't even get the chance to slap that smug look off Adah's face.

Adah stood frozen, stomping her foot in frustration, her gaze burning with hatred as she glared after Laurinda.

She despised Laurinda. Ever since Laurinda showed up, everything in her life had started to unravel. Lacy had dropped her partnership with the Charles Group because of Laurinda After Adah's riding.

accident, she ended up in t

hospital, and somehow got labeled as a mental case.

Now she couldn't live a normal life in Cabinda. Even the Charles family blamed her for losing the deal, kicking her out to Apex.

But what really got under her skin was how Laurinda had the audacity to chase after Adolphus. As if an outsider like her could ever dream of marrying into the Lane family. Absolutely ridiculous.

Once Adah figured out how to clear her medical record, she was determined to win Adolphus back. She was sure of it. She would be his wife, no one else.

And when that day came, she'd make Laurinda pay.

Back at the manor, Adolphus and Laurinda walked into the living room and spotted a brand new Hermès bag sitting on the coffee table.

"Did we have someone over?" Laurinda asked, sounding puzzled.

The butler came out from the dining room, carrying a tray of freshly washed fruit.

"No, miss, we haven't had any guests."

Laurinda shrugged off her coat and handed it to Adolphus, eyeing the bag again. It looked weirdly familiar, but she couldn't quite place it.

The butler set the fruit down and picked up the bag, which looked freshly cleaned and polished. He handed it to Laurinda and said, this yours? I found it in the storage room and thought you'd forgotten about it, so I brought it out for you." Content

He knew Laurinda didn't care much for luxury brands, but every year the boutiques sent over their latest designs. He had just assumed she left behind after some event and a housekeeper had put it away.

Laurinda glanced over the bag and could tell immediately it wasn't hers. She took it,

crouched down, and opened it, tipping everything out onto the rug.

Lipstick, makeup, a wallet, a phone, and a bunch of random trinkets scattered across the floor.

Laurinda sifted through the mess, picked up the wallet, and flipped it open. A familiar face stared back at her from an ID, and her eyebrows lifted, a slow realization dawning.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

## **- Chapter 194**

### **Chapter 194**

[ 639 words ]

It was kind of funny, actually. Laurinda never expected to find a picture of her own boyfriend tucked inside another woman's wallet.

Adolphus came back from hanging up their coats and spotted Laurinda crouched on the floor, examining something. He knelt down next to her, curiosity written all over his face.

"Is this you?" she asked, holding the photo so close to his face he had to blink to focus.

Adolphus squinted for a second, then realized what he was looking at. It was a photo from his family portrait. He honestly had no clue how it ended up here.

"Yeah, that's me. That's our family photo. Where did you get this?"

Laurinda shook the wallet in her hand. She hadn't found anything useful inside, but she had a pretty good guess about its owner.

If she remembered right, Adah had caused a scene at the hospital because she lost her bag and couldn't get in touch with the Charles family. That was what led Adolphus to admit her to the psych ward.

But how did Adah's bag wind up in their house?

Adolphus wrinkled his nose and brushed the wallet out of Laurinda's hands. Then he grabbed her wrist, gently pulled her up, and led her straight to the bathroom.

He wrapped his arms around her and patiently washed her hands, grumbling under his breath the whole time.

"You really shouldn't touch random stuff like that. Who knows how many germs are on it?"

Laurinda relaxed into his arms, watching his face twist in irritation like he'd just swallowed a bug. She giggled softly.

"So, you figured out whose wallet it is, right?"

Adolphus looked down, meeting her sparkling eyes, and couldn't help but smile at her teasing expression.

"There aren't many people who'd have a copy of our family photo. Adah is one of them. Her sister is my sister-in-law."

"If you know the bag's Adah's, aren't you even a little curious why her stuff is here in my house?"

Laurinda was definitely curious. She didn't know much about what happened that day. She only knew Irvin had drugged Adah, but everything else was a mystery.

