

From Ashes of Scandal to His Embrace (Laurinda)

Chapter 21

[632 words]

Laurinda caught a glimpse of Irvin's ears turning red. She figured geniuses were usually a little shy. Slipping the small medicine bottle into her pocket, she thanked him and walked away.

Not far off, a tall man watched the whole thing unfold. His dark eyes seemed to grow even deeper as he took it all in.

"Adolphus, the detective unit just got a new lead. Wait, isn't that Irvin over there? What's he up to? And who's that girl with him?"

"No clue. Hand me the car keys. You stay at the infirmary this afternoon. I'll head over to the detective team."

Adolphus took the car keys from Foley, glancing back in Irvin's direction. "Keep an eye on that kid. Don't let him get in trouble here. And make sure he knows not to mess around with whatever he's carrying. This isn't Cabinda. If he stirs things up, nobody's going to bail him out."

Foley's face turned serious when Adolphus mentioned what Irvin was holding. "I'll talk to him tonight," he promised.

Back in the classroom, Laurinda, for once, wasn't napping. She had her head down, playing with her phone. Shirley shot her a curious look.

"How come you're not sleepy today? You look like you're in a good mood. Did something nice happen?"

Laurinda smiled. "Something like that. Are you going out after class? I heard you guys talking about picking up some books."

"Yeah, do you want me to grab anything for you?"

"No need. I'll come with you guys after school."

It was rare for Laurinda to join in on after-class plans, but she made up her mind with a lightness she hadn't felt in a while. If some people wanted to make trouble, she might as well give them a chance.

Shirley was surprised but grinned right away. "Laurinda, I'm buying you bubble tea."
"Alright, thanks," Laurinda replied.

After the bell rang, Laurinda left the classroom with Shirley and a few other friends. Just as they stepped into the hall, Fabian came out from the classroom across from theirs. He leaned over and whispered to Jay, who was standing close by.

"Go to New Horizons College and tell Jared that Laurinda just left. As long as he handles this, I'll do what he asked."

Jay lit up with a big smile and hurried off. They had finally gotten their chance to settle the score with Laurinda. He could finally get revenge for his uncle.

Back then, if Laurinda hadn't refused to let his uncle off the hook, his mom wouldn't have worried herself

sick. She wouldn't have gotten distracted at work, and her arm

angel.n

wouldn't have been crushed by that machine. It was all because of

Laurinda.

Laurinda and her friends had just come out of the bookstore when a group of students in New Horizons College uniforms blocked their path. Leading the group was Jared, the school's biggest troublemaker.

Jared eyed Laurinda, who was standing behind Shirley, and gave a smile he obviously thought was charming.

"Why are you hiding behind your friend? No bodyguards today, huh? Let's see how tough you really are. Move aside," he said to Shirley. "I never said I wouldn't hit a girl."

He stepped right up to Laurinda and shoved Shirley out of the way.

Shirley yelped, stumbling, but Laurinda caught her arm and steadied her before she could fall.

Their other classmates were already

looking terrified. They all recognized

these guys from New Horizons. They came from powerful families and never cared about the rules. There was no way they could fight back, and they definitely couldn't afford to offend them.

"Laurinda..."

ight

"It's alright, don't panic. Shirley, take everyone back to school. I've got this."

"No way, I'm not letting them take you." Shirley glared at Jared. "Jared, I'm warning you. Move right now, or I'll call my dad..."

She pulled out her phone, but Jared just snorted, grabbed it from her, and smashed it on the ground.

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Chapter 22

[503 words]

"I'm giving you one more chance. If you don't leave now, don't blame us for what happens next."

Jared looked at the girls standing behind Laurinda. The warning was for them too.

Their faces were pale, but no one moved. They were Laurinda's close friends. They had come together, and they would leave together.

"Oh, wow. So loyal. In that case..."

"Wait. Let them go. I'll go with you."

Laurinda gently patted Shirley's shoulder, then turned and mouthed two words: call police.

Shirley caught on immediately. The stubborn look on her face disappeared as she grabbed the other girls, picked up her broken phone from the ground, and hurried away.

