

# From Ashes of Scandal to His Embrace (Laurinda)

## Chapter 201

[ 627 words ]

"My aunt begged you to clear her name, remember? You didn't show her any mercy. Instead of helping, you made fake photos and videos, and then played them at her wedding just to humiliate her. In the end, she had no choice but to end her own life to prove she was innocent."

"And now, you're pulling the same stunt with me. You've got a bunch of clueless followers trying to get me kicked out of school."

Laurinda turned to the dean, arching a brow. "Owen, you stole money from the library and cafeteria funds. I let it slide before because, honestly, I didn't care, but things have changed. I'm out on my own now. I need that money back."

She glanced around at the others. "And for the rest of you, the ones who faked poverty to get financial aid, or lied about your grades for scholarships, get ready. I'm coming for what you owe. My money isn't for people like you to spend."

Her eyes landed on a girl in the crowd. The girl immediately looked away, shrinking back, as if Laurinda could see right through her.

The homeroom teacher stared at Laurinda, completely stunned. He had never imagined there were so many secrets at this school. Owen, an embezzler? That seemed impossible. The guy still rode around on an old bike. He didn't look like someone who'd steal.

Laurinda looked down at Aileen. "I'll give you a minute. Try calling your connections, see if any of them want to save you."

"Oh, and one more thing."

Laurinda looked over at Harden, who was standing just outside the crowd. She flashed him a bright, confident smile.

"Do me a favor, will you? Tell Finn that Fabian and Laura only met because his precious sister set it up."

Harden stared at Laurinda, realizing for the first time how intimidating she could be. He'd never met a girl who seemed to have everything figured out, like she was in control of it all.

It made him want her even more. With Laurinda by his side, getting his hands on The Gates Group would be a lot easier.

"Clear the way, everyone, move!" The police arrived, the principal rushing in with them. He spotted Laurinda at the center and gave her an awkward smile. Once again, he was late.

Why couldn't this troublemaker warn him before stirring up chaos? He was always the last to show up, which made him look like a useless principal.

"Laurinda..."

"Principal, I'm reporting this. Owen embezzled money from the library and cafeteria construction funds. A bunch of students here have been faking poverty to get financial aid or lying about their grades for scholarships. Take Sally, for example-she's a sophomore, and she's also Owen's niece."

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"Her dad's a high-up at the local

steel mill her mom trades stocks at home They're nowhere near poor, but she gets the biggest financial aid package and bullies Tessie, who actually needs help."

"Her grades are fake too. Before every test, Owen gives her the answers so she can get the top scholarship."

"You'll need to check out the rest yourself, Principal. I've already called the police. I hope you're ready to cooperate with the investigation."

The principal's face went pale as Laurinda spoke. He felt like his job was slipping through his fingers.

How had he missed so many problems at his own school?

Laurinda didn't waste time worrying about the principal. She walked up to the senior officer waiting nearby and gave him a little smirk.

"I bet you're happy I just handed you a big win. Don't worry about it. Just, maybe, go easy on me next time."

She pointed at Aileen, who was still sitting on the floor, frantically making phone calls.

"Take her away and dig into all of it. If anyone tries to mess with you, let me know. I'll handle it."

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[ 563 words ]

Laurinda had finally decided. She wasn't going to hold back anymore.

She wanted to see if those people actually had the guts to face her directly. All that sneaky, behind-the-back stuff? She was over it.

When Laurinda told the police to take her away, Aileen lowered her phone, her calls going unanswered. She just stared, completely shocked.

No, this couldn't be happening. Laurinda wasn't supposed to fight back. Didn't she realize who she was up against? Wasn't she scared?

"You can't take me. Laurinda's lying about me. I didn't do anything!"

Aileen twisted and struggled, but two young officers held her in place while the older officer stepped closer.

"Making a scene won't help you. Laurinda already handed over the video of you insulting her. We've got more evidence, too. Stop fighting and come with us."

The older officer nodded at his coworkers, and they marched Aileen to the car. Then he turned to Owen, grabbed his arm, and pulled him up from the ground. "Owen, you need to come with us too. Laurinda reported you for embezzling school funds. The case is officially open. Please cooperate."

Owen stared at Laurinda, completely blindsided by how fast she'd moved. It was like she'd been planning this for ages.

How did she know so much? Even the principal didn't know these things. He couldn't help but ask, "Laurinda, how do you know all this?"

Laurinda looked at him, raising an eyebrow. "I could know even more, Owen. Should

I let your wife know you've got another family across town? Your little boy must be three by now, right?"

Owen's face went ghostly pale. She even knew about that? Was Laurinda some kind of demon?

"Enough. Don't say anything else. I'll go with the police and cooperate."

The police cars drove off, and the crowd Aileen had brought with her scattered. The campus was quiet again.

When people looked at Laurinda now, their eyes were filled with something new—a bit of fear, a lot of respect.

Laurinda turned to the principal. He stiffened, shuffling a couple steps forward.  
"Laurinda, I..."

"I hope you actually look into the scholarship and aid funds, Principal. I donate a lot to this school every

year, and it's not so cert everyt

peopl

can just pocket it. If you can't sort it out,

ask for all my donations back.

My lawyer will be in touch soon."

Laurinda glanced at the students in the crowd. She hadn't forgotten that they'd tried to get her kicked out. She couldn't do much to them, but she could definitely make things a little uncomfortable.

"From today on, the library isn't free for you anymore. Thirty bucks a month. And the cafeteria meal subsidies are canceled."

The crowd erupted. Some complained about getting dragged into this, others thought Laurinda was being way too harsh.

"I already warned you last time. Anyone who insults me will pay for it. Don't think you can get away with it. The cameras at the school gate

caught all your faces. I'll favere

someone go through the footage and pick you out, one by one.

"I'll take care of that," Bonnie said, stepping out from behind the crowd. of Laurinda's

She tugged the hou her head and

puffer jacket up over her

gave her a gentle pat. "Their meal subsidies will be gone before dinner."

"Thanks for handling it," Laurinda said softly.

Seeing the sour looks on the students' faces, Laurinda finally felt a little bit better. If she wasn't worried about causing problems for her classmates' parents, she would've banned them from the school entirely.

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## Chapter 203

[ 637 words ]

"It's freezing out here. Let's head back to the classroom," Bonnie said. "York just called. He's got all the evidence against Owen sorted out, so you don't need to worry about anything else."

"Alright. Thanks for helping out," Laurinda replied.

Earlier, as Laurinda walked out of the building with her homeroom teacher, she had already messaged Bonnie, asking her to dig into Owen's background. That's how she found out about his connection to Sally, and also uncovered the issues with the financial aid and scholarships.

The two of them walked off together, arms slung around each other's shoulders, leaving a crowd of students behind. Everyone stared at the principal, hoping he'd step up and do something about the situation instead of letting Laurinda handle everything.

The principal wiped sweat from his forehead, feeling genuinely rattled this time. Laurinda was even scarier than he'd thought.

"Don't look at me," he said, "Laurinda's in charge of both the library and the cafeteria. Your meal subsidies come straight from her bank account. There's only one way out of this for you. You need Laurinda to forgive you."

"One more thing. I'll say it again—no outside food deliveries allowed on school grounds. If you get sick from takeout, the school isn't responsible."

With that, the principal hurried off. After something this big, he'd have to report to the Board of Education. He just hoped they'd remember all his years of hard work and give him a chance to make things right.

He hadn't gotten far when he heard groans and complaints from behind him. This time, the students really were going to pay for their rash decisions.

"I'm calling my mom," one student grumbled. "How can Laurinda just cancel our meal subsidies? We're students here too. Cafeteria food isn't exactly cheap, and my allowance only goes so far. If I spend it all on food, I can't buy anything else."

"Yeah, let's all call our parents," another chimed in. "If enough of them show up and make a fuss, the school will have to do something."

They all started talking at once, getting more and more convinced that if they made a big enough scene, someone would fix things for them. Then they could just sit back and enjoy the results.

"Wow, you guys really have no

shame," someone from Class Three

spoke up. "Laurinda spent all that money on your meal subsidies. She would've been better off donating it to an animal shelter. At least the animals would be grateful. But what did you do? You tried to get her kicked out."

All of Laurinda's classmates had shown up to back her up. When Laurinda saw them, she'd quickly messaged them not to get involved, so they just watched as she handled the troublemakers herself.

They hadn't even left yet when they overheard these shameless complaints. Honestly, those students had no idea how good they had it.

"Seriously, you're biting the hand that feeds you. If you start making trouble, we'll expose you online. Everyone will see what kind of people you are. When it comes time for college applications, let's see which school wants someone who's so ungrateful and causes problems wherever they go."

A boy from Class Three waved his phone for everyone to see. He'd recorded the whole conversation if they were going to eat Laurinda's food and then badmouth her, they shouldn't be surprised when people found out.

As soon as they realized they might be exposed, the students who'd been so ready

to call home went dead quiet. None of them wanted their college applications affected. They slunk away in silence, defeated.

The homeroom teacher gave the Class Three students a thumbs-up for standing up for Laurinda. They were good kids who understood the value of gratitude.

"Alright, last period's about to start. Everyone, let's get back to class."

"Yes, teacher!" the Class Three students answered in unison, then hurried back toward the school building.

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## Chapter 204

[ 596 words ]

When Laurinda walked back into the classroom, she noticed a new girl sitting by Harden's desk. The girl's eyes were red and puffy, wide with fear, like a startled little rabbit.

Laurinda recognized her right away. She was Aileen and Aiken's daughter.

Laurinda walked over, pulled out the chair in front of her, and sat down. "So, you know what happened between me and your mom?"

Aggie nodded. She bit her lip and looked like she wanted to say something but couldn't quite find the courage.

"If you already know, then you should get ready for what's next. The Charles family isn't exactly the safest place. If Finn agrees to take you and your brother in, I won't send you off to Baily. Whatever your mom did, it's not your fault. You don't get to choose the family you're born into."

Laurinda remembered the files Bonnie had given her. Aggie hadn't had the easiest life under Aileen's thumb. As long as Aggie stayed out of trouble, Laurinda was willing to let her be.

Aggie looked at Laurinda, completely taken aback. She clearly hadn't expected Laurinda to be so gentle. Honestly, she probably thought Laurinda would kick her out the moment she learned who she was.

"I get it," Aggie said quietly.

"Good. Just don't back yourself into a corner. Nobody wins that way."

Laurinda reached into her pocket, took out a lollipop, and placed it gently on Aggie's desk. Then she stood up and returned to her own seat.

A wave of noise drifted in from the hallway. Laurinda knew it was the crowd from earlier, coming back from all the drama.

Shirley came barreling over with Elaine in tow, grinning from ear to ear. Shirley held her hands up in a giant heart and said, "Laurinda, you're amazing. Seriously, you're our hero. You should have seen everyone's faces after you left. It was priceless." Elaine nodded, backing her up. "You were so cool with Owen. He's always hanging around the cafeteria, pretending to check the food but just making trouble for my mom and the aunts. He never leaves without getting something out of it."

Laurinda hadn't realized any of this. She frowned and was about to say something, but her phone started buzzing in her pocket.

"Hang on, I need to take this."

She stepped out into the hallway and leaned against the balcony railing, answering the call. "Hello?"

"Laurinda, what happened? Foley said you ran into some trouble at school."

"It's fine, really. Everything's sorted

out. I'm not coming to the infirmary for dinner tonight thought want to check out the cafeteria and see

what's going on."

Adolphus was silent for a moment. She could almost picture him frowning on the other end. He always worried when she skipped her special meals.

"I thought you said it was all handled?"

Adolphus already knew what had happened. He'd even called the Cabinda family to put some pressure on them, so now Bagot was running around cleaning up the

mess.

"It is handled, but I need to get some proof about Owen. Don't worry, I'll eat properly."

Just thinking about the cafeteria food was already making her crave that spicy chicken. Her mouth actually watered.

Adolphus heard her and let out a soft, indulgent laugh.

"Alright. I'll have Foley bring the pork rib and yam soup I made for you to the cafeteria. Share it with your

roommates, okay? The cafeteria net

food is pretty heavy and spicy, so don't overdo it or you'll get a stomachache."

Laurinda felt a wave of relief and happiness at his compromise. She answered sweetly, "Okay, I promise. I won't eat too much the teacher's coming back, so have to go. Talk to you later."

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## Chapter 205

[ 621 words ]

Adolphus stared at his phone after the call ended, a helpless smile tugging at his lips. He leaned back in his office chair, glancing over a few surgery schedules. There was no rush to head back to the infirmary.

A knock on the door broke his thoughts.

"Come in."

Harrell stepped inside, holding a bag of medication.

"You went to see my mentor, didn't you?"

"Yep. He heard I've been staying at your place and asked me to bring you the meds you needed. When are you off? Edison and Orville are still hanging out at Apex. They want to grab dinner together."

Adolphus checked the time. "Half an hour or so. You got here just in time, actually. I have a case I want you to look at."

He pulled up Fidelia's file on the computer, then stood so Harrell could take his seat.

"I'm a psych major, you know. I barely understand half your surgical cases... Wait, is this PTSD?"

"Yeah. Earl is her attending physician. He's your junior from school."

Harrell scanned the file, not looking surprised at all. He knew how things stood between Earl and Adolphus.

Back when Earl wanted to switch to psychology, it was Adolphus who'd gone to Harrell for help. Without that, Earl's grades and personality would've kept him out of the program entirely, never mind being accepted by Harrell's mentor.

Earl was stubborn by nature. Being a psychologist meant dealing with a lot of pressure, and it was easy to get swept up in your patients' struggles. Too much exposure could drag anyone down.

"Looks like she's getting decent care. But you wouldn't have called me in just for that. Is this patient connected to you somehow?"

Harrell tilted his head back, studying Adolphus. He noticed something different- Adolphus seemed warmer now, less distant than when they first met, like he actually cared about someone in the world.

"She's Laurinda's aunt. Laurinda cares about her a lot. She dreams of bringing her home from the sanatorium someday. I wanted you to look at her case and tell me if there's any real hope."

Harrell shook his head. "It's not that

simple. I can't just give you

numbers, Mental illness isn't like surgery, where you can just cut out the problem. It's more like fighting this complicated monster. Everything matters-the

ples who

environment, the people around her, but most of all her own will D

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can only do so much. We're like

medication, really. We can stabilize

her, but we can't just erase her pain."

"So... I can't give you a straight answer. If you want, I can meet her myself and see how she's doing."

Harrell always preferred to meet patients face to face. Case files could only tell him so much.

Adolphus shook his head. If Earl found out he'd brought Harrell to see Fidelia, there would be drama for days. Earl was too fragile, and Adolphus didn't want to set him off.

"I remember you once said Earl wasn't meant for psychology. Do you know why he gave up surgery and switched?"

Harrell's eyes lit up with curiosity, like he was about to hear a juicy secret. "Don't tell me it has something to do with you?"

Adolphus nodded. "Yeah, he always felt like the family was comparing us. He couldn't handle it anymore."

He told Harrell about some of the resentment Earl had let slip over the years. Harrell gave a sympathetic smile.

"Honestly, that's rough. He picked

the hardest path, just to escape your shadow. But I get it. Your family's complicated, you're the clear

favorite and you're kind of a genius. Anyone would compare their kid to you."

"But still, I've got to hand it to Earl. He managed to carve out a whole new future for himself. That takes guts, I'll make sure to put in some good words for him with our professor whenever I can."

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## Chapter 206

[ 565 words ]

"So I'm playing it safe now. Like you said, psychologists all have their own baggage. I'm honestly worried he might do something reckless one day."

If Adolphus hadn't gotten wind of Earl's thoughts, he would have already checked Harrell into a wellness center. Between Earl and Harrell, he definitely trusted Harrell more.

"Let me handle it. I'll get Earl to invite me over, and then I'll fill you in on what's really going on."

With the serious stuff settled, Harrell checked the time. "Looks like we're about done here, right? I'm starving."

"Just about. Let me tidy up, and we can head out. By the way, I didn't get a chance to ask yesterday-Edison and Orville wouldn't show up here for no reason. What are they after?"

"They want to team up with FarrVector. They spent all day waiting in line for a meeting and still didn't get in. Heard they're planning to try again tomorrow."

Adolphus let out a soft laugh, clearly not surprised. So that's what they were up to. If they'd just mentioned it at dinner yesterday, a deal might already be done.

"You have a contact at FarrVector?"

Harrell caught the look on Adolphus's face and knew he was hiding something. "They were just complaining in the group chat. FarrVector's crazy popular. They're worried all the partnership spots will be gone before they get a chance. Why don't you help them out? We're all friends here, and you know The Brown Group and The Williams Group have solid reputations. FarrVector wouldn't lose anything by working with them."

"Alright, I'll message the person in charge and see what she says."

"Why text? A phone call would be faster. Or is it awkward for her to take your call?" Harrell teased, grinning. In Cabinda, getting a call from Adolphus was like winning the lottery.

Adolphus smiled down at his phone as he typed. "It actually is a little awkward with her."

Harrell watched Adolphus's

affectionate expression and

frowned. When did Adolphus get so

soft He got it with taurinda that

made sense, but with someone

else? That was just weird.

Adolphus slipped on his jacket, and his phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen. It was a message from Laurinda.

Here's the address for dinner. I'll have York bring the contract and everything we need.

An opportunity like this in Cabinda was too good to pass up. Laurinda didn't hesitate she immediately messaged York.

York was in the middle of handling the Aileen mess. As soon as Laurinda's message popped up, he handed things off to Jack.

"Jack, I've got two huge deals to work on. Take care of the Aileen situation for me Make sure the evidence is solid. Just keep her completely tied up." fo FindNovel.net

York hurried back to the office and grabbed the project manager and the tech lead. Following Laurinda's instructions, they made their way to the restaurant.

Outside the private dining room, York gave the door a gentle knock. Someone opened up almost immediately.

Edison and Orville had been acting tense ever since Adolphus walked in. Neither of them could meet his eyes.

Adolphus noticed their awkwardness but didn't think much of it.

He knew neither of them was capable of causing any real trouble. Even if something did come up, it would be small stuff.

When York entered with his team, Edison and Orville sprang up from their seats, looking completely stunned.

Adolphus heard the commotion and turned to look at them, honestly confused. Were they really that desperate to work with FarrVector?

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## Chapter 207

[ 639 words ]

Sam recognized York the moment he walked in. They'd met before at The Austin Family's place, so Sam got up and casually slung an arm around York's shoulders, like they were old friends.

"What brings you here? And who are these two with you?"

"I'm here on behalf of FarrVector," York replied, his voice easy. "Name's York. These are Kane from Projects and Klein from Tech. I heard Edison and Orville waited at our office all day. Sorry about that. Since I found out late, I brought two of our top people with me. Thought maybe this would be a good time to talk about working together."

York had already done his homework on these companies before he came over. Both were at the top of their industries, with The Lane Family backing them. In Cabinda, that meant real power.

Getting them on board would be huge for FarrVector and the perfect way to get a foot in the door in Cabinda.

But as soon as Edison and Orville realized York was the boss, their interest in working together faded fast.

They leaned back in their chairs, looking every bit the spoiled rich boys, and their voices were lazy, almost bored.

"Honestly, we're not that into the idea anymore."

York didn't react, but Harrell's eyes flickered with confusion. Just a minute ago, these two were plotting how to get in with FarrVector. Why the sudden shift?

He knew Adolphus was the reason FarrVector's team showed up with such sincerity. Now their attitude just felt like a slap to Adolphus's face.

Harrell hesitated, then tried to smooth things over. "Didn't you both wait at FarrVector all day? Doesn't really seem like you're uninterested. Maybe the wait got on your nerves? FarrVector has a lot of people wanting to work with them, it's normal. The boss is here now, so why not at least talk?"