Adolphus saw the way she was looking at him, all wide-eyed and full of questions. He sighed, not really wanting to talk about Adah, but he couldn't deny Laurinda anything.

he

"It was probably Irvin or Jasper who brought it here. I'd bet on Jasper. I think he not only took Adah's bag, also deleted the security footage from that day. He wanted to make sure Adah could reach out to Cabinda for help."

Adolphus carefully dried each of Laurinda's fingers, then rubbed in some hand cream for good measure.

Laurinda frowned, surprised Jasper

would go that far. Stealing was definitely wrong, but taking something from Adah didn't seem so bad. After all, Adah had caused her plenty of trouble. Maybe a little payback was fair.

"I'll talk to Jasper about this when I get the chance. Seriously, what was he thinking, bringing something like that into our house?"

When they came out of the bathroom, the butler glanced at them, then pointed to the stuff on the floor. "Laurinda, what should I do with this?"

"Burn it," Laurinda said. "Make sure it's all gone."

The butler nodded, picked up everything, and took it outside to burn it until nothing was left.

The next morning, Laurinda came downstairs and saw Sam waiting in the living room with a guy in glasses and work clothes.

That's when she remembered Sam had asked her for a favor, and she'd completely forgotten about it.

"Have you been waiting long? Why didn't you ask one of the maids to wake me up?" she said as she sat down across from them, feeling a little embarrassed.

Sam had come to ask for help, so he was extra polite and careful with his words.

"Adolphus told me your sleep isn't great, so he said I should wait for you to wake up before we talked business."

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## Chapter 195

[ 631 words ]

Laurinda only just realized that Adolphus wasn't home. The thought of how attentive he'd been left her smiling.

"Come with me to the study," she said.

"Wait," Sam spoke up, grinning. "Adolphus made it very clear you need to eat breakfast before you start working."

Sam was in no hurry. He'd already waited all morning, so what was a few more minutes?

The butler came out of the kitchen carrying a steaming bowl of herbal soup Adolphus had prepared and set it gently on the dining table.

"Laurinda, your breakfast is ready."

"Thanks," Laurinda replied. She nodded at Sam and the guy with glasses, then headed off to eat, leaving them in the living room with their tea.

Once Laurinda was out of earshot, the man with glasses turned to Sam and whispered, "Sam, is this Adolphus's place?"

He'd been dying to know ever since he stepped into the manor. The butler had always been nearby, so he never dared to ask until now.

Sam understood his curiosity. He'd wondered about it too, back when he first came. He just shook his head calmly.

"Nope. This is Laurinda's house. Adolphus is just staying here as a guest, same as us."

The man's mouth dropped open. He'd never seen a place this huge. Even the Bill family's mansion couldn't compare.

"Crazy, right? I was blown away my first time here, too. Sure, land in Apex isn't as pricey as in Cabinda, but owning an estate this massive is something else. There's a small golf course out back, and past that, a bunch of fruit and veggie gardens."

Sam was getting more excited as he spoke. If it wouldn't be weird, he'd honestly love to just move in with Adolphus.

While Sam was gushing about the estate, a maid came in with a man who looked like a contractor.

"Laurinda, the team for the stables is here. Do you want to get them started?"

Stables? Sam thought he was prepared for anything, but he still couldn't help being surprised.

What kind of fortune did Laurinda have? A golf course was already impressive, but a whole stable too? What sort of family was this? She didn't look anything like the so called fake heiress who'd been kicked out.

Even the Austin family at its peak

never had it this good.

"Josh, go ahead and show them around. There are three horses in total. They should have the design plans with them. Take a look, and if it all checks out, they can get started," Laurinda said, her tone casual.

After the accident at Lacy's stables, Laurinda had asked York to buy the empty lot next door. It just felt safer to have her own stables, where she could keep her horses close.

Once she'd finished breakfast and taken the supplements Adolphus had left for her, Laurinda walked out to the living room. She found Sam and the guy with glasses sitting there, both looking completely stunned.

"What's with you two? Is the work problem that bad?"

Sam snapped out of it when he heard her, shaking his head, then nodding.

"We hit a technical roadblock. It's tough, but honestly, what's messing with my head isn't work. It's you building stables at your house."