Jared watched them run off and gave a mocking smile. "So much for friendship. Laurinda... actually, you're not Laurinda anymore, are you? Come on, let's settle what you did to my brother's leg."

He yanked Laurinda by the collar of her puffy jacket, dragging her along like she was nothing, pulling her into a pitch-black alley.

Nearby, Fabian watched with a smug grin. After tonight, Laurinda would be finished. Her pride would be crushed for good.

"Warner, did you handle what I asked? The cops aren't coming, right?"

"Relax, Fabian. My brother Wade is the beat cop here. I already talked to him. He'll stall for a while, maybe wait until Jared's done."

Inside the alley, Laurinda changed in an instant. She grabbed Jared's arm, twisted hard, and everyone heard a sharp crack, followed by a scream that echoed off the walls. Just hearing it made you wince.

But that was just the start. The next few minutes were filled with even louder, more desperate cries. Then, it was just begging and sobbing.

Laurinda kicked the last guy to the ground, pulled out her phone, and turned on the flashlight. Her bright eyes narrowed as she looked over baseball

the mess: steel pipeposts,

Feyen a machete scattered

everywhere.

"So, tell me," she said, "with all these weapons, how many years do you think you'll get? You're all adults, right?"

At the mention of jail time, the guys on the ground stopped moving. Jared, still sprawled out, stared up at her.

"Laurinda, you... you can't do this. It was just a fight. You're not even hurt. We're the ones hurt, but you're acting like the victim!"

"A fight? That's not what this was."

Laurinda wagged a slender finger, pointing at the red light glowing at the corner.

"See that camera at the

intersection? It caught everything

You dragged me in here The reason you're the ones hurt is simple. You were outmatched. I just defended myself."

She shrugged. "You, on the other hand, came after me with these weapons. That makes it pretty clear what you wanted to do."

Laurinda nudged a steel pipe with, her toe. The metallic clank made everyone flinch. For a secon

of them could shake the feeling that they were completely screwed

Jared was stunned. He finally realized this wasn't some accident. Laurinda had planned it all.

"Laurinda, you set us up!"

"I did," she said with a smile. "But let's be real. If you hadn't walked right into my trap, when else would I get the chance?"

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Chapter 23

[673 words]

Laurinda crouched in front of Jared, grabbed a fistful of his hair, and yanked his head back until he had no choice but to stare at her. Her voice was cold, sharp enough to cut through bone.

"What did Fabian offer you? What's worth you crawling at his feet and coming after me?"

Jared glared at her, pure hatred burning in his eyes. "Nothing. I just hate you, Laurinda. Why do you get to walk around like you're better than everyone?"

He looked like he wanted to tear her apart, but the truth was, he didn't stand a chance. He couldn't figure her out, couldn't read her moves. Laurinda fought like she didn't care about anything, always knowing exactly where to hit so it hurt the most.

"Come on, Laurinda. If you've got the guts, just kill me. This has nothing to do with Fabian. I just want to take you down for my brother."

Laurinda gave him a slow, almost mocking smile. "Well, aren't you tough. If you're not going to play along, I hope you don't regret it. I'm only giving you one shot. Miss it, and you don't get another."

She finally let go, shaking her hand in disgust when she saw the sticky hair gel on her fingers. She wiped it off on Jared's uniform, stood, and walked to the end of the alley. Pulling out her phone, she made a call.

A few minutes later, a police car rolled up to the curb. An older cop stepped out, spotted Laurinda with half her face buried in her puffy coat, and let out a weary sigh. "Kinsey's going to freak when he finds out you've been in another fight."

"He's off in Cabinda for some conference. No need to bother him. Just process these guys by the book. That pile of crap on the ground is more than enough to charge them."

The officer looked at her like he didn't know whether to scold her or laugh. He just sighed again. "Come on, get in the car. You need to give a statement at the station. You know, you could go a little easier on people. Aren't you worried their parents will come after you?"