He shot Edison and Orville a look, hoping they'd take the hint and not push things too far.

"No, we just don't want to work together anymore. Is that so hard to believe?" Edison said, his eyes cold as he stared at York. Everyone in the room could tell something was off, even York, but he had no clue what he'd done to upset these Cabinda heirs.

"Yeah, that's right. We're just not interested Sorry for making you come out here, York. You can see yourself out," Orville added, even more direct He stood up and gestured toward the door.

York could tell they didn't want him there. He wasn't the type to force things, so he just smiled and nodded.

"If that's the case, sorry for interrupting. We'll head out."

He glanced at Adolphus with a polite nod, then turned to leave with his team.

"Hold on."

Adolphus's voice stopped York in his tracks. He turned his attention to Edison and Orville.

"Care to explain? You two came all the way from Cabinda for a reason, didn't you? What changed your mind so suddenly? Did something happen?"

Adolphus's eyes were cool and sharp as he looked at them. Edison and Orville avoided his gaze. There was no way they could say in front of everyone, what they'd seen. No way they could reveal that kind of mess.

"Adolphus, just let it go. This is our own problem," Orville said, his bravado evaporating in front of Adolphus. He could be tough with York, but not here. Protecting Adolphus's dignity meant putting the family business on the line.

He really regretted what he'd witnessed earlier. If only he hadn't seen it, maybe they could have just gone ahead with the deal.

Seeing they weren't going to talk, Adolphus didn't push. He stood up and walked over to York.

"Sorry for making you come all this way for nothing. Please, let the staff set you up in the next room for dinner. It's on me."

York was annoyed, but he didn't blame Adolphus. He just gave a little laugh and let it go.

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## Chapter 208

[ 654 words ]

"It's all good. Sometimes deals just don't work out. I've got other things to handle, so I'll head out first."

York gave Adolphus a pat on the shoulder and left with his crew, not wasting a second.

Edison and Orville watched York walk away, his easy attitude making their frustration flare. In their minds, they were cursing Laurinda too.

They just couldn't get why she'd cheat on Adolphus when she was already with him.

After York left, Adolphus came back and dropped into his chair. He asked Harrell for a cigarette, lit it, and leaned back.

"So, what made you change your minds all of a sudden?"

"Adolphus, there are some things we just can't share," Edison said, scratching his head and looking away, clearly uncomfortable. There was no way he could talk about it with all these people around.

Adolphus saw they weren't going to budge, so he let it go.

"Alright, guess I was poking my nose in."

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When evening classes ended, Laurinda slung an arm over Shirley's shoulder as they left the classroom. They'd only taken a few steps before someone called out to her.

Laurinda straightened up and glanced at the unfamiliar girl standing a little ways off. "Do I know you?" she asked, a little confused.

"Laurinda, I'm Tessie. I just wanted to thank you."

Hearing the name, Laurinda remembered

Tessie was the student who'd been

bullied, the one who was actually struggling financially.

"I already heard about what happened to you," Laurinda said. "I had Bonnie talk to the foundation, so your aid should come through soon. No need to thank me. Just focus on your studies. Knowledge can totally change your life."

People passing by overheard Laurinda—who was basically at the bottom of the class—say that, and a few of them burst out laughing. The irony wasn't lost on them.

Laurinda heard the snickers and looked over. Sure enough, it was Fabian's group again.

But when they noticed her looking, none of them dared meet her eyes. They hurried off, looking almost scared.

They still remembered how she'd handled Aileen and sent a bodyguard flying. That scene had been hard to forget.

Honestly, they felt lucky they hadn't tried messing with her after what happened to Jared and his friends. Otherwise, they knew they'd be the ones in trouble now.

As more people cleared out of the hallway, Laurinda turned to the still-nervous Tessie. "We're heading back to the dorm want to walk with us? School isn't always the safest place, you know."

She meant more than she said. Laurinda honestly had no idea if anyone from the casino or money-laundering crowd might show up looking for trouble. With their operations busted, their cash flow had to be hurting.

After dropping Tessie off at her dorm, Laurinda and her roommates headed back to theirs.

Going up the stairs, she could hear a few people muttering curses under their breath. Laurinda just smiled.

"Looks like some people are still holding a grudge."

Shirley hugged Laurinda's arm and flashed her a sweet, reassuring smile. "Don't mind them. You'll always be the best in my eyes."

Laurinda couldn't help but laugh, gently pinching Shirley's soft cheek. "You guys are probably the only ones who think I'm a good person."

Elaine jumped in right away. "That's not true! Anyone with a heart knows you're a good person."

To them, Laurinda was their hero.

After washing up, Laurinda sat cross-legged on her bed, chatting with Adolphus. He was sending her and York a proper apology.

York had already told her about how Edison and Orville reacted. Sure, Laurinda felt a little disappointed that things hadn't worked out, but she wasn't mad. They had every right to say no. It wasn't like she was forcing them into anything.

Just as she was about to reply to Adolphus, a hidden app popped up on her phone.

It was a map, and a tiny red dot was moving slowly across the screen.

Laurinda's interest was instantly piqued. She tossed her phone on the bed, grabbed her laptop, and started typing fast, ready to see what was going on.

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## Chapter 209

[ 583 words ]

Laurinda's fingers flew across the keyboard, so quick they barely seemed real. Lines of code scrolled down the screen, blue light flickering over her face. She looked calm, almost lazy, like this was just another casual afternoon.

Ten minutes later, her phone buzzed. She picked up without missing a beat. The voice on the other end practically vibrated with frustration.

"Laurinda, why'd you hand over that shipment? We could've handled it. Why let someone else take it?"

It was a haul worth hundreds of millions, and Laurinda had snatched it up like it was nothing, only to pass it on to some organization in Frostfrod.

What was she doing, running a charity now?

Everyone always says you should keep profits close, not just toss that kind of money into someone else's pocket.

"It just wasn't the right move. I wanted to cause them some trouble, not drag myself into a mess," Laurinda replied, voice steady.

Her answer clearly didn't satisfy the caller. Sure, there might be trouble if they'd taken the shipment, but since when were they afraid of problems?

Laurinda could sense the irritation, and it made her smile. She kept typing, never pausing. "Relax, I didn't just give it away for free. Nobody gets my help without owing me. I'll collect when the time's right."

She grinned at the screen, watching clusters of red and blue dots pop up, her eyes shining with excitement.

Soon, green dots started filling the map, and her fingers moved even faster.

On the other end, the caller listened to the rapid clacking of keys, feeling a headache coming on. Suddenly, everything clicked. They really couldn't have handled that shipment.

Laurinda was ruthless. She'd hijacked a fortune, slipped a virus into their system, rewrote all their records, and then sent everything straight to Interpol.

This wasn't just a setback. It was total destruction.

Whoever ended up with that shipment was just being set up for disaster. Laurinda had found the perfect scapegoat.

"Laurinda... is the other side... going to be okay?"

"They'll survive. I just took a little interest, didn't wipe them out. This way, they're too busy to bother me," she said.

She ended the call, still focused on her screen.

For the other side, losing the cargo and getting hacked at the same time was a double hit. Laurinda figured if she didn't give them a real crisis, it'd be a waste of all her recent effort.

\*\*\*

Over in the medical bay, Adolphus was waiting for a word from Laurinda, but instead, his phone rang with a call from Egan.

"Adolphus, we still have no idea who tipped us off. There's no trace at all."

Egan sounded tense as he

explained. He'd been stuck in a

meeting when a message came in about a shipment worth hundreds of millions passing nearby, complete with the route and security details.

of

At first, it seemed way too good to be true. But honestly, with that much money involved, who could resist?

He sent a team to check it out. The whole thing went down just like the tip said. They got the shipment, no real effort required.

"Adolphus, that's not even the

weirdest part. Right after we grabbed the goods, Interpol swooped in and stopped the other ship. Everyone on board got hauled away for questioning. Now, the

owner's lost everything-men,

money, the whole lot."

Listening to Egan, Adolphus felt a weird sense of déjà vu, especially when it came to bringing Interpol into the mix.

"Did you find out who owns the ship?"

"No, but we're guessing it's a

smuggling vessel from Stonehaven.

Nobody's come forward

they lost anything yet. With a

shipment that big, you'd think. someone would be making noise, right?"

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## Chapter 210

[ 650 words ]

Egan sat there, confused. It had already been an hour since everything went down, but nobody had shown up looking for the shipment. He couldn't figure out what was going on.

Adolphus was spinning his lighter between his fingers, eyes glued to his chat with Laurinda. It was almost funny how she hadn't messaged him back in an hour either.

He let out a low laugh. Laurinda was sharp. She always knew how to find the strongest person to lean on.

"Just keep the goods," he said. "And while you're at it, see if you can stir up some trouble for Stonehaven. Call it a thank-you to the mysterious benefactor who sent us this present."

Egan blinked, trying to process that. Was Adolphus serious right now? They'd just taken someone's shipment, and now he wanted to make things hard for them too? That couldn't be right, could it?

Before Egan could even ask, Adolphus hung up and typed out a message to Laurinda. Are you asleep?

She replied almost instantly. Not yet. Something came up and I forgot to text you back. And don't stress about your friends, okay? I'm in such a good mood tonight, I could forgive anyone.

Adolphus stared at the message, a cold glint flickering in his eyes. He was pretty sure he knew exactly who their mysterious helper was now. And as for Stonehaven, he wasn't about to forget what they'd done.

Just as he was mulling things over, his phone buzzed again. Another message from Laurinda.

I'm heading to bed. Good night. You should get some sleep too. Oh, and I want an egg pancake for breakfast.

He sent her a quick good night, grabbed his jacket, and walked out of the medical room. Foley followed right behind him.

\*\*\*

Two days later, Laurinda was called to the principal's office. The principal greeted her with extra politeness and set a bottle of coconut water on the table.

"You kids always seem to like these drinks," he said, "so I thought I'd skip the tea." Laurinda noticed how nervous he looked. She smiled, her eyes bright and playful.

"Principal, you don't need to tiptoe around me. Just say what's on your mind. Has the investigation into the financial aid and scholarships

finished? That's a lot of money from middle school all the way to high

school, right? What t

the

education bureau say? Are they doing anything about the students who faked their documents? What about the teachers who helped them?"

Her questions made the principal stiffen. He'd thought that once Laurinda handed everything over, he'd be the one calling the shots. Now he realized she wasn't letting anyone off easy.

He sat down across from her, rubbing his hands together, looking troubled.

"Laurinda, the investigation's done.

We're doing our best to get the money back, but there are some exceptions. A few of the students who shouldn't have gotten the funds already spent the money, and their families can't pay it back now. So, well..."

"What are you hoping I'll say?" Laurinda asked, her tone gentle but firm. "That money was supposed to help students who really need it, not be handed out as spending money."

She looked straight at him. "While you're feeling sorry for them, did you ever think about the students who actually needed that help?"

She didn't give him time to answer. "If you can't sort this out, I'll get my lawyer involved. And if that happens, I won't worry about saving anyone's reputation."

She could have let it go, but after her investigation, she found out that over a dozen students who truly needed support had been forced to drop out. There was no way she could just ignore that.

The principal could see she wasn't going to back down. He let out a long sigh.

"Alright, I get it'll ask the education bureau to come oversee the investigation. The teachers involved will be held accountable. I promise, from now on, every bit of financial aid will go to the students who actually need it."

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## Chapter 211

[ 574 words ]

Laurinda noticed the principal's stubborn resolve and let her frosty expression melt away a little. She met his eyes.

"It's good that you understand, Principal. I heard Owen tried to drag you into his mess during questioning. I don't believe you'd ever touch project funds, but the police are definitely going to investigate. You should be ready and make sure you don't get caught up in his problems."

The principal looked stunned. He clearly hadn't expected Owen to throw him under the bus. He got a bit worked up as he replied, "I swear, every bit of what I have is from years of hard work. Even when I eat at school, I pay for it myself. I've never done anything I'd be ashamed of."

"I believe you," Laurinda said. "I just wanted to warn you. If there's nothing else, I'll head back to class. I hope the scholarship and financial aid issues get sorted before finals."

She stood and gave him a small nod, then left his office.

As soon as she stepped out, the smile dropped from her face.

She didn't think the principal would be bold enough to actually steal money, but she also doubted he was completely in the dark about Owen's actions. In this kind of environment, could anyone really be totally innocent?

Aggie had been waiting anxiously outside the admin building. When she spotted Laurinda, she hurried over, visibly nervous. She kept her voice low. "I need to talk to you. Can we go somewhere private? No one else can know about this."

Laurinda saw how serious Aggie looked, which piqued her curiosity. She nodded. "Come with me."

They walked to the infirmary. When Foley saw Laurinda at this hour, he was surprised. "Laurinda, are you here for Adolphus? He's got surgery this morning. He isn't here."

"No, actually, I just wanted to use your break room for a while."

Aggie trailed behind Laurinda, eyeing Foley. She'd heard Laurinda was dating the school medic, but she hadn't expected him to be so attractive. For some reason, he looked familiar, though she couldn't quite remember where she'd seen him before.

Foley caught Aggie looking at him and paused for a moment, realizing who she was. He seemed surprised that Laurinda had brought her along.

"Go ahead and make yourselves at home," Foley said.

Laurinda thanked him and led Aggie into the break room. She grabbed two bottles of soda from the mini fridge, set one on the coffee table for Aggie, and opened her own, taking a big sip.

"You can talk here. It's safe."

Aggie finally relaxed a little as she sat down. She'd been uneasy ever since she accidentally overheard Finn and Fabian talking the day before. She'd been trying to find a chance to tell Laurinda all morning but hadn't managed it until now.

"Laurinda, Finn invites you to the Gates family's annual party, don't go. Seriously. He and Fabian are

planning to drug you, so you end up with Fabian. Then they if force you to marry him."

Laurinda wasn't surprised at all. This was exactly the kind of trap Finn liked to set. But why Fabian, not Harden? Wasn't Finn grooming Harden now? Had Fabian suddenly become important again?

Instead of answering, Laurinda watched Aggie carefully, then changed the topic. "Do you know anything about Harden? Like, how important is he in the Gates family?" "Harden?" Aggie was confused. Why was Laurinda asking about him? Shouldn't she be more worried about her own safety? Shouldn't she be asking for more details?

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## Chapter 212

[ 644 words ]

She didn't even hesitate before answering Laurinda's question. "Harden's in a really awkward spot in the Gates family. The butler told me that before Fabian came back,

Finn treated Harden like he was the heir. But now that Fabian's returned, Finn can't stand Harden anymore. He clearly favors Fabian, and now Harden's been moved to the first floor."

Laurinda understood what that meant. The first floor was for the staff. If Harden had to live with the servants, Finn definitely had something else in mind. The Gates family just kept getting messier.

"What about your mom? What are your dad and Finn planning to do?" Laurinda asked.

Aggie looked away, but she knew better than to lie to Laurinda. "My dad already filed for divorce. My brother and I got removed from the family registry. Finn's given up on my mom, and he doesn't want to keep me or my brother around. We'll

probably get sent away soon."

Laurinda listened, then suddenly let out a soft laugh. She tapped her fingers on the table, her voice steady. "Aggie, I've warned you before. Don't try to play games with me. I grew up around people like you I've seen every trick in the book."

"If you hadn't tried to manipulate me, maybe I'd have thought you were just innocent and I would've helped you out. But not anymore. Go back and tell Finn, if he doesn't want the world to know all of Fabian's dirty secrets, he'd better stop with these little schemes. If he thinks he can set me up, he's dreaming."

Laurinda stood, opened the break room door, and practically dragged Aggie out, leaving her in the hallway.

She couldn't believe she'd actually thought the child of Aileen and Aiken would be any different. How ridiculous.

Aggie sat on the cold stone floor outside the infirmary, face pale. She'd thought she'd covered everything, so why had Laurinda seen right through her?

"Laurinda..."

Laurinda didn't even look back. "If you don't want to get kicked out of school, just shut up and go already." She had no patience left. If Aggie wasn't still useful for something, Laurinda would've had her expelled on the spot. She'd never pretended to be a nice person.

Aggie scrambled up from the ground, not daring to meet Foley's eyes as he stood by the door, embarrassment burning on her cheeks.

Foley, still clueless about what had happened, followed Laurinda inside and asked gently, "Laurinda, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Just tired, that's all. Let me rest a bit. Don't worry about me."

Laurinda closed herself off in the break room, shutting the door behind her. She sank into the sofa

and stared out

watching the k

drining down through the gray afternoon.

\*\*\*

That afternoon, Adolphus came back and Foley immediately told him that Laurinda had been locked in the break room all day and hadn't even had lunch.

Worried, Adolphus shrugged off his coat and hurried over, knocking softly on the door. When there was no answer, he quietly pushed it open and stepped inside. Laurinda was curled up on the sofa, sleeping so peacefully he almost didn't want to wake her.

He knelt down beside her, taking in her rosy cheeks, and couldn't help but press a gentle kiss to her face.

"Don't," Laurinda mumbled, pushing him away with her hand on his chest. "Let me sleep a little longer."

Her sleepy, cat-like protest made him smile. He chuckled softly, wrapping her hand in his. "Did you not sleep well last night?"

"Not at all," she grumbled. "My roommate was up all night studying like a maniac. I couldn't get any sleep. I'm exhausted, so stop bothering me."

Still half-asleep, Laurinda pulled her hand back and rolled over, turning her back to him, clearly annoyed that he was interrupting her rest.

"Want to come home tonight, then?" Adolphus said, watching her with soft eyes. He leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to her ear, unable to hide the affection in his voice.

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## Chapter 213

[ 631 words ]

"No, I'm not coming home this week. We've got exams on Monday and I promised I'd help them study. Seriously, just let me sleep a little longer. I'll hang out with you later, I'm exhausted." Laurinda tugged her puffy jacket over her head, trying to block Adolphus out so she could get a few more minutes of rest.

Adolphus could tell she was on the verge of getting mad, so he just smiled, a little helpless, and backed off. "Alright, get some sleep then. I'll wake you up when dinner's ready."

"Okay. I want beef soup."

"You got it."

He grabbed a blanket from the cabinet, tucked her in, and quietly left the room.

Out in the hallway, someone called out, "Adolphus, is Laurinda alright?"

"She's sleeping. What happened this morning?" Adolphus headed to the kitchen, checked the fridge for ingredients, and rolled up his sleeves to start cooking.

"I'm not totally sure, but the girl who came with Laurinda is Aileen's daughter, Aggie," Foley replied. He remembered seeing Aggie with Adah back at the Lane family's place. Adah always seemed to dote on those kids, probably hoping to score some points with their dad.

"So this has something to do with the Gates family again? They really don't know when to quit. Tell Gaylord he can start targeting the Gates Group's overseas companies."

Originally, Adolphus had wanted to wait until their current deal was finished before going after the Gates Group, but now he didn't see the point in waiting. Cutting off their international business would send a clear message. Sometimes, people only learn when things get really tough.

Foley nodded and went off to contact Gaylord, leaving Adolphus alone in the kitchen.

Laurinda woke up to a bunch of noise outside. She slipped on her jacket and stepped into the main hall of the infirmary spotting a few unfamiliar faces. Edison loo leaning heavily on Orville. Laurinda walked over to where Foley was

pale,

mixing up some medicine.

"What's going on with them? If they're sick, shouldn't they be at the hospital instead of here?"

Foley heard

her a

and cracked a small smile. "Edison overdid it on the drinks at funch. Just a mild case of alcohol poisoning. He refused to go to the hospital-insisted on seeing Adolphus instead But Adelphus is busy making your dinner, so I'm handling the meds. He'll be fine after an IV."