Laurinda smiled. "Yeah. I've got two horses staying at Laird's equestrian center. One of them just turned six so he's fully grown now. I'm thinking of finding him a girlfriend. When the staples are finished, I'll invite you guys over to hang out."

Laurinda almost never invited outsiders to her home, but

17.

Adolphus's friends were different. She was happy to let them into her private world. They were all young, and it felt nice to have people

enjoy it with.

"Come on, let's head to the study. Let's see what kind of technical trouble you're in."

Laurinda led them into her study, and the tech manager started explaining where their company was at and the challenges they were facing.

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## Chapter 196

[ 606 words ]

After Laurinda figured out the issue, she gave the program a try. Just as expected, it crashed when the progress bar hit eighty-five percent.

She took the laptop from the guy with glasses, sat down, and started rewriting the code. After about an hour, she ran the test again.

By the time the progress bar reached ninety percent, the guy was already sweating. He couldn't wrap his head around it. Three months of stress and endless meetings, and now, an eighteen-year-old girl was solving the whole thing in just an hour.

Ten minutes later, the progress bar finally reached one hundred. He couldn't help but let out a cheer.

"You're a genius. Seriously, a total genius."

Laurinda slid the laptop back to him and told him to run the test again, this time following her steps exactly.

Sure enough, the program ran smoothly without any issues. The guy was so excited, he immediately pulled out his phone and opened his contacts.

"Laurinda, can we add each other? If I run into any technical problems, could I get your advice sometimes?"

"Of course."

Laurinda took out her phone, and they exchanged contact info.

She had noticed that Sam's company was working on surgical robots, which caught her interest too. Maybe she could get York and The Bill Group involved in a collaboration down the line.

Sam was still amazed by Laurinda's skill, his eyes practically sparkling.

"Thank you so much for your help today. About your payment, I'll..."

Laurinda cut him off. She never liked that kind of formal talk. Solving this was no big deal for her, and she didn't feel right accepting any money.

Honestly, she preferred that Sam owe her a favor instead.

"No need to talk about payment. That just makes things awkward. With your friendship with Adolphus, this was nothing. If you ever need any help, just let me know."

Hearing that, Sam immediately felt

like Laurinda was one of his own people now. She wasn't just Adolphus's girlfriend anymore, but also his friend. He'd treat her just the same.

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"Alright, then I'll save the thank-yous. When you and Adolphus come back to Cabinda, dinner is on me. I'll make sure you both are taken care of."

Laurinda wasn't about to turn down Sam's offer. She agreed with a smile and walked them to the door.

Once Sam left, Laurinda didn't waste any time. She'd been off for a few days already and was ready to get back to school.

Final exams were coming up, and there was no way she'd let anyone steal her top spot.

She texted Adolphus as she walked upstairs, then grabbed her bag and caught a ride from the estate.

On her way back to campus, Laurinda got a call from York. He needed her to sign a document, so she asked the driver to swing by FarrVector first.

Walking through the front doors of FarrVector, she saw a huge crowd in the lobby, all holding project proposals. The receptionist and, security guards were busy just trying to keep everything in order

Laurinda took in the scene, almost able to picture all that money flowing straight into her pockets.

She headed straight for the executive elevator, swiped the retinal scanner, and rode up to York's office.

Over in a corner, Edison rubbed his eyes and nudged Hale, who was almost asleep on his shoulder.

"I swear I just saw Adolphus's girlfriend," he whispered. "She went straight up in the executive elevator."

Hale glanced in the direction Edison pointed, looking unconvinced.

"Edison, are you still hungover? That's the CEO's private elevator. How could a high schooler just stroll in like that?"

They both came from wealthy families, and fairy tales weren't their thing. To them, there was no way a regular high school girl like Laurinda could be riding the executive elevator.

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## Chapter 197

[ 593 words ]

Trusting that Laurinda could actually ride the CEO's private elevator was about as likely as pigs growing wings.

"Don't believe me? Let's just wait and see. I bet she'll come out of that elevator again," Edison insisted.