Laurinda shrugged, not the least bit bothered. "They wanted me dead. I'm supposed to just let that go? And he tried to hurt my friend. Honestly, I was being nice by not breaking anything important."

The guys being dragged to their feet heard her say it and shivered. None of them thought she was bluffing. In fact, they were pretty sure she could do exactly what she said.

They were kicking themselves now. They should never have messed with Laurinda. No matter what anyone said about her, she was terrifying.

Suddenly, Laurinda remembered she'd told Shirley to call the cops. She turned to the officer sitting next to her.

"Did you tell the local patrol guy to leave?"

"What patrol? Weren't you the one who called us? You called someone else?"

He looked at her, totally confused, waiting for her to explain.

"If something happens to me, my friends always call the police. But the lo cop never showed He was probably paid off You might want to: look into that."

The officer looked like he was getting a headache just thinking about it, but Laurinda had people backing her up, so he just nodded.

"Alright, I'll have someone check it out. Those guys really did try to cover all the bases."

Too bad they had no idea who they were dealing with.

At the station, Laurinda was taken to make her statement. It wasn't long before York showed up, dragging a lawyer behind him.

York spotted her in the interrogation room, eating takeout like nothing had happened, and finally let out a breath.

"Did you have to go that hard? Their families are flipping out in the lobby."

The place was packed with relatives of the injured. After seeing the medical reports, York honestly had no idea how he was suppose to defend her

Jared's family was the loudest. His grandmother was out there, crying so hard she was nearly fainting insisting her grandson was dying.

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Chapter 24

[613 words]

Laurinda set her chopsticks down and looked up at York, who was clearly on edge. She shot him a look, trying to tell him to relax.

"They came at me with weapons. They wanted me dead. So what if I fought back a little harder than usual?"

She tossed her phone onto the table. The lawyer beside her glanced at the photos of the weapons, then gave York a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

"I'll talk to those people outside. You go handle Laurinda's paperwork. She'll be out of here soon."

The lawyer didn't wait for a reply, just turned around and left. York stayed seated across from Laurinda, studying the pictures on her phone.

"So what are you planning to do next?"

"I'll go through both the official channels and the not-so-official ones. If they're not willing to give up Fabian, I'll just have to teach them that Fabian can't protect them forever."

York caught the determination in Laurinda's eyes and realized she wasn't about to show any mercy. He set a shopping bag on the table.

"Are you heading back to school or home later? Let me handle the rest, okay? You shouldn't get involved with those people anymore. The Gates family is nasty. If you keep dealing with them, they'll just drag you into more trouble."

Laurinda picked up the bag, peeked at the phone inside, then put it back down.

"No need. I can take care of this myself. If I don't clean it up now, it'll just keep coming back to haunt me. Trust me, I've got this."

Right as she finished, the door to the interrogation room swung open. An older officer stepped in, looked Laurinda over, and gave her a thumbs-up.

"Pack up your things, you're free to go. If we need to talk, we'll contact you later. Next time, try to go a little easier. There's a line between self-defense and going overboard."

"I understand."

Laurinda didn't get annoyed at his advice. She just offered a sweet, innocent smile that fit her age perfectly.

Meanwhile, Adolphus was just

leaving the CID office when he heard a heated argument down the hall. He glanced over and recognized Laurinda pushing her way through a crowd. He shoved his paperwork into Sam's hands and hurried over.

Suddenly, the light overhead flickered as someone stepped in front of Laurinda, making her pause. She looked up and found herself staring into Adolphus's handsome, worried face. She felt a little awkward.

"You..."

"What happened? Are you hurt?"

Adolphus leaned in, catching a faint whiff of blood on her. His frown deepened.

Before Laurinda could answer, he gently but firmly pulled her hand out of her pocket and examined her scraped knuckles. His expression darkened.

"You got into a fight? Is it just your hand, or are you hurt anywhere else? Who did this? What really happened?"

Earlier that day, Adolphus had seen her talking to Irvin and managed to read Irvin's lips. He already knew that someone was looking to give Laurinda trouble.