Laurinda nodded, glancing over at Edison, who did look pretty miserable, but she decided to leave him alone.

Right then, her phone buzzed in her pocket. She checked the screen, zipped her jacket, and told Foley, "I'm stepping out for a bit. If Adolphus comes looking for me, just tell him I'll be right back."

Foley didn't know where she was going, but he just nodded, knowing it wasn't his place to ask.

Laurinda came back a little later, this time with York following behind her. York had a bag of fruit in one hand and a small suitcase in the other, trailing her closely.

Laurinda, carrying her laptop, took the fruit from York and headed into the kitchen to stash it in the fridge.

Meanwhile, Edison and Orville both caught sight of how comfortable Laurinda seemed around York. Their

eyes went wide. They couldn't believe she'd just bring york here, right in front of Adolphus. Was she not even pretending anymore?

Harrell noticed their reactions. He'd suspected there was something going on between those two ever since that dinner a while back, and now, watching their faces, he was sure York was at the center of it.

He stood up, closed the door to the IV room, and sat down across from them. "So, want to tell me what's really going on? Did York do something to you?"

The two exchanged a look. They knew they couldn't hide it from Harrell anymore, and honestly, they were tired of pretending. It was time to come clean.

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[ 602 words ]

Edison was wiped out, so he shot Orville a look. Orville nodded back, getting the message.

"Laurinda's really gone too far," Orville said quietly. "I think we should tell Adolphus. He deserves to know the truth. We can't just let her keep fooling him."

"Tell me what exactly?"

Adolphus leaned casually against the doorframe, his sleeves rolled up, looking effortlessly cool and just a little dangerous.

"Adolphus, Laurinda and York... they're having an affair..." Orville started, but before he could finish, a small head peeked out from behind Adolphus. Both Orville and Edison froze, their faces turning stiff with embarrassment. This was a first for them being caught gossiping by the very person they were talking about.

"An affair?" Laurinda let out a laugh, but there was no humor in her eyes. She'd known York for ages, and never once had anyone described their friendship like that. How did these two manage to twist things into something so ugly?

The sound of Laurinda's voice snapped Edison out of his daze. He glanced nervously at Orville, worry etched all over his face.

Laurinda stepped in front of Adolphus, stopping him from saying anything. She strode over to Edison and Orville, dragging a chair over with her foot and sitting down right in front of them. Her gaze was icy cold as she sized them up.

"Alright, I'm all ears. What exactly is this 'affair' you think I'm having with York? Please, enlighten me. I'm dying to know."

The two men met her sharp eyes and instantly felt a chill. Somehow, her presence was even more intimidating than Adolphus's.

Edison swallowed hard, sneaking a glance at Adolphus's dark expression, then nudged Orville under the table, urging him to talk.

Orville hesitated, clearly nervous under Adolphus's glare, but he still felt like Adolphus deserved to know what was going on. He finally blurted out what he'd seen at FarrVector. "Laurinda, look, get everyone has their own

their own ambitions, but cheating on someone is just wrong. Adolphus treats you so well. Why would you do something like that to him?"

Laurinda just sat there, staring at them in disbelief.

Her silence only convinced them more. They were sure they'd hit the mark.

She stood up, looking down at both of them. "Are you two out of your minds? Just because York and I talk, you immediately think we're up to something shady? What kind of twisted logic is that? So in your world, any guy and girl who are close have to be sleeping together?"

She shook her head, genuinely annoyed. "Honestly, your parents must be thrilled to have you both. Maybe they should try for another kid. It might raise the average."

Laurinda was fuming now. She hated nothing more than people who spread disgusting rumors. And now these two were making her out to be some gold-digging cheater. As if she needed their money. With thinking like theirs it was no wonder they couldn't see straight about the FarrVector deal. She was honestly relieved she'd decided not to work with them. Who knew what other drama their warped ideas would stir up.

"Hey, what's your problem? You're the one cursing at us," Edison shot back, his face red. "You're the one sneaking around with another guy and making Adolphus look like a fool. What gives you the right to get mad?"

Edison had never been spoken to like this in his life. He jumped off the bed, finger pointing at Laurinda. "You should be glad I don't hit women, or else today I'd..."

Before he could finish, he suddenly went flying across the room. Harrell and Orville stared in shock at Adolphus, stunned that he'd actually just knocked Edison over.

"Adolphus... we..."

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## Chapter 215

[ 599 words ]

Orville caught the look on Adolphus's face and instantly shut his mouth. He'd been about to say something, but now he just swallowed it down. He knew Adolphus would

blow up when this came out, but he hadn't expected him to take it out on them. Honestly, it felt unfair. They'd just stumbled onto something they probably shouldn't have seen.

Adolphus stared at them, eyes icy, his whole vibe screaming that he wasn't about to let them talk trash about Laurinda. "Who told you Laurinda's a gold digger? Did you even bother to check her background?"

He didn't stop Orville from helping Edison up. The three of them had grown up together. He knew they were impulsive, but they weren't bad guys. That kick just now hadn't been hard, just a reminder for Edison to watch what he said.

Edison sat back down on the hospital bed, rubbing his shoulder and shooting Laurinda a look full of wounded pride. But his anger seemed to have cooled off. "We didn't have to do some deep investigation. Everyone knows she's not the real Austin daughter. Anyone who pays attention can figure it out. She only got close to you because she wanted something. Otherwise, why would she start seeing the CEO of FarrVector right after getting with you? We saw them together. They weren't acting like just friends."

Adolphus stood next to Laurinda, slipping an arm around her waist. His voice was calm, but his words were sharp. "I'm the one who chased after her. She never tried to cling to me. And about her and York, they've known each other since they were kids. Laurinda owns FarrVector. So tell me, what could possibly be going on between them?"

The room went silent. Edison and Orville just stared at him, both looking like their brains had frozen.

Laurinda... the owner of FarrVector? That just didn't add up.

"Seriously, Adolphus?" Edison said, clearly not buying it. "Laurinda's only eighteen. You're telling us she's FarrVector's boss? Come on. She was the Austin family's daughter sure, but FarrVector isn't even connected to the Austins. Plus, she's still in high school. FarrVector's been around for five years. Who would believe a thirteen-year-old girl could run a company like that?"

Adolphus's patience was running thin. "I don't have time for jokes. You had lunch with people from the Gates Group today, right? Who set that up?"

Orville finally got what Adolphus was hinting at. He spoke up right away. "We ran into Adah yesterday and had lunch with her. We told her a little about why we're here. She said Apex isn't just about Jinsong Tech, that the Gates Group has a new project that might fit us, and she offered to introduce us."

The moment Laurinda heard Adah's name, she could pretty much guess what had happened. She gave Orville and Edison a cold smile. "Let me guess. She complained to

you that I've brainwashed Adolphus, ruined Laird's deal with the Charles Group, and that there's something weird going on between me and Laird too?"

Edison and Orville both looked stunned, like they couldn't believe Laurinda had figured all that out.

Laurinda could tell from their faces that she'd hit the mark. Adah really never missed a chance to drag her through the mud.

Edison looked uncomfortable,

scratching his head before trying to push back "Isn't it kind of true, though? Everyone in Cabinda knew about Daird and the Charles family working together. Then suddenly the partnership ended, and he's with the James family instead? That's a fact. The Charles Group is way stronger than the James family. Switching over just doesn't make sense... unless someone got involved."

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## Chapter 216

[ 586 words ]

Laurinda shifted in her seat, sounding more than a little annoyed. Honestly, if these guys weren't Adolphus's friends, she wouldn't even bother explaining herself.

"Unreasonable? What exactly is so unreasonable here? Sure, the James family isn't as powerful as the Charles Group right now, but are you honestly certain they'll never make a comeback? And let's not pretend you don't know what kind of tactics the Charles Group used to get where they are. Who's to say they won't fall from the top one day?"

She looked at them, eyebrows raised. "And another thing. You keep acting like I'm some evil temptress or something. Do I really look like the kind of woman who can just make any man do whatever I want? That's ridiculous. And you actually believe what Adah says? If you're really that gullible, maybe you should have Adolphus find you a good doctor."

She was done with this pointless conversation. Laurinda stood up and walked out of the infusion room, spotting York waiting by the door. She reached out and tugged his sleeve. "Come on. I'll treat you to lunch in the cafeteria."

York saw she was still in good spirits, which meant those two hadn't upset her. He let out a breath and nodded. "Sure, let's go."

"Mind if I join? I haven't eaten in the school cafeteria in ages."

Harrell had overheard them and quickly caught up, inviting himself along. Laurinda glanced at him. She'd noticed him sneaking glances at her all this time. She didn't think he was interested in her, but she had to admit she was curious about who this guy really was.

"Of course. The food here is actually pretty good."

York handed Laurinda a soft, fluffy hat. She put it on and left the infirmary with both guys in tow.

Back inside, Foley watched Laurinda leave. He didn't dare try to stop her, so he went over to Adolphus. "Sir, the beef broth is ready, but Laurinda's gone."

"Did she take the clothes York brought for her?"

"No, she left them behind."

"Keep them warm, then. She'll probably be back."

Edison and Orville listened to this exchange, their faces getting darker by the second. If York could bring Laurinda clothes and Adolphus didn't care, then maybe there really wasn't anything between Laurinda and York after all.

"Adolphus, we... we were wrong."

Adolphus could tell they were trying to apologize, but he wasn't ready to let it go so

easily. He dragged a chair over, sat down, and looked at them with a small, unreadable smile.

"Wrong about what, exactly?"

"We shouldn't have jumped to conclusions about Laurinda and York. And we shouldn't have believed Adah..."

"No, that's not it."

Adolphus shook his head, interrupting them.

"The real problem is that you didn't trust me. If you did, the moment you thought there was something off with Laurinda, you would've told me right away. That night asked both more than once. Do you even remember how you answered?"

The two of them looked even more ashamed. They wanted to explain, but the words just wouldn't come. The truth was, they hadn't trusted him.

"Adolphus, we wanted to tell you, but... I mean, getting cheated on is embarrassing. "We just didn't want "

"Right, you were worried about

embarrassing me. And now? Is any of this less embarrassing? Laurinda found out what you think of her what am I supposed to do? Ami

supposed to pick between my friends and her?"

Adolphus knew Laurinda wouldn't blame him for what Edison and Orville had done, but after this, getting her to go back to Cabinda with him was going to be a lot harder.

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## Chapter 217

[ 573 words ]

Laurinda had always struggled with feeling safe. Adolphus had finally managed to help her open up a little, but now everything had fallen apart again, right back to where they started.

"Adolphus, we can apologize to Laurinda."

It was only now that Orville realized how badly they'd messed up. Spreading rumors and making wild guesses about a girl's life was just as bad as any other kind of gossip.

"She won't accept your apology," Adolphus said, voice steady and cold. "Not every hurt can be fixed with a simple sorry. From now on, don't show yourselves in front of her again."

He was completely serious. If it weren't for their years growing up together, he would have been much harsher.

The two of them went pale, panic flickering in their eyes. This was as good as being kicked out of his world entirely.

"Adolphus, we know we screwed up. Can't you give us a chance to make things right?"

He shook his head. "There's no need. I'm letting you off because you've already lost enough. Your families won't be working with FarrVector anymore. And remember, don't even think about collaborating with The Gates Group."

Their faces, already grim, turned ghostly white. When they first heard Laurinda and York weren't involved the way they thought, they'd hoped an apology would smooth things over, at least for Adolphus's sake. Maybe Laurinda would agree to work with them.

Now, it felt like falling into an ice-cold abyss. They'd destroyed every chance they had.

"Adolphus, can't you talk to her for us? Just once more..."

"I already introduced you once. I know Laurinda. She's not going to work with you."

Edison and Orville fell silent, regret washing over them. Their stupidity had cost them more than they ever expected.

Adolphus stood, ready to leave, but then turned back and gave them one last warning. "Stay away from Adah too. Don't drag your families down because of your own mistakes."

Without another word, he walked off, not even glancing back. He had someone else to worry about now.

As soon as Adolphus stepped into

the cafeteria, he turned heads. Most of the girls couldn't help but stare. He had that kind of presence tall and magnetic, impossible to ignore.

"Wow, he's got to be over six feet tall. Broad shoulders, narrow waist, those legs..."

"Is he the school doctor or a model?"

"I swear, the school doctor is out of this world. And those two guys from before?"

How do people even look like this? Unreal."

"Don't forget Laurinda. She's gorgeous too."

Laurinda heard the buzz around her and looked up just in time to see Adolphus heading her way. She couldn't hold back a smile.

York noticed and flicked her gently on the forehead. "Hey, what's this? Didn't you just say you weren't going to forgive him that easily?"

Laurinda grinned, leaning her chin on her hand said I wouldn't forgive those two. Adolphus is different

He's a victim here too. His friends

just decided was cheating for

absolutely no reason."

Harrell chuckled at that and nodded. "She's right. He got caught in the crossfire."

From across the room, Adolphus

saw Laurinda laughing, and even his

usually serious face softened. He

couldn't help but speed up a little,

and everyone around seemned

notice the change.

When he reached their table, Shirley stood up right away, offering him her seat.

Adolphus nodded and murmured a quiet thank you.

Laurinda looked at him, still smiling, chopsticks in one hand, her other hand

propping up her chin. "Those two gone?"

"I'm not sure. I left right after we talked. But I promise, they won't bother you again."

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## Chapter 218

[ 603 words ]

Laurinda watched Adolphus for a bit, then popped a piece of spicy chicken into her mouth and chewed, thinking.

"I don't really care. I'm not going to bother with people who don't use their brains. Are you hungry? Want to get something?"

She was almost done eating. She pulled her meal card from her pocket and handed it over. "Go get it yourself."

Adolphus looked at her nearly empty plate, took the card, and said, "Come with me."

Harrell, who'd been quietly eating, suddenly choked on his food when he heard that. He couldn't even look at Adolphus when he was being so soft.

Adolphus shot him a look. "What? Got something to say?"

Harrell quickly waved his hands and set down his chopsticks. "No, no, just swallowed wrong. I wouldn't dare say anything. I'm full anyway, so you two carry on."

He glanced at Laurinda's roommates. "You guys are done too, right? Of course you are. Let's go, I'll treat everyone to milk tea."

The roommates picked up on his hint right away. They nodded, grabbed their trays, and stood up.

"Oh yeah, totally, we're all finished. We'll head out now."

They hurried after Harrell, leaving York still sitting there like a statue.

Adolphus raised an eyebrow at him. "You're not full?"

"I am. Can't I just sit here for a bit?"

"Come on, what are you hanging around for? Let's go, York. Aren't you on your way to see Irvin? I've got some review notes for him, you can take them."

Shirley came rushing back, grabbed York by the arm, and pulled him up before he could protest, dragging him away.

Laurinda watched them go, her smile growing. Things were always lively with everyone together.

Adolphus took her hand, his own smile fading as he got serious. "I'm sorry. You shouldn't have had to go through that."

She shrugged. "It's fine. Their

stupidity isn't your fault. You're not

their dad, you don't owe me an apology. Come on, let's get you

some food. You should try what the cafeteria actually tastes like.

Laurinda really didn't care anymore. It wasn't about being forgiving. Those people just didn't matter to her, so there was no point making herself or anyone she cared about upset over what they did.

Adolphus could see she didn't want to talk about it, so he let it go and followed her to get food.

While they were eating, Adolphus brought up Aggie.

"Foley said Aggie messed with you this morning. What happened?"

Laurinda made a face. She really didn't want to get into it. People like that were just annoying.

"Aggie wants to stay in the Gates family, right? So she probably agreed to help Finn set me up. She's trying to get close, make me let my guard down, and then pull something."

"They really think I'm that dumb?"

She was so tired of all the scheming.

This time, she was ready to go big.

She'd have Bonnie use the dirt they

had on Einn and completely rui

ruffis.

Fabian. Maybe then they'd finally

leave her alone.

"Let me handle the Gates family," Adolphus said. "You shouldn't have to worry about this."

He hated seeing her upset. All he wanted was for Laurinda to be happy and free.

She shook her head. "No, it's complicated with the Gates family. I can't just crush them all at once, but I can definitely make trouble for them. This time, I'm starting with Fabian."

She would have loved to take Finn down right now, but there were still bigger players she hadn't caught. Finn was still useful for now.

"Alright, we'll do it your way. In a couple of days, I'll have a big surprise for you."

When they finished eating, Adolphus cleared their trays, took Laurinda's hand, and together they left the cafeteria, heading toward the infirmary.

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[ 755 words ]

Back in the infirmary, only Foley was left. Laurinda glanced around and asked, "Did those two leave?"

Foley nodded. "Yeah, they left after Adolphus. Edison and Orville wanted me to apologize to you for them. They'll come say sorry in person if you're ever up for it."

Laurinda shrugged. "That's not necessary. Just let them know I accept the apology, but I'm not forgiving them."

As Laurinda turned away, Foley watched her and thought she and Adolphus really were a perfect match. They both had that stubborn streak.

Later, Laurinda was stretched out with her head on Adolphus's lap, reading a foreign novel while he fed her blueberries, one by one.

He asked, "Are you really planning to come in last again? I heard the finals this time are tied to early admissions. Don't you want to try for that?"

Laurinda put her book down and sat up, her face serious. "Do you realize how much trouble I'd be in if I actually did well? I've been at the bottom of the class since middle school. If I suddenly got an amazing score, what do you think people would say?"

She paused, then went on. "People would get suspicious. They'd investigate, ask me to prove my grades are real. Like you said, these results matter for early admissions, so people all over the country would notice. I don't want that kind of attention. It's just trouble I don't need. Honestly, being a slacker isn't so bad."

She meant it, too. Laurinda had plenty of ways to get into college. She didn't need to be the center of attention. She'd known from the first time she purposely failed what the future would hold, and she'd already prepared herself for it.

Besides, there were already people watching her. Standing out would only make things harder. Until she caught whoever hurt her parents, she wasn't about to show her real abilities.

Adolphus tried a different angle. "Have you ever thought about studying abroad? You know, Frostfrod?"

He was hoping he could convince Laurinda to go there, so he wouldn't have to worry about her when his own life got busy.

She shook her head. "No plans. Right now, I just want to get through these next six months. I'll think about the future when it comes."

Laurinda leaned back into him, closing her eyes. She loved how warm he was. With him around, winter didn't feel so cold.

\*\*\*

Aggie skipped evening study and rushed back to the Gates house. She found Finn and told him everything Laurinda had said, word for word.

Finn listened, but he still couldn't figure out what had gone wrong.

"Finn, did I do something wrong?" Aggie was totally lost. She had no idea how Laurinda had seen through her.

Finn sighed. "Just don't go near Laurinda at school tomorrow. She doesn't play by the rules, and I can't read her anymore. Let's just wait and see what happens."

Suddenly, Finn's assistant burst in, looking frantic and clutching a tablet. "Finn, it's bad!"

Finn frowned. "What's going on? Why are you so worked up?"

The assistant took a shaky breath. "Our overseas company got hacked. In just one hour, all our liquid assets are gone."

Finn shot up from the sofa, feeling the room spin. "How is that possible?"

"Our tech team's on it, but the money's gone. There's nothing we can do."

Hearing that, Finn sank back down, stunned. Their firewall was supposed to be top-notch, developed by his own company. Now, he could already imagine how devastating the losses would be.

He forced himself up. "We need to get to the office. Now."

There was no time to lose. Finn grabbed his coat and hurried out, thinking if this couldn't be fixed, he might have to fly overseas himself.

He called back to his assistant. "Get

in touch with Bagot. The Charles Group owns shares in that company too. Tell him to keep this under wraps, no matter what. If word gets out, our losses won't just be about the money."