Even though all he'd glimpsed was her back, Edison was sure it was Laurinda who'd just stepped inside. After all, anyone who could make Adolphus bend over

backwards couldn't be ordinary.

They ended up making a bet, ten million on the line.

Suddenly, neither of them felt tired anymore. They both stared at the elevator doors, determined to find out the truth about Laurinda.

The elevator chimed. The doors slid open, and Laurinda walked out, York right behind her.

York had Laurinda's bag in one hand and was gently adjusting the hood of her coat with the other.

They walked so closely, chatting as they went. Laurinda said something, and York leaned in, listening with full attention, sometimes replying. Anyone watching could see that these two were anything but casual acquaintances.

Edison and Orville wanted to go over and say hi, but seeing that scene, their feet were glued to the floor. Their feelings tangled up in confusion.

They looked at each other, lips pressed together, not sure what to do next. It was like they'd just uncovered a huge secret.

"Should we tell Adolphus?" Edison muttered, rubbing his temples. "He really cares about Laurinda. If he finds out about this... I swear, he might turn Apex upside down."

Edison regretted being so nosy. This was not what he wanted to get dragged into.

Orville thought for a second, then shook his head. "Let's just wait. Maybe we misunderstood something."

"How could it be a misunderstanding? Did you see how close they were? I even asked Sam, and apparently, Laurinda's pretty much on her own."

Thinking about Laurinda's family situation made Edison's expression even gloomier. Two people, not related, acting that close-there was no way they were just friends.

Orville stayed silent. He honestly had no clue what to say. He couldn't exactly go to Adolphus and blurt out, "Dude, your girlfriend's cheating on you."

\*\*\*

On her way back to school, Laurinda called her homeroom teacher. The teacher sounded genuinely happy to have her back and told her to head straight to class.

When she got out of the car at the school gate, she spotted a flashy convoy parked nearby.

Standing on the sidewalk, Laurinda watched a group of people approach and immediately noticed Aileen at the front.

She frowned, confused about why Aileen was here. Hadn't Aileen been humiliated enough online? Where did she get the courage to show her face in public like this?

Laurinda was curious, but she had no intention of saying hello.

After everything she'd discovered about Aileen, their relationship was way past just being rivals.

Laurinda turned to leave, but Aileen caught sight of her walking away. She pointed in Laurinda's direction and asked Owen, the man beside her, "Wasn't that Laurinda from your school? Shouldn't she be in class tight now? Why is she wandering. around?"

Owen hadn't seen Laurinda. He looked where Aileen pointed but couldn't spot anyone.

"Sorry, Aileen. I didn't see the student you mentioned, but I'll look into it. If a student skips class, the school will definitely deal with it."

"What's there to look into? Just call

her over now and ask her what she was doing. If your school can't even keep track of one student, I'm seriously going to reconsider my investment."

Aileen sounded so self-righteous, acting like she really cared about the students. When Owen heard her mention the investment, he got

nervous and called Laurinda's net

homeroom teacher right away, asking him to bring Laurinda over to explain herself.

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## Chapter 198

[ 572 words ]

Laurinda had just reached the top of the stairs when she spotted her homeroom teacher hurrying toward her. He was out of breath, his face flushed, and she couldn't help but ask, "Teacher, where are you rushing off to in such a hurry?"

He looked at her with a complicated expression, his mood written all over his face.

"Did you see Owen when you came in just now? He says you were wandering around campus during class. He wants me to bring you to him so he can question you himself."

Laurinda listened, calm as ever. She already had a pretty good idea who was behind this mess. Aileen just never learned, did she? Maybe it was time for her fake little act to get ripped apart once and for all.

She'd been planning to play it slow, but at this rate, what was the point?

Her teacher watched her, clearly worried she was scared about Owen's anger. He tried to reassure her.

"Don't worry, I'm here. I'll speak up for you. You just got back to school, it's normal for you to be around campus. None of this is your fault."

Laurinda gave him a small smile and slipped her phone into her pocket. "I'm fine. Let's go, before Owen decides to give you grief too."