He figured he'd deal with it after finishing up at the CID, but now he'd run right into her before he even had the chance to ask.

Laurinda felt awkward with Adolphus holding her hand in front of everyone. She tried to pull away, but he didn't budge.

With so many eyes on them, she finally gave in and muttered, "I'm fine. The other guys got it worse. It's late, I need to get back to school."

She tugged at her hand again, but Adolphus just tightened his grip, pulling her closer to his side.

"I'm taking you back. Come on."

He didn't give her a chance to argue, just led her out of the police station. Laurinda glanced at how determined he looked and decided not to fight quietly following along beside him.

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[632 words]

She could tell he was angry, but she honestly had no clue what had set him off.

He opened the passenger door and waited for her to get in, then leaned over to buckle her seatbelt. After that, he slid into the driver's seat and pulled away from the curb.

Sam and York stood in front of the police station, watching the black car vanish into the night. They glanced at each other, neither saying a word, then walked off in different directions, both deep in thought.

Adolphus parked right in front of the infirmary. He unbuckled Laurinda's seatbelt, hopped out, and came around to open her door. Once she got out, he took her hand and led her inside.

The way he took charge left her with no room to argue.

He had her sit on the couch, grabbed a first-aid kit from the cabinet, and crouched down in front of her to clean up the cuts on her hand.

Laurinda watched him, noticing how gentle he was. She let out a quiet sigh. "Why are you so upset? You're kind of scaring me."

Adolphus didn't answer right away. He finished tending to her last scrape, then finally looked up at her with eyes so dark they almost seemed to glow.

"I don't have a fiancée."

Laurinda had been expecting some explanation for his anger, so his response totally threw her off.

She nodded, stiff and awkward, but then things started to click in her head.

"So what if you don't have a fiancée? That childhood friend of yours might not be your fiancée now, but she probably will be one day, right? Isn't it basically the same thing?"

"It's not the same. I don't have a childhood sweetheart, and there's definitely no fiancée, not now, not ever."

His gaze was intense, like he wanted her to really get what he was saying.

Laurinda looked away, avoiding his eyes. She clearly didn't want to pick up on his meaning.

Adolphus let out a breathy laugh, half frustrated, half amused. What was he supposed to do with someone as sharp as her?

"Alright, I put waterproof bandages on your cuts. Come back tomorrow around noon so I can change them."

"Tomorrow's Saturday. I have to go home. Thanks, Adolphus. I'll be heading out."

When she realized he wasn't going to push things any further, Laurinda felt a wave of relief and hurried out of there as fast as she could.

Adolphus watched her practically bolt from the room. He smiled, helpless and maybe a little bit fond. She seemed so determined to keep him at arm's length. What else could he do?

Foley poked his head out of the break room. He'd wanted to come out before, but when he saw Adolphus bring a girl back, he thought better of it.

"Adolphus..."

"Yeah. Look into what happened to Laurinda after school tonight. Find out who went after her."

Foley blinked in surprise. Something had happened to Laurinda? Was that really her just now?

"Why are you just standing there? Get moving."

"Right, I'm on it."

He grabbed his jacket and took off.

As he walked out of the infirmary, Foley pulled out his phone and fired off a message in their group chat.

Huge news. Adolphus is actually interested in a girl.

Foley, you're brave to gossip about Adolphus. Aren't you afraid he'll make you dig ditches somewhere?

Sam saw the message pop up and grinned to himself. He'd seen Adolphus's little moment earlier b

he wasn't about to spill the details.

He liked being alive.

Laurinda didn't bother going back to her classroom. She headed straight to her dorm. After she showered, Shirley and the rest of the girls came back.

"I wonder how Laurinda's doing. Shirley, did she text you? Did she say if she's coming back tonight? My phone's busted thanks to that jerk. If it wasn't, I'd just ask her where she is and get my dad to check on her."

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Chapter 26

[642 words]

"Laurinda said there's no need to worry, she's okay. That's all we really know right now," one of the girls said quietly.

"Can I borrow your phone later? I want to call her myself. I'll feel better once I hear her voice," another chimed in, nerves clear in her voice.