His assistant nodded and rushed off to contact Bagot. Right now, the Gates and Charles families were stuck in the same mess, both stuck in th

.....

tangled up because of Aileen's situation. They couldn't handle another crisis.

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Aggie stood in the living room, frozen with dread. She had a bad feeling that things for the Gates family were only going to get worse.

Just then, Harden came out of his

room and saw Aggie standing there, lost in thought. He sneered. "I told

you not to play games with Laurinda. Now you've ruined whatever good feelings she had left for you. When the Gates and Charles

families drop you, there won't be anyone left to help."

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[ 695 words ]

Aggie heard Harden's voice and bit her lip, her eyes full of stubborn fire.

"You think I want things to be like this? I'm just trying to survive in this house." "Who are you to judge me? Maybe you should worry about yourself for once."

"You're just as useless. The second my cousin came back, you got sent down to the first floor. You've stuck by Finn for so long, but he still hasn't bothered to tell anyone who you really are. So what exactly are you proud of?"

Fuming, Aggie stomped up the stairs. She couldn't stand Harden. He always gave her the creeps, and she could never figure out what he was really after.

As Aggie disappeared upstairs, the mocking smile slid off Harden's face. He stared coldly at the third floor. He was determined to make Finn acknowledge him. The Gates family would be his, no one else's. He'd sacrificed too much already. There was no way he was letting it all go to waste.

\*\*\*

The moment Finn's overseas company hit trouble, Baal caught wind of it and wasted no time spreading the news.

Finn stared at the headlines flooding his phone, his chest tightening with anger and dread. He could feel it-someone was out to ruin him.

"Sir, the overseas company's value is still dropping. Our tech team is trying to patch the security gap, but... the hackers are faster than we are."

"Finn, the CEO of The Charles Group is on the line. Their overseas branch got hit too. Same problem as us. Their money's disappearing fast."

Finn answered the call and braced himself as Pearce's furious voice blasted through the speaker.

"Finn, what kind of useless firewall did your people build? If you can't fix this, don't blame me when I come after you for damages!"

Finn pressed his hand to his chest, swallowing his frustration. He couldn't afford to fight with Pearce right now.

"Our techs are on it. We'll fix the issue soon. Someone's clearly targeting both our companies. Just give us a little more time."

\*\*\*

Laurinda spotted the Gates Group disaster trending all over the internet. Someone had already beaten her to the punch, which. wasn't a bad thing at all. Looked like the Gates Group was about to bleed money.

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Adolphus leaned against her

shoulder, his lips curling into a small,

satisfied smile as he read the

headline. He was proud of what he'd

done. felt like the perfect way to

SALA

repay Laurinda for the big favor

she'd done for him.

"Finn sure knows how to make enemies. I haven't even made a move yet and someone's already taking him down for me. Love that."

Laurinda grinned, stretching her arms overhead.

"I'll be pretty busy before finals, but I'll still come by for meals. I smelled beef broth earlier. Can we have beef noodle soup for breakfast tomorrow?"

"Of course. I'll make it for you. Oh, Sam just texted me he wants to invite you to Raines's birthday party. Do you want to go?"

"Is it in Cabinda? When is it?"

Laurinda thought about it. She'd need to go to Cabinda after exams anyway her research institute had been waiting for her. If the timing worked out dropping by to see the Bill family wouldn't hurt. She was even thinking about bringing FarrVector to Cabinda. With some connections, things would be much easier.

"The party's the Tuesday after your finals end. If you're free, we could go to Cabinda together."

Adolphus sounded hopeful. He wanted her to come with him, but he was ready to respect her choice either way.

"That should work. I'd love to go. Also, could you help York get an invitation? He could go as FarrVector's CEO and make some connections at the party."

"Absolutely. With all the buzz around FarrVector, the Bill family will definitely want to meet him."

Adolphus grabbed his phone and texted Sam, who replied almost instantly with an OK emoji.

They curled up on the sofa for a while, enjoying the quiet, until Laurinda's phone buzzed. It was Bonnie, letting her know she was waiting at the back gate.

Laurinda read the message, then slipped out of Adolphus's arms and bent down, pressing a soft kiss to his lips.

"I'm heading out with Bonnie for a bit. You should get some rest tonight. I'll see you later."

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## Chapter 221

[ 571 words ]

Laurinda scrolled through the cloud drive, her face twisting in disgust at the censored photos. Even with the blur, they were way too much.

She turned to Bonnie, who was calmly sipping coffee. "You really don't hold back, do you? I can't even use these. Don't you have something a bit less... extreme?"

Laurinda wanted Fabian to go down, sure. But traumatizing the entire world? That wasn't her style.

Bonnie shot her a look, half amusement, half warning. "Believe it or not, these are the tamest ones I could find. He was just... really enjoying himself, so..." She left the rest unsaid. York had warned her not to drag Laurinda into anything too wild.

With a sigh, Laurinda shut her laptop and slumped back on the couch, eyes closed. She needed to mentally detox after seeing that.

"I finally get why Finn's so scared of you," she mumbled. "If these photos ever got out, even Finn would want to disappear, not just Fabian. No wonder York didn't want me asking questions."

Bonnie's chin lifted, pride written all over her face. "Of course. I figured after all that, they'd finally behave. But no, they're like cockroaches. No matter what happens, they just keep coming back. So, what's the plan? Are you really going to leak the photos?"

Laurinda shook her head. "No way. These are useless. We need a different approach. Did you hear about The Gates Group's overseas branch? I just checked -billions vanished overnight."

She couldn't bring herself to unleash those photos on the world. There were plenty of other ways to ruin Fabian. Time to try something else.

Bonnie nodded. "Yeah, I saw it. Platt thinks Digital Ghost is behind it. Says the method feels familiar, but he couldn't trace them. Whoever it is, they really know how to cover their tracks."

The name Digital Ghost made Laurinda sit up straight, eyes wide. "Wait... I remember seeing an invitation on Jasper's desk..."

Bonnie stared at her, stunned. Was she hearing things? Jasper was only seven. Was that even possible?

"Laurinda, are you serious? You don't think—"

Laurinda didn't answer right away. She wasn't sure herself. Jasper was capable of a lot more than people realized.

She opened her laptop again, fingers flying as she typed out code. The attacker had already cleaned up almost everything, but she still spotted a few tiny gaps.

She patched the holes herself, a small smile tugging at her lips.

"Well? Was it Jasper?" Bonnie's voice was tight with nerves. If it really was him... what hope did the rest of them have?

One sibling casually moved billions, the other tens of billions. If anyone outside found out, they'd lose their minds.

Laurinda kept her answer vague. "The style is familiar, but I can't say for sure." If Jasper wanted to keep his secret, she'd make sure it stayed hidden.

Bonnie let out a long breath, patting her chest. "You scared me. If it really is Jasper, the pressure on us is unreal isn't that basically putting him next in line for Stonehaven?"

Laurinda's eyes went cold at the mention of Stonehaven. "As long as those people are still out there no one at Stonehaven is going to hear about Jasper. One target is enough, and that's me."

She picked up her honey water, took a slow sip, and stood.

"Send a few of those photos to Fabian. Let him know he's on thin ice. If he's got any brains, hell back off not, send them to Harden He'll take it from there." fo FindNovel.net

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## Chapter 222

[ 650 words ]

Between Harden and Fabian, Laurinda definitely preferred Harden. At least he had some brains and knew how to play the game, unlike Fabian. That was exactly why Laurinda, even though she knew Harden was ambitious, had no intention of teaming up with him. She didn't want to help create a future rival for herself.

But if it was the Gates family at war with itself? Laurinda couldn't help but look forward to the drama.

After she made her point, Laurinda headed back to her room. Bonnie glanced around the empty living room, feeling an odd chill run through her. This was what it meant to strike at someone's heart. Was the Gates family really about to face disaster from all sides?

\*\*\*

The days slipped by in a blur of exam prep, and suddenly finals were here. By the time they finished, Laurinda still hadn't heard a word from the principal about the investigation into the scholarship and aid applications.

She sat alone in the school infirmary, scrolling through her phone until she found the principal's contact. She was just about to message him for an update when she heard some noise outside.

Foley was tidying up unused medicine when he noticed someone at the door. He stepped out and saw Aggie standing there, looking nervous and out of place.

"Are you here for medicine?" Foley asked.

"No, I'm looking for Laurinda. Is she here?"

Foley still remembered how badly things ended between Laurinda and Aggie. For a second, he thought about saying Laurinda wasn't around, but he hesitated.

"Let me check if she wants to see you."

He went back inside and told Laurinda that Aggie was waiting outside. He watched her face, waiting to see what she'd say.

Laurinda didn't look surprised at all. She could pretty much guess why Aggie was here. The girl was desperate and needed help.

Earlier that day, Laurinda had heard in the cafeteria that Fabian had totally lost it and kicked Aggie, Lawrence, and even Harden out of the Gates house.

She slid her phone back into her pocket, stood up, and walked out of the infirmary. Aggie was waiting at the bottom of the steps, looking small and anxious.

"What do you want?" Laurinda asked.

Aggie stared at the ground, her voice barely above a whisper. "Laurinda, I know I messed up. Please, can you help me? My cousin kicked my brother and me out. We have nowhere to go, and no money. Could you help us find a place to stay When Finn comes back, I get him to pay you back."

Aggie's head hung low. She couldn't even look Laurinda in the eye. If it weren't for the argument they'd had before, maybe she would've believed Laurinda would help. But today, she wasn't so sure.

"Finn? You really think Finn's going to help you? Have you forgotten what your mom did to the Gates family?"

Laurinda shook h

her head. "I'm not

giving you a place to stay. But I can

point you in the right direction.

Here's the address for the nursing home where Baily lives. He has

some money set aside. Go to him. If you manage to get that, you and

your brother won't have to worry. about anything. You're Austin family kids. I'm sure he'll help you out. That's all I can do."

Laurinda pulled a slip of paper from her pocket and dropped it on the ground. She'd

let Aggie stay at school all this time just for this moment. Hopefully, Aggie wouldn't let her down.

Aggie looked up, her eyes wide with disbelief.

She'd expected Laurinda to turn her away, but she hadn't thought she'd be humiliated like this. If she went to see Baily, it would be like admitting she was just the Austin family's illegitimate child content

A Charles family kid, or an Austin family secret... The difference was huge. Aggie couldn't accept it.

"Laurinda, do you really have to embarrass me like this? I'm just asking to borrow some money. When Finn comes back, he'll pay you back."

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[ 682 words ]

Laurinda folded her arms and looked down at Aggie, her face all wide-eyed innocence.

"Humiliate you? I'm just telling it like it is. You and your brother are Aiken's kids. Isn't it only natural for you to ask your real grandfather for money? He's in a nursing home now, he doesn't even need it. If you really beg him, I bet he'll give you whatever he's got stashed away. He loved Aiken so much. How could he just let Aiken's kids end up with nowhere to go?"

Aggie glared at Laurinda, clutching the lollipop Laurinda had given her earlier. Not long ago, she'd felt bad for agreeing to Finn's scheme against Laurinda, but that guilt had completely vanished. All she felt now was pure hatred.

"Laurinda, you're so cold. Do you really have to force my family into a dead end? You got my mom thrown in jail, made my brother and me homeless. What, are you only happy if I end up dead?"

Adah had been right all along. Laurinda was nothing but trouble, here to ruin their family.

Laurinda just smiled, totally unfazed by the anger in Aggie's eyes.

"Was it me who made your mom do all those things? And now you want to blame everything on me? Does that even make sense? If you want to die, that's not something I can control. You came to me for help, and I gave you every idea I had. That's all I can do."

She didn't bother saying anything else to Aggie. Laurinda just turned around and walked straight back to the infirmary. There was no way she believed Aggie would actually do anything drastic.

If Aggie really had any pride, she wouldn't have come here begging. What did she take Laurinda for? Someone to take advantage of?

Aggie stared after Laurinda, watching her walk away without looking back. It was clear now-Laurinda wasn't going to help her. She looked down at the slip of paper on the ground. After a long pause, she bent down, picked it up, and ran off.

What Aggie didn't realize was that Laurinda was already back in front of the security monitors, watching everything unfold in real time.

Foley glanced over and caught the sly, almost wicked smile on Laurinda's face. He felt a chill run down his spine.

Who on earth ever thought Laurinda was a pushover? This girl was something else. She was honestly kind of scary.

Laurinda's phone buzzed. It was a message from the principal, asking where she was so he could come find her.

Since it was freezing outside, Laurinda just texted back that she was in the infirmary.

Five minutes later, the principal showed up with two people from the education bureau.

As soon as he came in, the principal handed Laurinda a folder. He was being so respectful that the two officials actually looked surprised, like they couldn't figure out who was really in charge here.

"Laurinda, here's the list of students who got aid they shouldn't have. We're still checking the scholarship list, but we'll need to wait for the final exam results before we know for sure."

Laurinda flipped through the list. It was pretty much identical to the one Bonnie had given her. She handed the folder right back.

"Thank you for your hard work,

Principal 'll need to trouble you and

the education bureau to get that

money back. Whether you call the

police or just talk to the parents I'll leave that up to you."

The principal's face clouded over. He'd already tried to recover the money but those parents just ignored him not planning to pay anything back. He couldn't really expel the students just for this, could he?

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When the principal didn't answer, one of the staff, a woman, let out a sarcastic little

laugh and spoke up, acting like she was in charge.

"Laurinda, after looking into it for days, we know those students aren't technically eligible for aid, but asking them to pay it back would be tough on their families. Since you already handed out the money, isn't it better to just let it go? Why make things harder for them?"

Laurinda's eyes went icy at her words, but her smile didn't fade.

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## Chapter 224

[ 682 words ]

"So you're saying I should just let it go? Then what was the point of the principal's investigation, or yours? If you were never going to do anything, you might as well have not bothered from the start."

The staff member was caught off guard by Laurinda's words. From the beginning, she'd thought Laurinda was making a fuss over nothing. Rich people were always like this, turning every good deed into a performance just to polish their reputation. Why take things so seriously?

"If you knew the investigation was useless, why push the principal to do it? You rich people are always looking for drama. You like seeing regular folks jump through hoops for your entertainment. The only reason you set up this student aid fund was to make yourself look good, right? Be honest, with your grades, there's no way you'd have gotten into The Cabinda School without it."

The staff member didn't even try to hide how little she thought of Laurinda. After finding out about Laurinda's grades, her disdain only deepened. She saw everything Laurinda was doing as nothing but a show.

If you're going to donate money, why do you care who it goes to? Taking it back now just made her seem petty. The staff member hated people like that.

Laurinda could see arguing with her was pointless. She looked over at the principal, her voice suddenly cold. "Do you also think it's unnecessary to get the money back?"

The principal pressed his lips together. He was quiet for a long moment before speaking up, sounding uncomfortable.

"Laurinda, I get where you're coming from, but Babur isn't wrong. We could try to recover the money, but it would really put a strain on some of these families. Some students have been receiving the aid for three years. That adds up to a lot, and their families can't afford to pay it all back."

His answer was exactly what Laurinda expected. She wasn't holding out any hope for him now.

"Alright. If the school isn't willing to recover the money, then I'll handle it myself. If this ends up putting the school in a bad light, I hope you won't blame me for not protecting your image."

She turned to Foley. "Foley, take these documents to the police station. Report everyone involved-students and teachers. Let them investigate."

Laurinda pulled the folder from the principal's arms and handed it to Foley, who took a quick look at the principal, then grabbed his coat and keys before heading out.

The principal didn't expect Laurinda to be so direct. By the time he realized what she was doing, Foley was already gone. He slapped his leg, calling after her.

"Don't do this! Laurinda, tell him to come back! We can settle this ourselves."

"There's no need. I've already given you enough chances. Thank you and the staff for the list. I'll make sure to report your attitude to the education board too. Appreciate your time."

Laurinda's iron resolve took everyone by surprise. A middle-aged woman who'd been quiet until now finally spoke up.

"Laurinda, I understand how you

feel. We just don't think you need to

go this far. Those students aren't

poor, but they come from average families. That money might not mean much to you, but it's a big deal for them. Isn't this a bit much?"

Laurinda let out a small laugh, more frustrated than amused. She was just trying to

take back the aid that had been claimed with false information—how was she suddenly the villain?

"Too much? Where was this concern

when they spent my money? If

you're going to fake your situation you should be ready to get called out. I have money because I want to help people who actually need it. Like you said they're not struggling. So why are they taking from families who really need that help?"

"Do you even know how desperate those kids are when they go to the education board for aid, and end up with nothing?"

"My donation was supposed to

support students who want an education. On a small scale, I'm helping individuals, but on a bigger scale I'm helping the board solve a

real problem. How did this become my fault?"

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## Chapter 225

[ 755 words ]

"I've recorded everything you both said. I'll let Sanderson know what really happened. By the way, in case you forgot, Sanderson personally approved the aid fund in the first place."

Laurinda hadn't planned on mentioning Sanderson's name, but she was done letting people walk all over her. She'd learned how to stand up for herself since she was a kid. The resources her parents left her weren't just for decoration.

Right in front of the principal and the two staff members, Laurinda pulled out her phone and called Sanderson.

As soon as his familiar voice came through, all three of them looked like they'd swallowed a lemon. They clearly hadn't expected Laurinda to actually know the director.

"Sweetheart, what made you think to call your old uncle?" Sanderson greeted her, sounding a little surprised but happy to hear from her.

"Sanderson, have you heard about the fake claims on the aid fund at The Cabinda School?"

"I have. My staff told me about it, and I've already sent people to help with the investigation. Don't worry, this is serious. Once we get the facts, I won't go easy on anyone. The students who took money they weren't supposed to will have to pay it back and the school will officially reprimand them. It's a matter of character. As for any teachers who helped cover it up, the Board isn't going to let it slide. We're still deciding exactly what to do."

Laurinda sat back on the couch, glancing at the three people across from her. She could barely hide her smirk as she saw just how hopeless they looked.

"Are you in your office now, Sanderson? If you're free, I'd like to come over. There's something I want to talk to you about in person."

Sanderson sounded even more cheerful now. It had clearly been a while since he'd last seen her.

"I'm in my office. I'll wait for you."

Laurinda ended the call and turned to the three people standing there, their faces pale. Her tone was calm and matter-of-fact.

"If there's nothing else, you should head out. The equipment in the infirmary is pretty expensive, so I need to lock up."

The principal looked like he wanted to argue, but one look at Laurinda's expression told him there was no point. He and the two staffers followed Laurinda out of the infirmary.

Babur, the staff member who had been giving her trouble, still didn't look convinced. She tried to defend herself.

"Laurinda, this really has nothing to do with us. We were just here to help with the investigation."

"I never said it was your fault. And getting my donation back doesn't have anything to do with you either, right? You don't have to explain yourself to me. Someone else will talk to you about it later."

Laurinda locked the infirmary door and walked away without looking back.

The principal just stood there, rubbing his thinning hair, looking completely lost. He honestly had no idea how he was going to get out of this one.

The older staff member turned to Babur, who was still grumbling, and let out a quiet sigh.

"Let's just go back. We're probably going to get caught up in this too. Who would've thought she actually knew Sanderson?"

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The moment Laurinda walked into the Board of Education building, Sanderson's assistant was already waiting for her at the door. After a quick greeting he led her straight to Sanderson's office.

Sanderson set his pen down and looked at Laurinda across the desk. His smile was warm, almost fatherly.

"What's wrong? Are you not happy with how things are being handled?"

Laurinda took the tea his assistant handed her, sipped it, and slouched over the desk. Her voice was muffled and a little tired.