She flashed him a look that said she wasn't worried. If anything, she was curious to see who would end up on the losing side today.

This Owen was trouble, no question. The way he'd rolled out the red carpet for Aileen made it obvious he was after her investment. To impress her, he'd probably stop at nothing to make Laurinda's life difficult.

As they walked toward the school gate, they could see Owen in the distance, practically falling over himself to open a car door for Aileen. She didn't even look like she was planning to get in.

"Director Owen, I brought Laurinda. She just—"

Before her teacher could finish, Owen lifted his hand, cutting him off.

"No need for excuses. Laurinda, you weren't in class when you should have been. Instead, you were wandering all over campus. This is a serious breach of school rules. I've decided you'll get a major demerit, and on top of that you thread three-thousand-word apology at Monday's flag-raising ceremony."

"Director Owen, isn't that a little much? Laurinda—"

"What's too much about it? She's a student here. She needs to follow the rules, end of story. If we let this slide, what's the point of having rules at all? That's settled. don' want to hear any more arguments."

n't

He didn't give Laurinda's teacher a chance to say another word. Pleasing Aileen

was all he cared about now. Laurinda was no longer the school's favorite, and Aileen was the one he wanted to impress.

Laurinda stood quietly to the side, her eyes cool as she watched Aileen's smug little show.

Aileen met her gaze, and for a moment, her smile slipped, but she quickly recovered. She wasn't scared of Laurinda anymore. The Austin family was ruined, and Laurinda, now just a girl with nowhere to go, was hardly a threat.

Besides, Aiken had promised her ages ago that the photos Laurinda had taken were long gone. There was nothing left for Laurinda to use against her.

"What's with that look? Not happy?"

that

Laurinda, I'm going to rip off your mask in front of everyone today. You're not going to boss people around here anymore. Don't think don't know you bullied your classmates. Laura left because of you, didn't she?"

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## Chapter 199

[ 637 words ]

Aileen glanced at the crowd of students gathered around her, a smug grin lighting up her face. Getting rid of Laurinda now felt as easy as squashing a bug.

"Have you all seen what's blowing up online? The Austin family is bankrupt. They're out of the picture at Apex. And Laurinda? She was thrown out of her family even before it all

went down, with nothing but the clothes on her back. Don't let her current act fool you. She's not some fancy heiress anymore. She's just a broke orphan."

Aileen could hardly contain her excitement as she kept going, her words tumbling over each other. "She grew up surrounded by rich people. She knows all the tricks, especially after hanging around families like ours, the Gates family. She knows better than anyone how to make quick cash. You all get what I'm saying, right?"

Someone in the crowd jumped in. "Oh, I get it. The other day I saw this luxury car parked at school. An old guy got out, and he was all nice to Laurinda, like he was trying to impress her. They looked pretty close. Who knows what's going on between them?"

"Wait, are you serious?" another girl gasped. "It's bad enough she was all over Fabian and flirting with the school doctor, but now she's got some old guy wrapped around her finger? That's just gross."

"Well, she is pretty," someone else said. "Old guys go crazy for girls like her. Young and beautiful, you know?"

"Seriously, she acts all innocent, but she's just disgusting. I don't get how she still walks around like she's better than everyone."

A girl near the front turned toward their teacher. "Mr. Owen, we don't want someone like her at our school. Even if she donated a cafeteria and a library, it's not enough to make up for the stuff she's done. We want her gone."

"Get Laurinda out of here!"

"She's trash-kick her out!"

"Expel Laurinda!"

The loudest voices belonged to the girls who had resented Laurinda for ages. They used to keep quiet because she was rich, but now that she had nothing, they finally felt bold enough to push her out.

Laurinda scanned the crowd, her eyes icy. The chanting grew louder, but she only paid attention to Aileen, who looked more pleased with herself than ever. Laurinda strode straight toward her.

Aileen sneered up at Laurinda, who was taller "What, are you here to beg? Get on your knees and maybe I'll let you off easy. Otherwise make sure you can't show your face at Apex ever again."