"Of course. When we get back to the dorm, let's check if she's up for a call. I'm really worried about her too. Those guys..."

Thinking about what had happened left everyone in a heavy silence. All they could do was hope the police had gotten there fast enough and that Laurinda was safe. If anything happened to her, they'd never forgive themselves.

Shirley pulled out her key to unlock their door, but before she could even put it in, the door swung open with just a gentle push. Her eyes widened in surprise as she stepped inside and immediately spotted Laurinda, sitting on a chair and towel-drying her hair like it was any normal day.

"Laurinda! Oh my god, I'm so glad you're okay! Are you hurt anywhere?"

Shirley rushed over, practically spinning in circles around Laurinda, trying to see if she was hurt. Her eyes landed on Laurinda's hand.

"Wait, your hand... did you get hurt?"

Laurinda glanced at her friends, all crowding around her with worried faces. She smiled, trying to reassure them.

"I'm really fine. The police got there so quickly, those guys freaked out and ran. Nothing to worry about."

She didn't want to make them even more anxious. Laurinda knew her roommates cared for her, no matter what, and she didn't want to add to their fears.

"As long as you're really okay. You scared us so much. Shirley barely touched her dinner, she was so afraid for you," one of the girls said, her voice trembling a bit.

Laurinda felt a pang of guilt. "Sorry for making you all worry. Tomorrow night, dinner's on me. Let's go to Aeterna, and you can order whatever you want. Seriously."

Shirley's face lit up. "I knew you were the best, Laurinda! Don't worry, we're definitely going to take advantage of that!"

She threw her arms around Laurinda, hugging her tight. From the moment she walked in, Shirley had wanted to do that. She'd been so afraid something terrible had

happened, but she also trusted Laurinda. If Laurinda had told them to leave, there must have been reason. Shirley didn't want to weigh her down.

After some chatting and laughter, the girls got ready for bed. When Shirley climbed into her bunk,

Laurinda quietly slipped a new phone into her hand. She wasn't trying to hide anything from the others, but some things were easier; to handle quietly.

Shirley stared at her, surprised. Laurinda just winked. Shirley knew Laurinda hated saying no, so she whispered a quick thank you and disappeared under her covers, already starting to play with her new phone.

Before long, the room was quiet. Laurinda sat on her bed, trying to empty her mind, but the thought of that one person kept circling in her head, refusing to let her rest.

Across town, Fabian noticed

Laurinda hadn't come back to

campus. He was convinced his plan had gone perfectly. Feeling

triumphant, he took Laura and the rest of the group out to a bar the air thick with celebration.

The drinks were flowing and the music was loud when suddenly Warner's phone rang.

"Who's calling you?" Fabian asked, spotting the serious look on Warner's face. He had a hunch it was about Laurinda.

"It's Wade. Probably about her. You guys keep drinking, I'll go see what's up." Warner grabbed his phone and stepped outside.

Fabian couldn't wait to hear what had happened. "Go on, just make sure you find out everything. We want all the details."

The whole group started laughing, their faces twisted with excitement. They didn't feel an ounce of guilt for what they'd done. If anything, they thought ruining Laurinda's life was something to be proud of.

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Chapter 27

[662 words]

"Fabian, that faker is finished this time. She always thought she was better than everyone else. Now she's about to see how rough the world really is. Without the Austin family backing her, she's nothing." One of Fabian's friends smirked as he spoke.

"To Fabian!" someone else cheered, raising his glass. "If it weren't for you, I'd never have gotten this off my chest."

"Yeah, cheers to that, Fabian," another chimed in. "I've never liked Laurinda. She finally got what was coming to her."

Laura leaned closer to Fabian, wrapping her arms around his. She looked up at him, her smile sweet and bashful, but inside she was practically dancing with joy. For so long, she'd thought Laurinda was untouchable. But all it took was one move from Fabian, and Laurinda's whole world came crashing down.

Suddenly, Warner burst into the room, out of breath and panicked. "Fabian... Fabian, something's happened!"