"The principal tried to cover it up. And one of the staff he brought said I shouldn't care about the money since I'm not hurting for cash. She thinks I'm being too uptight."

"Sanderson, it's not about the money. I just want my donation to go to the people who actually need it, not to be wasted by people who cheated the system. You get what I mean, right?"

"I do. I understood exactly what you wanted when you first set up this fund. It's my fault for not putting someone trustworthy in charge. take care of it, I promise. Will you trust me?"

When Laurinda had first told him about her plan for the aid fund, he'd promised he'd personally make sure everything was handled right.

Now that things had gone wrong, he knew he couldn't just shrug off the blame. It

was his responsibility, and he hadn't done his job well.

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## **- Chapter 226**

### **Chapter 226**

[ 642 words ]

"Alright, but I've already sent Foley to the police to file a report. You'll probably be contacted soon, so from now on, it's your problem to deal with."

Sanderson kept smiling, almost impressed. It took some guts to make Laurinda mad enough to call the cops.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of it. And if you think the principal at The Cabinda School isn't the right fit, I've got someone in mind who'd be perfect. You're about to get a break, right? Why not come stay at the Adams house for a few days? My mom says Lea's bringing Jasper home."

"We'll see. I have to make a trip to Cabinda soon, so maybe after I get back. It's getting late, Sanderson. Since this is your responsibility now, I'm out. I'll leave you to it."

Laurinda stood up and placed a recorder on Sanderson's desk.

"This is your mess. Handle it however you want. I'm done."

After she left, Sanderson told his assistant to play the recording. When it finished, the silence in the office was almost suffocating.

"So this is how they handle things? How can someone in public service say things like that? Unbelievable. Starting today, check every school in the city for financial aid issues. If we find anything, there'll be hell to pay."

\*\*\*

Laurinda stepped out of the education bureau and immediately spotted Adolphus's car parked by the curb. She headed over, but before she could knock, the door opened and he stepped out, tall and calm as ever.

"Sorry, I was on the phone and didn't see you come out. Did everything go okay? Need me to do anything?"

Adolphus had bumped into Foley at the police station and found out Laurinda was at the education bureau. He passed his work to Sam and hurried over.

"I left it to Sanderson. Oh, and I forgot to tell you — Larson's second son is actually the director over there. He'll handle it."

"Good. I was thinking, if you weren't satisfied with how it was going, I could call in a couple more people to help. Having Foley file a report is fine for an investigation, but it won't really solve the problem. You need someone who knows what they're doing for this kind of thing."

Laurinda smiled, the corners of her eyes lifting.

"I wasn't really thinking ahead. I was just so mad. Luckily, I know how to push back when people try to pull rank."

"Come on, let's get you something to eat."

Adolphus gently tapped her head, took her hand, and led her around to the passenger seat. He opened the door for her and waited until she was settled before getting in himself.

He drove down a narrow alley. Laurinda glanced around, taking in the unfamiliar neighborhood.

"Are we visiting your mentor? I didn't bring a gift."

"I've got that covered. Just wait until I park."

Adolphus pulled over, popped the trunk, and started unloading the gifts he'd picked up earlier.

Laurinda walked over and, seeing all the boxes in his arms, quickly grabbed a few.

"What did you buy? This is a lot."

"Crabs. Harrell said he's been craving them, so I had some freaket

ones brought in They're amazing,

time of year."

Laurinda's eyes lit up and she suddenly grinned, her mind jumping to something mischievous.

"So, what about when they're not exactly in season? Still good?"

"They're always good. I'll make sure you get to try some tonight."

Adolphus leaned down and kissed the corner of her mouth. Laurinda blushed and pushed him away.

"You're shameless."

"Oh? I thought you liked me this way."

"Go away. You're impossible."

Laurinda shoved him lightly, turning away just in time to spot Harrell by the door, watching them

obvious amusement, ther

Her shy look vanished in an instant. She straightened, cool as ever, and gave him a little nod.

"Can you help us with these?"

Harrell couldn't help but be amazed at how fast she could switch gears. Her poker face was almost too good.

"Right away. And I've got a surprise for you."

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## **Chapter 227**

[ 582 words ]

The three of them walked into Balaam's courtyard, gifts in hand. Laurinda spotted Earl right away, sitting in the sunroom. She lifted an eyebrow.

"So, Earl is the big surprise?"

Adolphus noticed Earl, too. He had no idea what Harrell was up to, so he turned and gave him a questioning look, waiting for an answer.

Harrell just laughed, shaking his head. "What are those faces for? Earl isn't the surprise. Come on, you'll find out inside."

He led the way, carrying the crabs into the kitchen. Adolphus took Laurinda with him into the main hall.

The second Laurinda stepped inside, she stopped in her tracks. She couldn't believe her eyes.

Earl came out of the sunroom just then, gave Laurinda a nod, and spoke gently. "My senior gave Fidelia a check-up today. He thinks she can start getting out more. She just finished the last of the medicine my uncle left, so we brought her here for Balaam to take a look."

Laurinda watched Fidelia chatting with Balaam and Regan. Her eyes started to sting. She honestly couldn't remember the last time she'd seen Fidelia looking so alive.

Adolphus set down the gift boxes and walked over, wrapping Laurinda in his arms. His voice was soft and steady.

"Fidelia getting out of the care facility is a really good start. Isn't this what you've been hoping for? Seeing her talk with people like everyone else?"

Laurinda nodded, holding back tears. She turned and hugged Adolphus tightly, burying her face in his chest.

"She really did it."

"She did. And it's only going to get better from here."

Adolphus held her a little closer, letting Laurinda take her time and collect herself. He knew she didn't like showing her vulnerable side in front of other people.

Off to the side, Earl watched the two of them together. He felt a dull ache in his chest, realizing for the first time that Laurinda had only ever seen him as a friend. It was time for him to let go for real.

When Laurinda finally pulled herself together, she stepped back from Adolphus, Turning around, she noticed everyone else had stopped talking and was watching her She felt herself blush, her ears turning red with embarrassment.

She gave Adolphus a playful punch on the chest and whispered, "You could have warned me."

He just smiled and took her hand. "It's just friends here. What's there to worry about?"

He led her over to Balaam and Regan.

"Balaam, Regan, this is my girlfriend."

Hearing Adolphus introduce her like that made Laurinda's cheeks flush even more, but she didn't shrink back. She smiled and greeted them confidently.

"Hi, Balaam. Hi, Regan. Nice to meet you both."

Regan grinned and waved her in. "Come on, have a seat. We're so glad you're here."

Regan had already noticed Adolphus's feelings for Laurinda the last time they met, and she was happy to see them together. They made a striking pair.

As Regan guided Laurinda inside, Adolphus spotted Fidelia hanging back, looking a little out of place. He softened his voice and asked,

"How's it feel being out of the care facility?"

Fidelia smiled, just a little. "It's not bad. Harrell thought I should get out and try adjusting to life outside, so came with everyone. Honestly, Apex has changed so much if you dropped me on a random street, I'm not sure I could find my way home."

Laurinda's face lit up at Fidelia's joke. She hurried over and slipped an arm around her shoulders.

"If you want to go anywhere, I'll go with you. I'd never leave you wandering around by yourself."

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## Chapter 228

[ 579 words ]

Laurinda's playful smile caught Fidelia off guard, making her realize just how quickly the years had slipped by. In her own foggy haze, she had missed so much,

especially watching Laurinda grow up.

"Sweetheart, you've really been through a lot," Fidelia said softly.

"Oh, Fidelia, don't say that. I haven't suffered at all. And now that I have my family with me, I'll only get happier," Laurinda grinned, her eyes sparkling.

Everyone in the room was watching Laurinda, completely drawn in by her energy. Adolphus and Earl both unconsciously softened, their expressions gentle and warm. Off to the side, Harrell couldn't help but feel a twinge of worry.

Wait... could both of them actually be falling for Laurinda?

He cleared his throat. "Dinner's ready, let's eat and talk. Earl, come help me in the kitchen."

Harrell quickly led Earl out, leaving the others behind. Adolphus watched them go, a small smile tugging at his lips. He could tell Earl was trying to move on, even if he hadn't quite managed it yet. Sometimes, though, all you needed was time.

Adolphus lingered near Laurinda as she helped Fidelia into the dining room, and soon everyone was seated around the table.

Regan brought out a bowl of nourishing soup, setting it down in front of Fidelia with a proud smile. Fidelia tasted it and couldn't help but beam-it was miles better than anything she'd eaten at the care facility.

Adolphus served Laurinda a bowl of chicken soup. She took one sip, then practically melted. Leaning closer to Adolphus, she whispered, "We definitely need to come over for dinner more often. This chicken soup is unreal."

He laughed gently, looking at her with unmistakable affection. "Regan taught me everything I know about cooking. Her family has been chefs for generations. If you like it, we can come by anytime."

"That explains so much. Your cooking is incredible too. Honestly, it's a waste if you don't open your own restaurant."

"Well, actually, my mentor's brother runs a private kitchen over in Cabinda. When we go back, I'll take you. You could eat there for three days straight and never repeat a day, though,

dish On the fourth repeat

depends on his mood," Adolphus said, chuckling.

Laurinda's eyes lit up. "That sounds amazing. We have to go next time we're in Cabinda."

Regan and Fidelia watched the two of them, unable to hide their smiles. The more they saw, the more obvious it was—these two just fit. Adolphus, especially, looked at Laurinda with such tenderness. Regan and Fidelia had seen enough in their lives to recognize what was happening.

After a while, Earl spoke up. "Laurinda, Balaam and I talked, and we think Fidelia should stay here for a bit, just to help her recover. What do you think?"

Laurinda paused, glancing at Fidelia and Regan. "Are you sure it's not too much trouble?"

Regan pretended to scold her. "Oh, come on. Don't be so formal. I love having Fidelia here to keep me company. We talked all afternoon and really hit it off. Trust me Balaam and I will take good care of her."

Laurinda looked to Fidelia, who immediately nodded, looking happier than she had in ages.

"We already decided earlier that I'd stay for a while. Thea's going to bring my things over later," Fidelia said, her voice light.

Laurinda could see how much Fidelia wanted to stay, so she simply smiled and nodded. She loved the atmosphere here, and she was sure Fidelia would too.

"Alright then, I really appreciate you all looking after her," Laurinda said, her voice warm with gratitude.

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## Chapter 229

[ 640 words ]

Under the table, she reached for Adolphus's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. She had a feeling this was all part of his plan. Otherwise, there was no way Balaam and Regan would have invited Fidelia to stay here.

After dinner, Regan suggested they play mahjong. Fidelia jumped at the idea and was instantly swept up in the excitement. Laughter filled the room, and Fidelia was so caught up in the game that she barely noticed when Laurinda tried to talk to her.

Laurinda watched Fidelia, who was now completely focused on mahjong, and let out a helpless sigh. She slid into the seat next to Adolphus and put on a mock pout. "Now that she's got mahjong, I don't even exist."

Adolphus met her eyes, a smile lingering on his lips. He reached over and playfully pinched her cheek. "Harrell's staying here for the next few days. He'll keep an eye on Fidelia, so you don't have to worry."

"Thank you," Laurinda murmured. She wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her head against his chest. The steady rhythm of his heartbeat calmed her. In that quiet moment, she wished life could always be this perfect.

Earl saw them together and the sight stung, but he was surprisingly calm. He stood up, quietly passed along a few instructions to Harrell about Fidelia, then left the house.

Once Earl was gone, Adolphus stepped outside for some air. Harrell glanced over and offered him a cigarette.

Adolphus shook his head. "What did he say to you?"

"He said he's leaving Fidelia in my care for now. He's heading back to Cabinda for a blind date."

Adolphus blinked, taken aback. "A blind date?"

It didn't make sense. Earl wasn't at the age where the Carl family would be rushing him into marriage. Was something bothering him that much?

Harrell just shrugged. "How should I know what's going on with your family? You're asking the wrong person." He let out a short laugh. Harrell wasn't close enough to know the Carl family's business, but he could tell Earl wasn't being pressured. This felt more like running away. He'd noticed the sadness in Earl's eyes whenever he saw Laurinda and Adolphus together. Maybe the blind date was just a way to distract himself.

"I also—" Adolphus started, but Laurinda came out of the house before he could finish. She was clutching a puffy jacket and her phone, her face pale.

"What happened?" he asked.

"We need to get to the hospital now. Fabian's lost it. He hit Bonnie with his car. She's in surgery right now."

"Don't panic. I'll grab my phone and coat and call the hospital. Wait for me."

Adolphus tried to stay calm, not wanting to alarm Fidelia. He ducked back inside, grabbed his things and sent a quick message to Balaam to let him know they were leaving.

Harrell drove, Adolphus made the call to the hospital, and Laurinda sat quietly in the back seat. Her mind kept replaying the day her parents died, the memory of all that blood creeping in until she could barely breathe.

Harrell caught her in the rearview mirror and saw how shaken she was. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a piece of candy, and handed it back to her.

"Here. Try some candy. It'll help you calm down. We're almost at the hospital."

Laurinda took the candy, unwrapped it, and slipped it into her mouth. The soft lemon flavor melted on her tongue, and the storm of thoughts in her head began to clear.

After Adolphus hung up, he turned and pulled her into his arms, holding her close.

"Bonnie's stable for now. When we get to the hospital, I'll do the surgery myself. Don't be afraid. I promise I'll keep her alive."

He didn't know Bonnie that well, but Adolphus understood how much Laurinda cared about her and the

people around her. He wouldn't let anything happen to anyone important to her.

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[ 566 words ]

Laurinda pressed her face into Adolphus's chest, her voice coming out low and

shaky. "This is all my fault. If I hadn't asked Bonnie to send those photos to Fabian, he wouldn't have snapped like this. I should've found a different way..."

Adolphus hugged her tighter, feeling the tremble running through her. He

understood her guilt, but he didn't want her drowning in it.

"It's not on you. Fabian was never a good guy anyway. Don't overthink it. I promise, Bonnie's going to be alright."

The car pulled up fast outside the emergency room. Adolphus helped Laurinda out, and together they ran toward the hospital doors.

York spotted them and got up, meeting them halfway.

"They took her in about forty minutes ago. No clear updates yet."

"I'll go in and check. Don't worry, I won't let anything happen to her."

Adolphus told Laurinda and York to wait, then pushed open the doors to the trauma room and disappeared inside.

"What happened? Bonnie always has people with her. How did Fabian even get close?"

"Her bodyguard said Bonnie thought someone was following her, so she tried to lure them out. That's when Fabian showed up in his car. He was completely out of control, just wanted Bonnie dead. She tried to dodge, but he still managed to hit her."

York had already sent people to pull security footage from the area. He couldn't shake the feeling that there was more going on. Even if Fabian had lost it, there's no way he could have tracked Bonnie down so easily.

Harrell walked in and gave York a nod in greeting.

Just then, the trauma room door swung open. A nurse stepped out. York and Laurinda hurried over to her.

"How is she?"

"They're moving her to the operating room now. Dr. Sterling is handling the surgery himself. He wanted me to tell you the chances of success. are about eighty-five percent."

Hearing that, Harrell knew just how bad Bonnie's injuries were. He'd known Adolphus for years, and the man's surgeries always had a perfect record. People didn't call him a miracle worker for nothing.

"The surgery will take a while. Dr. Sterling said you can wait in his private lounge."  
"Alright."

Laurinda knew she needed to let Adolphus focus on the surgery. She couldn't distract him, not now.

The light above the OR came on. Laurinda tucked her phone away, stood up from the bench, and glanced at Harrell.

He caught her look, brows drawing together in confusion. "What's up? Do you need anything?"

"York and I need to handle something. Could you stay here and keep an eye on things for us? We'll be back as soon as we can."

Harrell could guess what she was planning. He wanted to tell her to wait, to let Adolphus finish the surgery first, but he could see the determination on her face. Nothing was going to stop her.

"Alright. I'll wait here."

"Thank you, really." Laurinda pulled a black card out of her pocket and handed it over. "The password is six eights."

Without another word, she and York hurried out of the hospital. Harrell looked down at the card in his hand, eyebrows raised.

As far as he knew, there were less than five of these cards in the world. What kind of woman did Adolphus get involved with?

Outside, a black van was parked at the curb. As soon as Laurinda appeared, a man got out to greet her.

"Laurinda, Fabian's at the hospital right now. Do you want us to head over?"

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[ 686 words ]

"Who's keeping watch?"

"Fabian got out on bail. The Gates family has him now."

"Out on bail? That's interesting. If there's no one official guarding him, then go get him. Bring him straight out."

He hurt her and thought he could get away with it? Fabian needed to learn what real fear felt like.

Laurinda opened the car door and slipped into the passenger seat. York headed to the driver's side. As soon as he reached the car, the driver jumped out and handed over the seat. York slid behind the wheel, hit the gas, and the car sped away from the hospital.

Two cars parked at the curb quickly followed. In no time, they all pulled up right in front of the hospital's main entrance.

Laurinda was just about to get out when York's hand closed around her arm. "Jack says you're not getting out. He's handling this himself."

Looking through the window, Laurinda saw a man get out of a nearby car. He waved at her, signaling for her to stay put.

She understood everyone was just trying to keep her safe, so she didn't argue. She stayed in the car and waited for them to bring Fabian out.

Meanwhile, Fabian sat on his hospital bed, happily munching on fruit. His arm was in a cast and he had a minor concussion, but none of that seemed to bother him.

He'd wanted to deal with Bonnie for a long time. The nerve of her, thinking she could use dirt on him to keep him in line. Like he was someone she could control.

If he couldn't destroy the evidence, he'd just get rid of her. It's not like a dead woman could rat him out.

The more Fabian thought about it, the more smug he felt. Then, suddenly, his hospital door crashed open. A dozen huge men stormed in.

Alice, who'd been taking care of Fabian, shot to her feet, eyes wide with fear. "Who are you people? Get out! Leave now!"

Jack stared at Fabian, who just sat there clutching a cherry, frozen in shock. Jack pushed Alice aside, barely glancing at her, eyes narrowing.

"You're the one who hit her with your car?"

Fabian shrank back, too scared to talk, shaking his head as hard as he could.

After a long, awkward pause, he finally managed, "I... I didn't mean to. The car lost control, I couldn't help it. I'm innocent!"

That was the same story he'd fed the police to get out on bail. He had actually tampered with the car before driving, and the investigation had confirmed it was a mechanical failure.

Hard to tell if Fabian was clever or just reckless. Either way, he'd bet his life on this scheme.

He might have fooled the police, but Jack wasn't buying it. Too many coincidences meant it wasn't a coincidence at all.

Jack tilted his head and gave Fabian a cold, mocking smile. He grabbed Fabian by the collar, yanked him off the bed, and slammed him onto the floor.

His arm, which had just started to heal, popped out of place again. Fabian turned deathly pale from the pain.

"Mom, why are you just standing there? Call someone! Get them in here!"

"No need. It's too late. Take him away."

Fabian and Alice's screams echoed down the hallway as Fabian was dragged off by a group of men, limp as a rag doll.

"Let go! Let go of my son! Give him back! Somebody call the police! Hurry!"

Jack strolled out of the room, calm and collected. He caught Alice as she tried to run after Fabian, pulled her back, and tossed her into the hospital room. His voice was icy.

"Tell Finn that if he calls the police, he can look forward to his son doing hard labor in Z City. He knows what kind of place Harrisburg is."

With that, Jack turned and walked out, leaving Alice alone on the floor. She fumbled with her phone, trying to call Finn, but no one answered.

Harden rushed into the hospital, out of breath. He'd heard Fabian was in a car accident and had come as fast as he could, but all he found was Alice sitting on the floor, lost and broken, with no sign of Fabian anywhere.

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[ 684 words ]

"Alice, what happened? Where's Fabian?"