Before Aileen could finish, Laurinda's hand shot out and grabbed her throat, squeezing tight. The sound was sharp and sudden, silencing everyone.

Laurinda leaned in, her expression twisted with a cold smile. Her grip only got stronger.

"If you

don't want that mouth

anymore, I can sew it shut for you. Ten years ago, you ruined my aunt's life with your lies and drove her to jump from her window on her wedding night. Now you want to do the same thing to me? You have no idea who you're dealing with."

Aileen struggled, gasping for air, shaking her head in a desperate attempt to deny it and break free.

Owen shouted from the side, panic in his voice. "Laurinda, let her go! Don't do something you'll regret!"

Laurinda didn't even turn. "This has nothing to do with you. Stay out of it. This is between me and her." Her voice was low, her eyes wild and bloodshot.

Owen, who'd been about to intervene, froze. He had never seen Laurinda like this before. She was terrifying.

The homeroom teacher stepped forward, worry etched into his face. He spoke gently, trying to calm her down. "Laurinda, please, let her go. We know you're not that kind of person. Don't throw your life away over this. You're still so young. Don't make a mistake you can't take back."

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## Chapter 200

[ 561 words ]

A man in black lunged at Laurinda, thinking she was distracted. He never even touched her. She lifted her foot and kicked him straight in the chest. He flew backward, crashed to the ground, and struggled to get up before spitting out blood.

Aileen watched it all, her eyes huge with fear. She was gasping, barely able to breathe.

Laurinda looked down at her and suddenly let out a laugh that sent chills through the room. There was something eerily cold about it.

"Aileen, did you really think I couldn't find proof to take you down? Running illegal casinos, laundering money... isn't that enough? What do you think will happen if The Charles Family and The Gates Family find out what you've been doing? Do you really think they could still protect you then?"

Laurinda slid her phone out of her pocket. On the screen were photos, clear evidence of Aileen's gambling operation.

Aileen stared at the images, so stunned she forgot to breathe. How did Laurinda know all this? Even Bagot and Finn didn't know. She had no idea how much Laurinda had uncovered.

"You... you..."

"You want to know how I found out? Sorry, I'm not telling you. I've already sent everything to the police. It's over for you, Aileen." Her voice was soft, but it cut deep. "And if Aiken finds out all the money he lost was because you set him up, do you think he'll finally turn over those old videos to Bagot? What do you think Bagot will do when he learns his kids are actually Aiken's?"

Aileen's eyes got even wider. She was panicking now, wishing she'd never crossed Laurinda. She never imagined Laurinda could know so much. Who was this woman? Was she even human?

"Aileen, just because you have powerful people behind you, doesn't mean you can do whatever you want. Believe it or not, you're already on your own. They've left you behind. No one's going to help you now."

Laurinda's words were quiet, but they made Aileen feel like she'd fallen into an ice bath. She stared up at Laurinda, shaking.

"I... I was wrong..."

"It's too late. Not every apology gets you forgiveness. I'm not letting your lies about me slide. And everything else you've done... it's more than

enough to ruin you."

Laurinda leaned in, her voice cold. "Don't worry about your kids. They're part of the Austin family. I'll make sure they're reunited with Baily He only has those two grandchildren left, so I'm sure he'll treat them well."

She finished speaking and let Aileen fall to the floor like she was nothing. Laurinda calmly pulled out a disinfecting wipe and cleaned her fingers, not even glancing at her.

The crowd of students watching

went completely silent. Especially

When

the ones who'd been yelling to have Laurinda kicked out of school she looked their way, they shrank back, too scared to meet her eyes.

Aileen sat on the floor, gasping for air, her mind blank. All she could think was that it was over. This time, she really was finished.

After a few minutes, she snapped out of it, pushed herself up, and crawled to

Laurinda. She clung to Laurinda's leg, desperate.

"Laurinda, please, just let me go. I'll clear your name. I'll tell everyone I lied. Please, Laurinda, let this end here. I'm begging you."

"End here?" Laurinda kicked her away, staring down at her with cold, angry eyes. "You tell me how this could possibly end here."

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