Everyone turned to look at him. One guy frowned and asked, "What's wrong? Did Jared mess up and go too far with Laurinda? If something happened, it's not like anyone could trace it back to Fabian. Even if Jared gets into trouble, he'd never snitch for the sake of the Brown family. And let's be real, this wasn't even Fabian's idea, right?"

Warner shook his head. "No, it's not that. It's Wade. The cops found out he ignored a call on purpose. They've taken in his whole team for questioning. Plus, Wade heard Laurinda got taken in by the police too. That's all I know."

Fabian sat bolt upright on the couch, and Laura's face drained of color. They both realized things were getting way out of hand.

"You're saying Wade's under investigation, and the city police are handling Laurinda's case? Did anyone say which hospital she's at?" Fabian's voice was tight, suspicion growing with every word.

It was too much of a coincidence. The same police station that took in the Austins was the main department. That night, his dad hadn't been able to reach Kinsey at all. Could Laurinda actually know someone as powerful as Kinsey?

"This doesn't add up. Jay, try calling Jared. We need to know what's really going on."

Jay hurried to pull out his phone, not knowing that Jared was currently in surgery, his body broken in several places.

"No one's answering, Fabian," Jay said after a minute.

"Try calling his brother. Call everyone you can think of, just find someone who knows what's happening."

Everyone started dialing numbers, one after another, but nobody picked up. Nothing. Just silence.

They all looked at each other, worry spreading across their faces. No one had to say a word. They all felt it.

"Still nothing, Fabian. No one's answering."

Laura spoke up, her voice shaky but

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trying to sound calm. "Maybe Laurinda got hurt worse than we thought Maybe everyone involved got arrested. Fabian, can you get someone to check in with the police? If they've pulled in Warner's brother too, this must be huge. Maybe it's even a homicide."

Her words seemed to cool the panic in the room Fabian squeezed Laura's hand, then stood up, looking at everyone seriously. "Don't say a word about us trying to reach Jared I'm taking Laura home. I'll have my dad look into Jared's situation. If anyone asks, you didn't hear a thing. Keep quiet. If something goes wrong, you're on your own."

With that, Fabian grabbed Laura's hand and hurried out, his steps unsteady and anxious.

The rest of the group exchanged uneasy looks. The reality of the situation was finally sinking in. No one said anything. They just slipped out, one by one, and headed home.

Laura barely remembered the ride back to the Austin house. Her mind was spinning, thoughts running wild. She pushed open her bedroom door. only for a hand to suddenly clamp around her throat, shoving her hard against the door.

"Where is your mother?" a voice growled in her ear.

Laura clawed at the hand around her neck, desperate to break free, but no matter

how hard she fought, she couldn't loosen Aiken's iron grip.

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Chapter 28

[613 words]

"I... I really don't know. I've only talked to her once since I got to Apex. I... I don't know where she is."

Aiken could tell Laura wasn't lying. He finally let her go, settling onto the couch with a cigarette dangling from his lips, refusing to even glance at Laura as she sat on the floor, struggling to catch her breath.

"When I sent someone to get your mother, she'd already vanished. Tomorrow,

you're going to help me transfer every last share of the Austin family to my name. Remember this, Laura. You're my daughter, always. You'll do what I say. Don't even think about reaching for things that aren't meant for you."

Aiken got up and walked over to her, crouching down until they were eye to eye. He pressed the burning end of his cigarette against her ankle and smiled, his expression sending a chill down her spine.

"If you want to keep your spot as Laurinda, you better find your mother and bring her to me. The only way you'll be safe is if she keeps her mouth shut. Otherwise, one day she might tell everyone you're my illegitimate daughter, and then your life will be even worse than it is now..."

Laura froze, barely breathing. She didn't dare make a sound, just nodded as hard as she could.

She knew exactly what kind of man Aiken was-cold, ruthless, and always true to his word. The moment she stopped being useful, he'd make her life unbearable.

"And about you and Fabian. Make sure the Gates family holds your engagement party before New Year's. The Austin Group needs their support."