Alice snapped back to reality when she heard Harden's voice. She turned to him, her eyes dazed and lost, clutching his sleeve as her voice trembled. "Fabian was taken away by a group of men in black. I think it's got something to do with the woman he ran into. Harden, call Finn. Tell him something happened to Fabian and he needs to come back right away."

Harden already knew who Fabian had hit. The moment he heard Bonnie's name, he instantly thought of Laurinda.

A bad feeling twisted in his gut. If Laurinda was involved, then chances were, Fabian wouldn't be coming back.

Alice suddenly slapped him across the face. Harden just stood there, and to Alice, it felt like he was stalling on purpose, like he didn't want to help Fabian.

"Harden, listen to me. No matter what, Fabian is Finn's son-the real heir to the Gates family. And you, even if you're Finn's illegitimate son, you're always going to be the secret no one talks about. Don't even think about replacing Fabian. You'd better get moving and figure out how to save him."

The slap seemed to wake Harden up. He looked down at Alice, who was sitting on the floor, her face twisted in anger as she yelled at him. He let out a cold laugh.

"Alice, if Fabian dies, then Finn's only got me left, his illegitimate son. He won't have a choice. He'll have to make me his heir."

He walked out of the hospital, not even glancing back at her.

Outside the door, a nurse who had accidentally overheard everything felt like she'd just uncovered a huge secret. The drama in these rich families was on another level.

A few nurses recognized Harden right away. No one would have guessed that the retired e-sports star was actually the Gates family's illegitimate son. If that ever got out online, it would go viral in no time.

After Fabian was taken, Jack got back to his car and sent Laurinda a message. He told her not to follow and advised her to stay out of it.

Laurinda hated that she couldn't take revenge for Bonnie herself, but she understood Jack's reasons. No one wanted her to get mixed up in this dirty business.

"Let's go back to the hospital," York said. "Jack's got it under control."

"I can't just let this go!"

Laurinda really couldn't. Fabian had ruined Bonnie's life, and she couldn't calm down unless she destroyed him herself. She honestly wished Fabian would just disappear forever.

"Don't rush. Jack probably didn't let you get involved because someone's watching you. Wait until we get somewhere safe, then you can go. With Jack on it, Fabian's going to wish he was dead. But we need to figure out exactly what happened. We can't let Fabian walk away from this."

York drove Laurinda back to the hospital. While they were still in the car, Laurinda used her phone to delete every bit of surveillance footage connected to Jack Only. Then she got out and headed back to the area outside the operating room.

The surgery lasted seventeen hours. Bonnie's condition became critical three times, but each time they managed to pull her through.

When the surgery finally ended, Adolphus came out of the operating room. As soon as Laurinda saw him, she rushed over.

"Are you okay?"

Adolphus was caught off guard. He thought Laurinda would ask about Bonnie first, not about him.

He

gave her a gentle smile. "I'm alright. Bonnie's stable too. She's in the ICU now. As long as she wakes up, she'll be fine. Don't worry."

"You worked so hard."

"It's nothing. I have to head into a meeting now, but you should rest in my office for a bit. When I'm done, we can go home together. Don't worry, Bonnie's got a team of nurses looking after her."

Laurinda looked at Adolphus, noticing the exhaustion on his face. Seventeen hours in surgery had to be brutal. She couldn't help hugging him tightly.

"Thank you."

He chuckled. "You don't need to thank me. I probably smell like the hospital right now. Let me shower when we get home, then you can hug me all you want."

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## Chapter 233

[ 640 words ]

He still smelled faintly of blood, and even though he didn't want Laurinda to catch that scent, he just couldn't let go of her.

"Dr. Crawford, everything's ready now. The director and all the doctors are waiting for you in the conference room." The nurse walked over and quietly reminded Adolphus. She shot Laurinda a curious look, clearly surprised at how beautiful Adolphus's girlfriend was.

While Adolphus was in his meeting, Laurinda tracked down the hospital

administrator. She and York changed into hospital scrubs and made their way into the ICU. Through the glass, they could see Bonnie lying there, surrounded by tubes. Her hands, the only part of her skin visible, were completely pale, and one of them was clenched tightly into a fist.

"Did Jack say when we can move?" Laurinda asked quietly.

"The Gates family is searching the whole city for Fabian. Someone is already watching us. We should wait a bit longer," York replied.

The Gates family was powerful, especially here in Apex, their home ground. They had to be careful.

Laurinda shut her eyes for a moment and took a slow, deep breath. "Alright. Let him live a few more days."

When she left the ICU, Adolphus and Harrell were waiting outside, deep in conversation. She couldn't make out what they were saying.

"Did you wait long?" Laurinda asked.

"Not really, just about ten minutes. Did you see Bonnie?" Adolphus moved to her side and gently fixed a stray strand of hair by her cheek. His voice was soothing. "Don't worry. I've already requested medication from the research institute. It should help with her pain. Foley will be here soon with a team. We won't let anyone get close."

While Laurinda was with Bonnie, Adolphus had already heard that the Gates family was searching for Fabian. He didn't need to ask to know Laurinda was behind Fabian's disappearance.

Worried the Gates family might take desperate measures, Adolphus had arranged for Foley to watch over Bonnie, making sure no one could get near her.

Laurinda almost wanted to say no, but since they still hadn't figured out who leaked Bonnie's location, it really wasn't safe to use her own people. She nodded.

"Thank you for everything."

"If you're really grateful, come home and rest with me. I'm exhausted." Adolphus took Laurinda's wrist and checked her pulse. He could feel her stress and didn't want her health to take another hit after all she'd been through. He just wanted to take her home and let her rest.

"Okay. As soon as Foley gets here, we'll go."

Laurinda glanced at York. She knew he had a lot on his plate, especially with the company. If the Gates family couldn't find Fabian, they'd probably turn on ParVector; they'd managed to bribe someone so close to Bonnie, they definitely knew about her connection with York? They had to stay vigilant.

"You should get some rest too. Things at the company are about to get rough. I know it's a lot for you."

York noticed the shadows under

Laurinda's eyes. Right in front of Adolphus, he reached out and

hugged

her, whispering, "Bonnie's going to be okay. She's not going to leave us like the others. You have to take care of yourself. Don't overthink it."

Laurinda grabbed onto York's shirt, her eyes welling up. She hated feeling so weak, but she was terrified of losing someone else she cared about.

"I know. You be careful too."

"I will. And don't go anywhere alone for now, okay? Listen to Adolphus."

York let go and turned to Adolphus. "She's in your hands now."

"I've got her. Nothing's going to happen while I'm here."

Adolphus looked at Laurinda's reddened eyes, feeling nothing but heartache. He didn't know everything she'd been through, but he was determined to protect her.

York left, and Laurinda sent Harrell off as well. She was still worried about Fidelia and asked Harrell to keep an eye on her, just to make sure she'd be alright.

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## Chapter 234

[ 633 words ]

The hallway was quiet, just Laurinda and Adolphus left behind. He sat down on a bench and pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her.

"Bonnie's in pretty bad shape, but I've seen worse," he said softly. "I've already asked the research institute for some special meds. They should get here by tomorrow morning. Once we start treatment, she'll recover a lot faster."

Laurinda leaned into his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. For the first time all night, she felt like she could breathe.

"My parents died in a car accident too," she whispered. "When I got to the scene, there was blood everywhere. I could barely recognize them."

She paused, her voice trembling.

"Since then, I have nightmares almost every night. I'm scared to fall asleep sometimes. I'm afraid that if I do, I'll wake up and someone else I love will be gone too."

Adolphus held her tighter, his hand resting gently on her back. He'd already noticed how off she was in the car. Harrell had filled him in earlier, saying there was a wire pulled tight inside her, ready to snap if anything pushed her too hard. She needed someone to watch over her, to make sure she didn't break.

"That's not going to happen," he said quietly. "Nothing like that will happen again. What happened to Bonnie was just an accident. She's going to be alright, you'll see."

Laurinda stayed quiet, her face pressed against his chest. Deep down, she knew this wasn't just an accident. It was only the beginning. There was no way Fabian could have pulled all this off by himself. Someone was using him to get to her. Adolphus looked down at her, worry clouding his eyes. There were so many things she wasn't telling him, so many secrets wrapped around her. He wished he knew what to do to keep her safe, to give her a life where she never had to worry again.

Suddenly, Foley and Sam rushed over, a group of men in black following close behind.

"Boss, we brought them," Foley announced.

Adolphus nodded, his voice low. "I've talked to the hospital already. Go find Dr. Phelps. He'll get you set up with scrubs. Foley, you and

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Lingshuang are the only ones allowed to handle Bonnie's

treatment. Don't let anyone else

rear

her. I'll come back in the morning to check in."

"Understood. I'll take care of it," Foley replied, then hurried off with his men.

Sam lingered, glancing at Laurinda with concern. "Laurinda... are you alright?"

"I'm okay," she said, lifting her head and giving him a small smile. "I just felt a little out of it for a minute. Thanks for coming."

Laurinda always tried to be kind to people who showed her kindness. She didn't hold back.

Adolphus spoke up. "Foley's got this covered. Let's go home."

Before Laurinda could say anything, Adolphus scooped her up, cradling her in his arms like she weighed nothing at all. It was an unexpectedly tender gesture almost like a father carrying his daughter.

She gasped, cheeks flushing as she glanced around. There were people staring, a few even trying to hide their smiles.

"Put me down, this is so embarrassing," she whispered, lightly patting his shoulder.

"Just relax," he teased. "I've been operating for hours. My arms are dead. If you keep squirming, I might drop you."

Hearing that, Laurinda stopped struggling and wrapped her arms around his neck, doing her best to ignore the curious looks from people passing by.

Once they were in the car, Sam handed a folder to Adolphus, who flipped through the papers before passing them to Laurinda.

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"You tell me," he said quietly. "Do you want Fabian to just disappear, or do you want him behind bars? I can make either happen. I've got a shipment leaving from the docks tonight. If you want someone to vanish, that's the easiest thing in the world."

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[ 598 words ]

Laurinda skimmed through the report Adolphus handed her, then shot him a sharp look.

"How many years do you think Fabian would get with this?"

"I can file a medical report," Adolphus replied, his tone calm. "Intentional severe injury is at least twenty years. If I pull a few strings, thirty won't be a problem."

He reached out and took her hand, his palm warm around hers.

"If you want, we can make sure he suffers before he goes away. I'll deal with the Gates family. They won't dare meddle in this."

The Gates family's overseas company had already been shorted. Their only shot at a comeback was to use the money from their partnership with Frostfrod. If Finn tried to touch those funds, the people at Frostfrod would ruin him completely. Keeping Finn in check would be easy.

"Finn isn't so easy to handle. For the family's reputation, he'll put up a fight. I don't want Fabian to have another chance to stir up trouble, but I don't want him to die quickly, either. My people want to send him to Harrisburg."

Laurinda laid out her plan. Harrisburg, known as the City of Death, was a place no one ever came back from. Years ago, Finn had sent Grant there, and no one had heard a word about him since.

Adolphus knew all about Harrisburg. He looked at Laurinda in surprise, not expecting her to have those kinds of connections.

"That could work. Are you sure Finn can't reach that far?"

"He shouldn't be able to. What, you think Fabian's some kind of cockroach who can't be killed? If he is, we'll just break him first, then send him in."

Laurinda didn't think Fabian was that lucky. If he somehow crawled out of there alive, she might even respect him for it... before dealing with him herself.

"Let's do it your way. If you need anything from me, just say the word. I told you, I can handle whatever comes."

Laurinda gathered the file off her lap and handed it back to Adolphus with a small smile.

"Then, could you make some noise about Fabian escaping from the hospital? No one can prove he was taken, so let everyone think he ran away to avoid punishment."

Adolphus and Sam immediately

understood Sam caught Laurinda's

eye in the rearview mirror

and,

something ranged in his mind. Laurinda was now officially the

second person he never wanted to cross.

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When Sam dropped Laurinda and Adolphus off at their place, he grabbed two

invitations from the front seat and handed them to Laurinda.

"Laurinda, these are for my grandfather's birthday party. You and York are invited. I

know the timing's not great, but it just worked out this way."

Laurinda accepted the invitations and slipped them into her bag.

"York and I will definitely be there."

Sam's face lit up at her promise.

FarrVector was the talk of Cabinda's tech world, and plenty of companies were desperate for any news about them. Sam's family, the Bill Group, hoped that being close to Laurinda and York would give them a shot at working with FarrVector before anyone else.

Driving away, Sam waited at a red light and spotted Adah getting out of a car, with

Aggie and Lawrence right behind her.

He'd heard a bit about what was

going on in Cabinda. Bagot and

Aileen had gotten divorced, and both

Aggie and Lawrence had been

kicked out of the Charles family. Still,

why was Adah with those two?

Sam was curious, but he had no intention of getting involved with the Charles family business. As long as they stayed out of his way, he wasn't going to bother with them.

He hit the gas and drove off, while Adah led Aggie and Lawrence into the bus station.

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[ 566 words ]

"Aggie, are you sure you want to head out to the countryside?"

"Adah, thanks for getting the tickets for me and Lawrence. We really do have business out there. When we get back, we'll treat you to dinner."

Adah shot Aggie a look of annoyance. The only reason she'd gotten close to Aggie in the first place was because she was in Laurinda's class. Adah thought she could use Aggie to mess up Laurinda's reputation at school. But now, with Aggie suddenly leaving,

she was frustrated. The task she'd given Aggie wasn't even halfway done. "Don't worry about us, Adah. Lawrence and I will be back before you know it."

Aggie thought Adah just didn't want them to leave because she was worried. That made her feel warm inside. Of all the people she'd grown up with, Adah really was the one who cared about her most.

When Adah realized she couldn't change Aggie's mind, she stopped arguing. She just said, cold and sharp, "Hurry back. And don't forget what you promised."

"Relax, Adah. I'll bring you a surprise."

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Aggie and Lawrence climbed onto the bus to Solenia. By the time the sun was coming up, they pulled into the run-down bus station. Aggie led Lawrence off, and the two of them just stood there, staring at the shabby little town. They never imagined Laurinda could send her own grandfather to a place like this.

"Lawrence, start filming now. We need to set the story straight, show everyone how Laurinda abandoned her grandfather in this dump, and completely ruin her reputation."

Lawrence gripped the camera,

frowning. "Aggie, aren't we just here

If was

to get what's ours? If we post any of those videos people online will figure out who we are. Word will get back to Cabinda, and then everyone will know we're not Dad's real kids."

Just thinking about the looks they'd get from their old friends in Cabinda made Lawrence want to drop the whole thing.

"Aggie, don't you want to go back to Cabinda? Don't you care about your friends there?"

"Finn said as long as no one exposes the truth, people will just think The Charles Family didn't want to take us in after what happened to Mom. Why do we have to stir things up?"

Aggie shot him a glare. "Don't be such a coward. Do you really think we still have a chance to go back to Cabinda? Finn doesn't even want us. He didn't help Mom when she needed it so why would he put a finger on us?"

"Just listen to me. We're not only going to make Baily give us what we deserve, we're taking everything Laurinda has too. She's just an orphan. The only reason she's living

well's because she took over The k Austin Family's fortune. We're the real Austins. All of that should be ours."

"Does it even matter if we're part of The Charles Family? Hardly anyone knew about us anyway. Who cares whose kids we are?"

"The only things that are really yours are the ones you hold in your own hands. Don't ever count on anyone else."

Aggie used to care about keeping up appearances, but after what Laurinda did to her outside the infirmary, that all changed. She finally understood that money was the only thing that mattered. You couldn't rely on anyone.

As for reputation or pride, those meant nothing to her now.

The Charles Family didn't care if they lived or died. So why should she care about anything else?

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## Chapter 237

[ 654 words ]

She'd already made her decision before she came to see Baily. As soon as they got the money from Baily and Laurinda, she would take Lawrence and leave Apex behind. She'd traveled all over before, had friends waiting for her in other countries, people who knew nothing about her messy past. She could make it work. She could build a new life somewhere else.

Lawrence was suddenly scared of Aggie. She reminded him so much of their mother, especially when she looked at him like that, with eyes full of nothing but hate. There was no warmth in her at all. No trace of family.

He didn't dare go against her. He just did what she wanted, filming video after video together.

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Laurinda barely left the hospital for the next few days. On the third day, Bonnie finally woke up. The second Laurinda saw her eyes open, she broke down in tears, clutching Bonnie's hand, thanking her over and over for coming back, for not leaving her behind.

Bonnie still couldn't speak, but when she saw Laurinda crying, her own silent tears slipped down her cheeks.

Adolphus, worried that the emotional reunion might be too much for them, spent a long time calming Laurinda down and persuading her to step out of the ICU for a while.

That evening, York swung by the hospital after work to check on Bonnie. He ran into Adolphus, who was just getting ready to leave.

York was carrying a gift box. He handed it over to Adolphus.

Adolphus peeked inside and saw it was a dress. "What's this for?"

"It's Laurinda's. She wants to wear it to Raines's birthday party next Friday. Can you give it to her? I won't have time to see her myself. I've got to get back for a meeting after I visit Bonnie."

"You're not coming with us to Cabinda?"

The two of them sat down on a bench in the corridor, chatting like it was no big deal.

"I'm not going with you. Laurinda said you guys are heading out on Thursday. I'll come on Friday morning. Got a few things to wrap up first."

York leaned back, looking totally wiped out. This week had just about drained him. He'd been dealing with company problems and keeping an eye on Finn's people, worried they'd pull something when he wasn't looking.

Finn was still stuck overseas, but his people were busy as ever. York didn't dare let his guard down for a second.

"Okay. Just text me before your flight. I'll have someone come get you."

"No need. I can manage. Just keep Laurinda safe."

At the mention of Laurinda, York's tired expression tightened. He glanced at Adolphus, dropping his voice.

"Did you hear she shattered that bastard's leg?"

Jack had managed to get Fabian onto one of Adolphus's ships, and Laurinda had gone over to settle things with him. No one knew what Fabian had said to her but whatever it was, it pushed her over the edge. She'd broken his leg with a chair.

York had only just heard the story from Jack, who sounded worried about Laurinda and wanted him to check on her.

"Yeah, I heard," Adolphus said, totally calm. "I was the one who handed her the chair."

York stared at him, shocked. "You just let her do that?"

"What else could I do? She was

furious. I wasn't about to stand back

and watch Honestly, if she hadn't

the fish

had other plans for him, I would've tossed him in the ocean for Laurinda showed mercy by letting him live."

Thinking about the way Fabian had cursed at Laurinda made Adolphus clench his jaw. He treated her like she was precious. No one had the right to insult her.

Anyone who did deserved to pay for it.

Adolphus flicked his lighter between

his fingers, voice casual like they were just talking business. "There's something else. I want to

Jasper with me to Cabinda. If he stays here, he'll always be Laurinda's soft spot. He's not a kid anymore. It's time he learned how to take care of himself."

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## Chapter 238

[ 614 words ]

York barely had time to process the first shock before another hit him right between the eyes. He just stared at Adolphus, lost for words.

"Did Laurinda agree?" he finally managed.

"I haven't told her yet. I was just about to. If she says yes, we'll take Jasper with us tomorrow."

York stayed silent, trying to wrap his head around it. He understood what Adolphus was getting at, but Jasper was only seven. Where could he possibly go?

"Where are you sending him?"

"To the Flame Training Base."

York blinked. For a moment, he thought he must have heard wrong. He shot up from his seat, his voice rising in disbelief. "You're sending him to the Flame Training Base? That place is brutal."

"Laurinda would never agree to that..."

"I agree," Laurinda's voice cut in.

She had just stepped out of the ICU and caught the last part of their conversation. Right now, everything was crystal clear to her. If those people came for them, she couldn't guarantee Jasper's safety. The only way was for him to get stronger.

Even Bonnie, as tough as she was, had nearly died. Jasper had to learn to protect himself.

"But he's only seven," York said, his voice softening.

"York, when you were seven, you were already fighting for your life. Seven isn't so little. Don't underestimate him."

Laurinda already had a sense of what Jasper could do. She trusted her brother wasn't weak.

With Adolphus willing to help, she had to fight for Jasper's chance.

York saw the determination in her eyes. He realized she'd made up her mind, so he could only respect their choice.

"Promise you'll keep him safe. And if he doesn't want to go, don't make him."

"Of course. I'm not about to ruin everything for myself," Adolphus said, a small smile playing on his lips. He still wanted to marry Laurinda. Protecting Jasper was a no-brainer.

Life was slowly getting back to normal for Laurinda, but things couldn't have been worse for Finn.

He picked himself up from the floor, clutching his stomach and glaring at Bagot, who had just knocked him down.

"Bagot, are you out of your mind? Why are you attacking me?"

"Who else am I supposed to hit? Do you take me for a fool? Did you sabotage the company on purpose? Why else can't we find any trace of the hack?"

Finn's face twisted in pain. He didn't even know who was behind it. They had almost figured it out, but then another hacker suddenly showed up, wiped all the evidence, and made it look like he was the one at fault. .net "Bagot, just think for a second. Why would I tank my own company? All that money that disappeared was mine too. Am I crazy? Would I really bum my own cash just to tujek you? I trick I don't have time for this. My son's in trouble and I need to get home to see what's going on."

Bagot sprawled out on the sofa, looking at Finn with total indifference. He didn't buy a word of it.

He'd gotten plenty of people to check it out, and every single one said Finn set it up himself.

He wasn't about to let Finn get away with his money.

"Don't even think about leaving until you come up with that money. As for that useless son of yours, you might as well forget him. Didn't you have an illegitimate kid? He's way better than your pathetic one."

At the mention of Fabian, Bagot let out a cold laugh. Aileen used to bring Fabjan to the Gates family all the time, always going on about how clever he was. But in the end, he was just another tool for her, and none of the Cabinda family heiresses ever gave him a second glance.

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## Chapter 239

[ 593 words ]

"Bagot, do you even have a heart? Fabian calls you uncle. How can you talk about him like that? Don't you care about him at all?" Finn yelled, desperately hoping he could get through to Bagot and convince him to let him go home. He was scared out of his mind. He knew exactly how brutal Bagot could be.

"Uncle? If you hadn't brought that up, I almost would've forgotten everything Aileen did. You knew about her and Aiken, and you still sent that woman to my bed. Finn, you're unbelievable." Bagot's voice was cold, his anger boiling over as he thought about all the humiliation Aileen had brought him. Not a single one of those kids was his. He hated her so much it hurt.

Aileen was locked up now, out of his reach. But Finn, the guy who had set it all in motion, was right there. He was an easy target.

Bagot got up from the couch and unleashed his anger, punching and kicking Finn without holding back. Every blow was payback for what Aileen had done.

Finn was in agony, curling up on the floor and begging for mercy. He honestly had no idea when Aileen and Aiken had started seeing each other. If Laurinda hadn't caught them back then, he probably still wouldn't know.

"Bagot, I swear I didn't know about Aileen and Aiken. When I finally found out, I made them end it, I promise. Please, stop, you're killing me."

"Bagot, we're on the same team. I have no reason to mess with you. Just let me go home. I'll figure out the company stuff. I've got a fund from Frostfrod that can help us out. I promise I can turn things around. I'll take the loss myself, and you'll still get all your profits."

Bagot finally stopped, looking at Finn's battered face with a hint of satisfaction.

"You sure you can actually move that money?" Bagot crouched down in front of him, eyes narrowed. The Gates Family had nothing to do with that deal. He didn't think Finn would really risk it.

"Absolutely. I can move some of it

and no one will notice. Frostfrod already transferred the whole three year payment upfront. Once our company's back on track I'll fill the gap. It'll be fine." Finn had

already thought this through. Saving the company meant he had to use that Frostfrod money. He didn't have

any other options.

All his own cash was tied up in tech investments, but FarrVector had taken over the whole market, and he'd lost everything.

Bagot seemed to relax a little as he listened. He sat back down and lit a cigar.

"You better not be lying to me. If you are, just watch The Gates Family go down. Someone send Finn home."

As Finn was dragged away, Bagot took a long pull from his cigar and started thinking. He'd spent years living in the shadows in Cabinda. If he could use The Gates Family to finally go legit, maybe this was his chance.

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After leaving the hospital, Laurinda and Adolphus went to The Adams Family home to pick up Jasper. Laurinda told the Larsons her plan to take Jasper to Cabinda. Beatrice agreed right away.

"Cabinda's a good choice. I was already thinking it was time for him to start school. Apex isn't safe anymore, and The Lane Family isn't a bad option either. Adolphus's parents can protect him."

Larson wasn't completely sold on the idea. He and Beatrice had raised Jasper themselves, and he hated the thought of letting him go. But he couldn't argue with Laurinda. More

than anything he just wanted Jasper

be safe.

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## Chapter 240

[ 582 words ]

"Fine, let him go back. We can always visit him in Cabinda if we miss him. Are you planning to have someone keep an eye on him?"

Even though Larson was willing to let Jasper go, in his eyes Jasper was still just a kid who needed someone to look out for him.

"I'll take care of it," Adolphus promised. He walked over and sat beside Laurinda, then turned to Larson with genuine respect. "Don't worry, Larson. Once Jasper is in Cabinda, I'll make sure he's looked after. No one will dare mess with him. With The Lane Family behind him, anyone causing trouble will have to think twice."

For the first time, Larson actually found Adolphus agreeable. He nodded his approval.

"I'll leave him to you, then. He's young and at that mischievous age, so be patient with him."

"Of course. Jasper's a great kid. I really care about him."

Larson couldn't help but snort. "Yeah, with your hidden agenda."

The whole room burst out laughing. Adolphus just smiled, completely unbothered. "It's normal for a guy to like a beautiful girl, isn't it?"

"You're shameless. Listen, Laurinda's still young, so watch yourself. If you ever make her cry, I'll go straight to your dad and have him deal with you, whip and all."

Larson had more or less accepted Laurinda and Adolphus, but he still had to give a warning. After all, no one knows a man better than another man.

"Don't worry, sir. I'd never let Laurinda get hurt."

In all his twenty-three years, Laurinda was the only one he'd ever cared about like this. There was no way he'd let anything happen to her.

After dinner at the Adams house, Laurinda and Adolphus left with Jasper. On the way, Laurinda explained everything to her little brother.

Jasper sat quietly next to her, calm and composed, looking way older than his age.

"I know I'm pretty weak right now. If I have a chance to get stronger, I'm all for it."  
Laurinda reached over and ruffled his messy hair, her eyes filled with guilt.

"It's my fault I'm not strong enough to protect you. If I was, you could've had a normal, carefree childhood."

Jasper looked up at her. He understood, probably better than anyone. Ever since he learned who he was, he knew he'd never get to grow up without worries.

The peaceful years he'd had were all because Laurinda had carried the weight for him. He just hoped that one day, he could stand beside her and be her support, too.

"No matter how strong you get, it's not the same as me being strong myself. I want to stand next to you, not be your burden."

Laurinda smiled, her voice soft and full of emotion. "Then let's meet at the top."

She gave his hair an extra playful mess. In her eyes, her little brother was the coolest, most one-of-a-kind kid out there. He'd probably have to change his hairstyle once he started at the Flame Training Base.

She pulled him close, raising her phone. "Come on, let's take a selfie, just the two of us."

Once the decision was made, Adolphus didn't waste any time. He took Laurinda and Jasper home to pack, and then they went straight to the airport.

Sitting on the plane, Jasper still couldn't quite believe it. He was sure there weren't any flights left, so how did they manage to get on this one? And this was his first time on such a small plane.

"Laurinda, does Adolphus own this airline or something? How can we just hop on a plane whenever we want?"

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[ 664 words ]

Laurinda glanced over at Adolphus and shot Jasper a quick, playful eyebrow raise.

"That's probably what it means to have real skills," she said with a soft laugh. "Anyway, Apex isn't far from Cabinda. Try to get some rest. We'll be there in about an hour."

She closed her eyes. The exhaustion hit her all at once. Ever since what happened to Bonnie, she hadn't slept well. Even with Adolphus next to her at night, her sleep was restless and light. Now, with the hum of the plane, her eyelids started to feel heavy.

\*\*\*

When the plane touched down at Cabinda Airport, Adolphus took Laurinda's hand and led her out of the terminal. Jasper trailed behind them, pushing a luggage cart that was almost as big as he was.

Garry spotted them and had to rub his eyes, convinced he might be seeing things. Was that really Adolphus, strolling out like some kind of family man? The whole scene looked straight out of a picture book. He never thought he'd see the day. Adolphus noticed Garry's reaction as he walked over. He narrowed his eyes, just a little. "Is something wrong with your eyes? Can you still drive?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. I just thought I was hallucinating. When you walked out, I could've sworn you were a family of three. Never thought I'd see you like this, man."

Garry was the chatty type. Adolphus barely noticed his teasing anymore. He just raised an eyebrow in response. "Let's get the bags in the car. It's freezing."

"On it."

Garry took the cart from Jasper and, without missing a beat, scooped the boy up and set him in the car. Under his breath, he muttered about how heartless it was to make a kid push all that luggage.

Once the suitcases were packed away, Garry climbed into the driver's seat. The others were already settled inside.

"Adolphus, am I dropping you at The Lane Estate or are we heading to Lunaria Lakeside?"

"Lunaria Lakeside. Does my mom know I'm back?"

"She doesn't know you're here today,

but she knows you'll be back

tomorrow. Seth let it slip about you and Laurinda when he was dropping Maurind off the invitation. So, yeah, she knows you're bringing her home."

Garry kept glancing at the rearview mirror, watching for any reaction from Adolphus or Laurinda. When they both just looked calm, he finally relaxed.

Adolphus turned toward Laurinda. "So that explains why Sam's been so quiet lately. He's the one who spilled the beans."

Laurinda laughed, completely unbothered. Coming to Cabinda meant she was ready to face the Lane family. She gave Adolphus a small, confident smile.

"Just so we're clear, I'm not someone who lets herself get pushed around. If your family doesn't like me, I can leave. I know how to look after myself."

That was her way. She gave respect where it was given, but if people looked down on her, she wouldn't go out of her way to please them. She wasn't the type to clash head-on with elders but she wouldn't stick around for something toxic, either.

Adolphus squeezed her hand, his smile warm and reassuring.

"My parents are older, but they aren't set in their ways. What's important is that you're my choice. They'll respect that."

Garry heard all this and couldn't help but smirk, trying not to laugh at how confidently Adolphus talked about the Lane family's heads.

"Alright then," Laurinda said, "I'll go pay my respects after I finish my errands tomorrow. Since they already know I'm here, it'd feel wrong not to."

Adolphus was surprised. He'd expected Laurinda to be resistant, but she was taking the initiative.

"I'll bring Jasper back tomorrow, and I'll get a gift ready."

"Sounds good. I'll let you handle it."

Laurinda glanced back at Jasper, already curled up and sleeping in the back seat. In her heart, she whispered, Stay strong, little one. Grow up happy.

When they got to Adolphus's place at Lunaria Lakeside, a spacious two-story penthouse, neither Laurinda nor Jasper paid much-> attention to the fancy surroundings. They just followed Adolphus's directions to their rooms, took quick showers, and went straight to bed.

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## Chapter 242

[ 621 words ]

Laurinda had just finished her shower and was curling up in bed when she felt someone slip in beside her. Adolphus slid under the covers and hugged her from behind, resting his head gently against her neck.

His warmth was comforting, and Laurinda, still half-asleep, mumbled a question about what his parents liked.

Adolphus didn't brush her off. He answered her thoughtfully, taking her question seriously.

Listening to him, Laurinda closed her eyes, already running through ideas for what gifts she should bring to the Lane family. Before she knew it, her thoughts faded and she drifted off to sleep.

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The next morning, Jasper was already at the dining table, waiting for Adolphus to make breakfast. Garry had dropped off fresh groceries earlier.

"Adolphus, Laurinda really likes sweets. Don't forget to keep some lollipops and chocolate in her bag. She even asks for full sugar in her milk tea."

Adolphus glanced at Jasper, amused by how mature he sounded for his age. "You seem pretty calm. Aren't you nervous at all?"

"Nervous about what? The only thing that scares me is being too weak to protect Laurinda or making her sad. I can handle anything else. And don't look down on me. No matter what kind of place the Flame Training Base is, I'll stick it out."

Jasper tilted his chin up, his face full of confidence, like nothing could faze him.

Adolphus could see how much Jasper took after Laurinda. He knew Jasper wasn't just putting on a front.

He set a plate of breakfast in front of Jasper and ruffled his hair gently.

"When you get to the Flame Training Base, you don't need to force yourself. If anything comes up, just find Garry. He'll be around most of the time."

"I know. But I'll try not to trouble him. I'm there to train, not to take it easy. I get it."

Jasper understood how rare this chance was. He'd even looked up the Flame Training Base last night and realized what a big deal it was.

The way Adolphus was looking out for him made it clear how much he cared about Laurinda.

Just then, Laurinda came out of her room. Jasper's eyes lit up. "Are you here to see me off?"

"No," Laurinda replied, her voice cool and even. "I have to go to the research institute. Adolphus will take you. Not everyone can get into that place, so I'll stay out of the way."

When Laurinda mentioned the research institute, Adolphus paused as he put her breakfast down. "Which institute?" he asked, sounding a little puzzled.

"The physics institute. I've got something to take care of. Text me when you're done, I'll send you the address and you can pick me up."

Adolphus didn't ask for more details, just nodded. "Alright. I'll come get you when I'm finished. I'll have someone drive you over in a bit."

Laurinda stretched, yawning, then

took the plate and utensils from him, shaking her head. "No need. Someone's already coming to pick me up. You two can head out whenever you're ready."

Jasper looked disappointed. He hadn't really expected Laurinda to see him off, but now that she was right there and still wasn't coming, he couldn't help feeling a little sad.

Laurinda noticed. She reached over and squeezed his chubby little hand.

"I'm not going to see you

off

because have a hard time letting

you go I went with you, I'd

probably change my mind halfway

there and drag you back W

"back Wouldn't

that be embarrassing?

Jasper stared at her. At first, there was a hint of emotion in his eyes, but it quickly faded into a look that clearly said, Yeah, right.

"You're so fake. If you really couldn't

bear to let me go, you'd at least try

to look sad. You can't even hide that

smile Admit it, you'

ve been wanting.

to send me off for ages."

"Really? Was it that obvious?"

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## Chapter 243

[ 632 words ]

Laurinda pulled her hand back and cradled her gorgeous face, putting on that classic look of fake embarrassment, like she'd just been totally caught out.

Jasper just sighed and gave her a look. What could he do? She was beautiful, after all. He'd let her off the hook.

Adolphus sat off to the side, watching the siblings with a soft, affectionate smile. They looked so much alike, and the sight clearly warmed his heart.

After breakfast, Garry showed up. He grabbed Jasper's suitcase and started leading him outside, talking to him about everything he needed to know before joining the Flame Training Base.

Laurinda, already dressed, sent a quick text to her ride, then headed downstairs with Adolphus.

She glanced at Jasper in the car and felt a little pang of anticipation. The next time she saw him, he'd be changed, maybe even transformed. She couldn't wait to see how he'd grow.

"Take care of him, okay?"

Adolphus smiled. "You don't have to be so polite. I'll probably be back this afternoon. Make sure to eat a good lunch, alright?"

Laurinda nodded. "Don't worry about me. I can handle myself."

She reached up to fix his collar, then opened the car door for him.

Adolphus couldn't help himself. He leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss to the corner of her lips.

"I'm heading out now."

"Bye."

The moment Adolphus got in the car, he was met with Jasper's grumpy glare. Adolphus raised an eyebrow. "What's wrong? Got something to say?"

"Laurinda's still young. You can't just take advantage of her like that!"

"I'm not taking advantage of her. I know where the line is."

Adolphus ruffled Jasper's hair, a fond gesture. He knew some people might think he was being too forward, but this was just how he showed his feelings. He loved Laurinda, and he respected her, too.

Jasper was mature for his age. He got what Adolphus meant, but it didn't make him feel any better. He pouted and looked away, refusing to talk to Adolphus. Adolphus didn't push him. He just smiled and pulled out his tablet, quietly getting some work done.

Watching Adolphus focus on his work, Jasper remembered something he wanted to ask Garry.

"Will I be able to use the internet at the Flame Training Base?"

Garry, sitting up front, turned around and answered seriously, "Yeah, you will. The base even has a network engineering department. If you're interested, once you finish your training, you can go check it out."

Garry just figured Jasper was a typical kid, curious about everything. As long as he kept up with training, Garry didn't see any harm in letting him explore a little.

Jasper's eyes lit up at the mention of network engineering. He was dying to see what they had. He wondered if it'd be enough of a challenge for him.

Adolphus, knowing Laurinda's skills with tech, guessed Jasper was no ordinary kid either. Thinking back to the little games Jasper made for kvin, Adolphus paused, then asked "Are you into military games at all?"

"Military games?"

"Yeah. The training base has a game development department. They're working on a military simulation right now. If you're interested, Garry can take you to check it out, maybe even help make it."

Garry twisted in his seat, giving Adolphus a skeptical look. He was starting to think Adolphus was being a little too optimistic.

Seriously, a seven-year-old making games? Was Adolphus really seeing Jasper through rose-colored glasses?

"Adolphus, Jasper's still a kid. Isn't that a bit much?" Garry couldn't help but say.

Adolphus didn't even glance at him.

He kept his focus on Jasper,

eyebrow raised "He thinks you're too young. He doesn't think you can do it. Why don't you send him the game you made for Irvin and let him try it?"

But Jasper wasn't interested in proving himself. He only shared his games with people he liked. If Garry didn't believe in him, why bother letting him play?

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[ 632 words ]

"Not interested. I'm going to Flame Training Base to work on myself, not to be your assistant."

Honestly, it was laughable. After leaving Flame Training Base, he could make more money than he knew what to do with. He wasn't about to waste his time on some game development gig. There was already over ten billion dollars sitting in his account, and he had no idea how to even spend it all. Did he really need their spare change?

Jasper's proud little attitude was exactly like Laurinda's. He didn't care for Adolphus, and Adolphus didn't bother forcing him.

As for Jasper's skills, Garry could figure them out on his own. Laurinda just hoped Garry wouldn't regret underestimating him today.

\*\*\*

After Adolphus left, Laurinda hopped into Pamela's car and headed for the research institute. When they pulled up, she caught sight of a familiar figure at the entrance.

She had barely stepped out of the car when a tall guy, at least six foot one, hurried over with a big, excited grin.

"Laurinda, you actually came! I thought Grandpa was messing with me. You haven't been back to Cabinda in forever."

Laurinda looked up at Teddy, who towered over her, his smile eager to please. She couldn't help but smile back.

"What's wrong? Are you disappointed to see me?"

"Of course not! I'm just happy you're here. Are you planning to take the college entrance exams this year? If you come to my university, I'll look out for you."

Teddy was already a sophomore and the student council president. If Laurinda came to his school, he'd finally get his chance to protect her for a change. Just thinking about it made him happy.

"My test scores aren't that great. I'll have to wait and see where I end up."

They strolled side by side, chatting easily. Laurinda's gaze swept over the busy research rooms inside the institute.