"I understand." Laura's voice was small, but steady. Marrying Fabian was what she wanted too. He was the only way out of the mess she was stuck in.

Satisfied, Aiken stood. He nudged Laura aside with his foot, swung the door open, and walked out like nothing had happened, instantly slipping back into the cautious, harmless persona everyone thought they knew.

Laura hugged her knees to her chest and started to cry, her hatred for Laurinda growing stronger with every shaky breath.

If Laurinda hadn't been so perfect as

a little girl Aiken never would have

set his sights on her. He never would have turned his twisted plans..... toward Laura, and her life wouldn't be such a nightmare.

"Laurinda, you're just like me now," Laura whispered, her voice shaking. "No, you're probably already dead, aren't you? Guess that means you're even worse off than I am."

The next morning, the dorm room was filled with the sound of bags being zipped and whispered goodbyes. Laurinda pulled aside her bed contain and saw her friends, already packed and ready to go. She waved at them. swnovels

"Travel safe, okay? See you all tonight at Aeterna."

"Don't worry. You rest up, and don't skip lunch."

With one last round of hugs, her friends grabbed their luggage and left. Shirley poked her head out from behind her own bed curtain, rubbing her eyes and looking at Laurinda.

"Laurinda, why don't you come home with me? It's no fun being here at school by yourself."

Shirley knew Laurinda had left the Austin family. She was a real friend, so she never brought it up to hurt her, but she hated the thought of Laurinda being alone. Laurinda smiled, touched by her kindness. "I might have left the Austin house, but I'm not homeless. I have a doctor's appointment later, so you don't need to worry." Shirley grinned, reassured. "Alright, as long as you have plans, I won't worry. But Laurinda, my door is always open. If anyone messes with you, we'll sic Coco on them."

"Deal. Now don't just lie there, get up and pack your stuff. Want me to walk you out?"

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[586 words]

"No, really, I'm good. My mom just texted. She's picking up my brother first, then me.

I don't have to head out until after ten."

"Alright, get some more sleep then. I'm going to wash up."

Laurinda gave Shirley's soft hair a playful ruffle, neatly folded her blanket, and hopped out of bed to head to the bathroom.

By the time she strolled out of the school gates, almost an hour had passed. She slung her backpack over one shoulder and took slow, thoughtful bites of a breakfast bun, completely unbothered by the people passing by—most of whom couldn't help but stare. Laurinda was just that beautiful. Even on a sleepy morning, she somehow managed to turn heads. Watching her eat, there was something so real about her, like her usual fairytale charm had dialed down and she was just a regular girl for a moment.

Someone nearby couldn't resist. They pulled out their phone and snapped a quick photo, then uploaded it to the campus forum.

Warner spotted the post first. He immediately called Fabian.

Fabian, who was still half-asleep and grumpy, forgot all about his bad mood as soon as he heard the news. He never imagined Laurinda would show up at school like nothing had happened.

"Are you absolutely sure it's her?"

"Fabian, come on. You could recognize Laurinda from a mile away. Remember that time you picked her out of a crowd just because you saw her hair tie? It's her. She looks totally fine. Which means Jared and the others..."

Warner's voice faded. He didn't dare finish his sentence. His family had already tried to get information about Wade, and they'd come up empty. That only made things feel even more serious.

"I got it. I'm hanging up."

Fabian ended the call, frustration bubbling up inside him. Of course he'd recognized Laurinda. He just couldn't admit how much it bothered him that she was walking around campus, completely unharmed.

He jumped out of bed and rushed out of his room, determined to ask his dad what was really going on.

But as soon as he came downstairs, Fabian stopped short. The living room was packed. There must have been at least twenty people men and women, old and young all crowded together. His stomach dropped. Across the room, he spotted a face that looked almost exactly like Jared.

At that moment, Keith noticed Fabian. He shot up from the couch, pointed straight at him, and turned to Finn.

"Finn, didn't you say your son wasn't home? Then who's this? My son Jared told me everything was Fabian's idea. He only did it because Fabian promised our family the Central Square Project."