Watching everyone so focused on their work made her feel a little guilty. As the one in charge, she knew she hadn't been around enough lately.

"Laurinda, you're so funny. Do you even need test scores to get into The Cabinda University? Didn't you get accepted four years ago? My grandpa went to a meeting there the other day and the dean actually asked about you. He wanted to know when you'd stop goofing off and finally show up for class."

They reached the thirteenth basement level and pushed open the door to Fraser's office. Inside, Fraser was in a protective suit, slumped in his chair, looking troubled.

"What happened? Another failed experiment?"

"Yeah, it failed again. The data isn't adding up. I just can't figure out where we went wrong."

Laurinda walked over, picked up the experiment report from his desk, and started flipping through it carefully.

"When's the next experiment scheduled? I want to run it myself."

you

Fraser shot up from his chair. "Absolutely not. This experiment is way too dangerous. How could even think about doing it yourself?" If something went wrong, a leak could ruin everything. Laurinda was too important to risk.

"I have a new approach. Maybe if I try, things will turn out differently."

Laurinda understood the risks, but she had taken on this role. She couldn't just keep relying on the hard work of the older researchers.

"If the rest of you can do it, why can't I?"

She wasn't being stubborn or reckless. She just truly believed that with her quick hands, she might have a better shot at success.

Fraser looked at her, sounding tired. "If you've got ideas, bring them up at the meeting. If the others agree, I'll let you try."

She rolled her eyes. "You're so sneaky. You know they'll agree with you no matter what. Saying that is basically just saying no."

Laurinda let out a sigh, knowing they

just wanted to protect her. Still, it was clear she needed to push forward with the experimental robotics project as soon as possible.

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## Chapter 245

[ 699 words ]

Laurinda settled into her chair, grabbed a pen and some paper from the desk, and started jotting down ideas all over the experiment report. After half an hour of scribbling, she finally set her pen aside.

"Alright, let's head to the meeting," she said, sounding more hopeful than tired. "I want to try out this new idea. Looking back at what went wrong before, I'm pretty sure the issue is with this step right here."

She pointed out a specific part of the report. Fraser leaned in, eyes narrowing as he realized he had completely missed that detail.

"Good catch," he said. "Let's bring it up with the other researchers, see what they think. Teddy, you should come too."

Teddy was the assistant Fraser had been grooming for Laurinda. Maybe he'd never be in charge, but he would always have her back. Fraser made sure Teddy sat in on every important meeting and let him get hands-on with any experiment that wasn't risky.

By the time they reached the conference room, the most senior researchers were already there. These were the veterans, the ones who'd seen it all. As Laurinda and Fraser walked in, the reactions around the table were mixed. A few of the most prominent elders didn't bother hiding their annoyance or scorn. They had never wanted Laurinda in charge. In their eyes, she was just a kid who had no business running the institute, but there wasn't much they could do. The director's seal was in her hands, and that was final.

Laurinda didn't pay attention to the ones who clearly disliked her. She'd gotten used to their cold shoulders long ago. As long as they kept their complaints out of her way, she didn't mind what they thought.

One of the older researchers, his face lined with kindness, smiled at her. "Laurinda, we heard you're taking your college entrance exams this year. Will you be coming back to the institute after that?"

Before she could answer, a white-haired man across the table let out a sharp laugh. "Come back for what? She's been at that tiny Apex school, and her grades are at the very bottom. She got less than a hundred on her finals. What's she going to do here, sweep the floors?"

He shook his head, looking at

Laurinda like she was a

disappointment he couldn't let go of. "When her parents were alive, she was a prodigy. But after they passed, she just gave up she's been wasting her days ever since. I barely paid her any attention, but when I saw her grades, I almost had a heart attack. How can we trust the Cabinda Physics Institute to someone like her?"

"Pete, that's enough," Fraser cut in, his voice calm but firm. "Grades aren't everything. Laurinda's always had a gift, and you know it. You were the one who mentored her. Don't you still believe in her?"

Pete glared at Fraser, his frustration written all over his face. He knew exactly how talented Laurinda was and maybe that's why it hurt more to see her like this. He'd once pinned all his hopes on her especially after her parents died. He had even thought about putting his own work aside to guide her, but Laurinda never listened. He'd gotten so worked up about her that he'd fallen ill after coming back from Apex. When he finally tried to check on her again, it felt like she was too far gone.

Fraser understood where Pete's anger came from. He'd been just as upset after his last visit to Apex, but once he learned what Laurinda was dealing with, his anger faded. The last thing he wanted was for these old-timers to turn against her.

Laurinda walked to the front of the room and looked at each of the senior researchers. She bowed deeply.

"Thank you all for everything you've done for the institute. I know I made a lot of mistakes when I was younger realize that now, and I'm going to work harder from here on out. The institute's entrance exam is in November. I'll earn my place here fair and square. If I fail, I'll step down and hand over the director's seal."

As soon as Laurinda mentioned stepping down, Pete was the first to object.

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## Chapter 246

[ 575 words ]

"That's ridiculous. You can't just hand over the Institute's seal whenever you feel like it. You're in charge here, and nobody can change that."

Laurinda watched Pete get all worked up. She knew he was tough on the outside, but soft where it mattered. Sure, he'd call her out in front of everyone, but he was also the first person to stand up for her when it counted.

She knew his anger wasn't really about her decisions. He just hated seeing her hold back.

"Don't worry, Professor. If I'm coming back, I'm doing it the right way. We don't keep freeloaders around here."

Pete fell quiet, studying Laurinda with those sharp, dark eyes of his. After a while, he finally nodded.

"In that case, I'm going to apply to be the chief examiner for the assessment. I'll be watching you closely, and you can forget about any shortcuts."

Laurinda grinned. "Great. I'll see you in November."

She turned to look at the others sitting off to the side, the ones who hadn't said a word. They all had that look in their eyes, somewhere between contempt and ambition.

"Alright, now that we've settled that, let's wait for November and see what happens. For now, let's get this meeting started. I've got a new proposal for the underground experiment."

Fraser pulled out the plan Laurinda had revised, and everyone dove right into the discussion.

Some people were willing to test it out, but a few of the more cautious ones thought the changes were too risky.

The debate heated up pretty quickly, both sides refusing to budge.

Laurinda sat back and listened, piecing together everyone's ideas in her mind.

Two hours later, she set a fresh, complete plan on Fraser's desk.

"This is the latest version. Bring it up with everyone again in a couple of days. If it makes sense, go ahead and ask finance for new protective suits. Wait until we have them before starting the experiment. checked out your current

suits-they're ancient. Time for an upgrade."

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She smiled, "And don't worry about saving money for me. I can still keep this place running. You senior researchers are what make this institute special. You're priceless."

Fraser picked up the file and nodded. He didn't argue. The suits really were overdue for replacement, and he wanted to keep his team safe.

"Your plan covers everything. I'll talk it through with them, and I'll have Teddy send you the meeting notes. But what about you? Are you really going to take the selection exam in November?"

Laurinda's smile softened. "Of course. That's what they've been waiting for, isn't it? I can't let them down."

She'd stayed away from the Institute on purpose, not wanting to give her opponents any ammo. Let them think they could control the place Now she was back, and she wanted to shake things up. If they made the move in November, shed be ready. Their big projects would be almost finished by then, and she'd finally have the freedom to act.

Fraser might not have said anything during the meeting, but now he couldn't hold back.

"This is risky. You're basically giving them an invitation to target you. What if something goes wrong?"

Laurinda looked totally calm. "That's exactly what I want. If they get desperate, it'll all come out in the

when can really

open and had

win. November wont be a one-sided

fight. It'll be everyone giving their all. Only then can we get a real answer." Content

She was full of confidence. Her rivals were waiting for that day, and so was she.

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[ 623 words ]

Fraser knew there was no changing Laurinda's mind, so he didn't bother trying anymore. Instead, he focused on quietly helping her, doing what he could behind the scenes to make things go smoothly for her.

"How long are you planning to stay in Cabinda? I heard a rumor that you and Adolphus are together now?"

Laurinda blinked, surprised that Fraser had heard about her and Adolphus so soon. "Wait, you didn't hear that from Josh, did you?"

"Of course not. You know what Josh is like. You're everything to him, there's no way he'd gossip about you. It was actually the dean at Cabinda University who let it slip. Apparently, Adolphus has already started making arrangements for your admission. He even donated a whole new lab building to the university to secure you a spot."

"When the dean found out the spot was for you, he put two and two together about your relationship. You know, the Lane family heir never does things like this. It's kind of a big deal."

Laurinda couldn't help the little smile that tugged at her lips. She hadn't realized Adolphus was already planning out her future like this. She had joked with Shirley before that she'd have to donate a building just to get into college, and now, somehow, the joke had turned into real life.

"He's actually really sweet. I like him a lot," she admitted. "I've been struggling with sleep, and this well-known doctor told me I should try dating someone healthy to help with my anxiety. I figured I'd give it a shot, and honestly, it's working out better than I thought."

The mention of a famous doctor made Fraser think of Phillip right away. He hesitated. "Wait, you don't mean Phillip, do you?"

"That's him. You know him?"

Fraser nodded. "Yeah, he's kind of a legend around here, though he retired and left Cabinda pretty suddenly. He's actually Adolphus's mentor. Are you sure those two didn't team up to trick you?"

Laurinda let out a soft laugh. Tricked? Maybe, but she'd walked right into it herself.

"I didn't get introduced to him through Adolphus. York actually found the doctor for me. I only learned later that he was Adolphus's mentor. Guess it was just meant to be."

She would never admit that she was attracted to Adolphus from the start. She wasn't that shallow, or at least she liked to think so.

Fraser smiled. "You do seem happier these days. And if he's helping you get into college, he's got to be serious about you."

After chatting for a while longer in Fraser's office, Laurinda checked her phone and realized she needed to go.

"I've got a few things to take care of, so I should get going."

"Alright, do you want Pamela to drive you again?"

"That'd be great. Adolphus hasn't texted, so I'm guessing he's still busy."

Laurinda slipped on her coat, grabbed her bag, and headed out.

Teddy was waiting by the door and hurried over as soon as he spotted her.

"Heading out, Laurinda? I'm free

now, let me give you a ride. Pamela's busy working on the end-of-year financials

Laurinda remembered how swamped Pamela must be, so she nodded. "Thanks, Teddy. Can you

take me to Cloudhaven and head to pick something up."

"Of course, Laurinda. Here, let me carry your bag."

He grabbed her backpack, and when he did, he noticed the scar on her palm and frowned.

"What happened to your hand?"

"It's just from the reins. Looks worse than it is, no nerve damage, so I'm good."

They walked together toward the elevator, and at the door, they ran into Talbot.

"Heading home already, Laurinda?"

"Yeah, there's nothing else for me to do here today. By the way, Talbot, you should really take care of yourself. You look exhausted. Those dark circles under your eyes are a dead giveaway. Don't forget to get some rest, okay?"

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## Chapter 248

[ 551 words ]

"Of course I'll take care of myself. I want to do as much as I can for the Institute. Like you said, they don't really keep people around if they aren't pulling their weight."

As Talbot finished, the elevator doors slid open. He nodded at Laurinda.

"I'm not as free as you are. I've got things to do, so I'll head out. See you." "Bye, Talbot."

The elevator closed, and Teddy let out an annoyed sigh, muttering under his breath.

"That old guy totally does that on purpose. He's always causing drama at the Institute. He squeezes the researchers dry, then makes the younger ones put his name on their papers. My grandpa tried talking to him a few times, but Talbot just fired anyone who complained. Now everyone's angry, but too scared to say anything."

Laurinda wasn't surprised at all. She'd been through it too when she was younger.

Once, she'd left a paper she wrote on her desk. The next thing she knew, he'd published it under his own name. She was just a kid then, and couldn't prove it was hers.

But this time, she wasn't letting it slide. She'd make sure he left the Institute in the messiest way possible.

"Don't worry. He'll get what's coming to him. One day everyone will see him for what he is."

When they got into Teddy's car, Laurinda's phone buzzed. It was a message from Adolphus.

I just left Flame Training Base. I'll be in the city in about an hour. Send me the address of the Institute.

Laurinda hesitated for a second, then sent him her location instead of the Institute's address.

Adolphus stared at the map, frowning. Garry noticed right away.

"Something up?"

"It's nothing. Let's just go straight to my mom's house."

Adolphus couldn't stop overthinking on the drive back. He figured Tanya must have invited Laurinda over. As soon as the car slowed down, he jumped out and rushed to Tanya's main house.

Tanya was watering the flowers outside. She heard someone coming and turned to see Adolphus barreling in. She raised her eyebrow.

"What's the rush? Did something happen?"

Adolphus paused when he saw only his mom was there. He steadied himself and tried to sound casual.

"Why are you out here watering the flowers alone, Mom?"

Tanya could see right through him. She laughed softly.

"Who else did you expect? When you called and said you were bringing someone home, your dad and the butler went out to buy groceries. Why'd you come back by yourself? Where's Laurinda?"

Tanya still couldn't quite wrap her head around her youngest son dating a nineteen-year-old. She'd given him a long lecture when she first heard about it.

"Um, I saw the location she sent me and thought she was nearby. I figured maybe you'd invited! I invited her over for tea or something. I guess that was just me overthinking."

Adolphus looked a little sheepish. When he'd seen Laurinda's location, his mind had gone wild with all sorts of worries.

He knew his mom wouldn't do anything out of line, but he couldn't help freaking out a little and rushing home without even replying to Laurinda.

Tanya rolled her eyes at him and let out a little huff.

"Your dad and I have always said we wouldn't butt into your business, and we meant it."

"Our family doesn't need to use arranged marriages or care about social status. We're not interested in any of that."

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## Chapter 249

[ 583 words ]

"Whatever happens in your love life, whether it's sweet or messy, it's got nothing to do with me. I even managed to tolerate it when Len insisted on a divorce and then married someone like Adah who's always stirring up trouble. No need to make things hard for a young girl."

"Let me see the location. Did the girl come here on her own? We should go look for her. There are so many little alleys here. It'd be easy for her to get lost."

Adolphus pulled out his phone, opened his chat with Laurinda, and showed the location she sent to Tanya. Tanya glanced at it and nodded.

"It really does look like our place, but..."

A thought suddenly struck her. She reached out and tapped Adolphus on the arm.

"Do you remember when you were five and brought home a little stroller? There was a tiny baby in it, just a few months old."

Adolphus had no idea what she was getting at.

Of course he remembered. That baby was like a little fairy. He'd snuck her home and tried to hide her, not wanting to give her back to her parents.

"What's that got to do with this?"

"I think it does matter. This location is Clouthaven Lane, right next door to us. Her house faces the other street. The baby you found was from that family. Looks like you two go way back, huh?"

"Call your little girlfriend and ask for the exact house number. The location matches up. It's probably them."

Suddenly, Laurinda's bright, unforgettable eyes flashed in Adolphus's mind. He'd always felt like he'd seen her somewhere before. He never thought she'd tried to get him to take her home all those years ago.

He called her. The phone barely rang before she answered, her voice warm and cheerful.

"Are you here?"

"I'm close, but I can't find your door. Can you send me the house number?"

"Sure. And knock first when you arrive. We have a big dog. Don't let him scare you."

She hung up. A second later, the house number popped up in his messages. Adolphus handed the phone to Tanya. She checked it and grinned.

"Looks about right. Go find out if it's really next door. This is getting interesting." "Alright. We'll be back soon."

Adolphus set off quickly, phone in hand. Tanya watched him go, her smile soft and proud.

For once, her youngest son's chilly, distant nature seemed to be melting away. He finally looked like someone whose heart could be stirred.

Following Laurinda's address, Adolphus walked up to the front gate on Clouthaven Lane. He'd been

in this neighborhood before but

never realized this was where the

Austin family lived.

He knocked three times. Inside, a dog started barking, loud and fierce. Then came the sound of hurried footsteps.

Teddy opened the gate and froze when he saw Adolphus.

"Uh... Adolphus? What are you doing here?"

"What about you? Why are you here?"

They both blurted out their questions at the same time, equally surprised.

Adolphus had never imagined Teddy would know Laurinda.

"What are you two doing just standing there? Come help me with these boxes!"

Laurinda called out from a covered walkway, spotting them still at the gate.

They both snapped out of it and hurried over to her, each grabbing a box from her arms.

Laurinda handed off a box of scrolls

and another filled with antiques, then flexed her sore hands. As they walked inside, she warned. Careful; with those. Don't drop them. They're really valuable."

Her dad had been obsessed with collecting antiques. Her mom once

told her that he'd bought this se

just because he fell in love with the basement.

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## Chapter 250

[ 586 words ]

After her father bought the house, he stashed all his treasured finds inside. When he passed, she kept the tradition alive, adding beautiful pieces she discovered along the way. As a kid, she'd always tagged along with him, watching him appraise antiques. She'd picked up more than a few things just by being around him, so she understood exactly how valuable these pieces were.

The three of them stepped into a smaller room off the main courtyard. Laurinda directed Adolphus and Teddy to set the boxes down on the table, then she reached for Adolphus's arm.

"Come on, take a look. Which one do you think your mom would like? I picked these out just for her."

Adolphus stared at the table, trying not to let his jaw drop at the sight of all the priceless antiques and paintings. This felt like way too much for a first meeting. These were the kinds of gifts that belonged in a museum, not in someone's living room.

Laurinda noticed his hesitation and tilted her head. "What's wrong? Nothing here catch your eye?"

He hesitated for a second. "It's not that. These are incredible, but they're way too valuable. My mom would probably be overwhelmed if she saw them."

Laurinda frowned, then reached out and gave his shoulder a comforting pat. "Your mom's seen it all. A few antiques aren't going to faze her. It's just good manners to bring a gift the first time you meet. You should pick something out for your dad, too. Can't play favorites."

Teddy, who'd been hanging back, finally caught on and tugged at Laurinda's sleeve. "Laurinda, when did you and Adolphus get together?"

Hearing Teddy call him by his first name made Laurinda think of Irvin. She leaned casually against a cabinet, her voice lazy. "You know Irvin, right?"

"Yeah, of course. Why? You know him too?"

Laurinda grinned, her smile growing as she nodded. "We were classmates, actually. He's at Apex now, working in their biology research institute."

Teddy's eyes went wide. He couldn't believe Laurinda had managed to get Irvin, of all people, on her side. The guy was infamous for being a troublemaker, always experimenting with some weird chemical

concoction. Most people wouldn't even dare talk to him. He didn't even listen to his own grandfather, but apparently he listened to Laurinda.

Teddy shook his head, but then narrowed his eyes at her. "Don't change the subject.

When did you and Adolphus get together?"

Laurinda shrugged, a playful glint in her eyes. "It's been a while. Why? Got a problem with it?"

"I..." Teddy started, but before he could finish, he felt a sudden chill on the back of his neck. He glanced nervously at Adolphus and forced a smile. "Who, me? I wouldn't dare. Adolphus is a great guy..."

Adolphus shot him a look, clearly not buying his act. "Irvin already said everything you're thinking. I'm serious about Laurinda. I don't have a fiancée or some long-lost love. So don't even try to stir the pot."

It was rare for Adolphus to say so much, and Teddy's awkward smile only grew. "Relax, everyone knows? The Charles and Lane families both made official statements. Everyone in our circle knows there's nothing going on with you and Adah. I wasn't trying to start anything. I'm just curious how you two got together, that's all."

Adolphus narrowed his eyes at Teddy, his tone turning sharp. "And I'm curious, how you and Laurinda know each other." He'd never really asked about Laurinda's past, but seeing Teddy's attitude, it was obvious their relationship wasn't as simple as it looked.

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