He took a shaky breath. "I don't care about the project anymore. I just want the Gates family to help get my son out of this."

Finn hadn't expected Fabian to show up right then. The families had arrived so suddenly, he hadn't even had time to warn his son. He'd just wanted to get through the Confrontation and then talk to Fabian himself.

He hesitated for a moment under Keith's glare, but quickly composed himself and waved Fabian over, keeping his tone calm.

"Fabian, come here. These are the families of Jared and his friends. They have some questions for you. Just tell them what you know."

Finn motioned

for Fabian to stand

next to him and tried to smooth things over with Keith. "Honestly, I went to bed before Fabian got home

last night, so I didn't see him come in. Now that he's here, you can ask him directly. I don't know the details of what happened between him and Jared."

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Chapter 30

[641 words]

Keith had spent years navigating the business world, so he caught Finn's meaning right away. Finn was clearly trying to wash his hands of the whole mess. It was obvious now that Jared had been set up.

Still, Keith clung to a shred of hope as he looked at Fabian and asked, "Jared said you sent someone to find him, told him Laurinda got kicked out of the Austin family, and that he should take some guys to go after her. In return, you'd hand over the Central Square Project from the Gates Group to the Brown family. Is that true?"

Fabian met Keith's hopeful look with nothing but a cold, mocking smile.

"Keith, are you serious? Sure, I'm supposed to inherit the Gates family business someday, but I don't have the power to just give away company projects. Think about it. Doesn't that sound ridiculous?"

With Fabian acting so unconcerned, Keith couldn't help but laugh, the sound bitter and sharp. He finally understood. His foolish son had been nothing more than a tool for someone else's scheme.

"Alright. Fine. If Fabian has nothing to do with this, then my son can just tell the truth. He may be naïve, but at least he knows how to protect himself." He paused, his tone turning pointed. "Luckily, he kept evidence that works in his favor."

He turned to Finn. "Sorry for bothering you all today. We'll be on our way."

Keith knew better than to go up against the Gates family. They'd never step in to help his son, and crossing them would only end badly. Still, he wasn't about to just let this slide. Even if he couldn't drag them down, he'd at least make them uncomfortable.

The group left the Gates estate, frustration written all over their faces. As they walked out, someone grabbed Keith's arm and asked in a low, anxious voice, "Keith, did Jared actually keep evidence?"

"There's a recording," Keith said quietly. "Jared said if Fabian denies everything, he'll hand the recording over to Laurinda. He thinks she might go easy on him if she hears it."

Everyone tensed at the mention of Laurinda's name. They were still reeling-no one expected that fake from the Austin family to be so ruthless.

"She's really something, isn't she? Not even an Austin anymore, but she still acts like she can do whatever she wants," someone muttered bitterly.

Keith just sighed. "You can't blame Laurinda for this. Our kids were the ones who picked a fight with her. She was raised to be an heir. Do you really think losing the Austin family's support would, make her ordinary? The Austins mad a mistake kicking her out. She can stand on her own," no matter where she ends up."

That was why Keith never went after Laurinda, even after what happened to his son. Deep down, he knew she wasn't someone he could afford to provoke.

Back at the Gates house, the butler reported that the troublemakers had finally left. Finn turned, walked straight over to Fabian, and slapped him hard across the face.

Fabian stumbled, eyes wide with shock as he stared at his father.

"You're pathetic," Finn snapped, his voice low and angry. "Don't look at me like that: I've told you so many times to clean up after yourself when you pull something like this. Look at the mess you made. Who

said you could use the company as

bait?"

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Fabian's jaw clenched tight. He could taste blood but kept his mouth shut, head bowed, not daring to say a word. He'd started to panic the moment he learned Jared

had a recording. All he wanted now was to keep himself out of trouble.

Finn's voice was cold. "Laurinda always refused to get engaged to you. I thought she was just being coy at first, but now I get it. She anything to do with

never wanted were het ler

you Honestly, if

wouldn't have looked at you twice either."

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