

From Ashes of Scandal to His Embrace (Laurinda)

chapter 251

[682 words]

"I know his grandfather. If nothing unexpected happens, he'll be sticking with me from now on."

As soon as Laurinda said that, everything clicked for Adolphus. That explained why she was going to the research institute.

He didn't ask any more questions. Instead, he glanced over at Teddy and gave Laurinda a knowing look.

"If he's joining you, why not send him to the Flame Training Base for a few days with Jasper? He can't afford to be out of shape."

Laurinda's face lit up. "That's a great idea!" She turned to Teddy, her eyes bright. "I remember you went through special training before, right? You should be able to handle a crash course at Flame. You're on break now, aren't you? How about spending some time there?"

Teddy knew all about the Flame Training Base. All the kids from big families in Cabinda got sent off for training, but usually just to regular bases.

Flame Training Base was a whole different level. Hardly anyone outside the Lane family had ever set foot there. Just thinking about it made Teddy a little excited.

"Sounds good, I'm in," he said.

"Perfect. Go pack your stuff. Garry will take you over in a bit, he's heading back to the base anyway."

With a wave of his hand, Adolphus sent Teddy off. Anyone hanging around Laurinda couldn't afford to be a weak link.

Once Teddy left, Adolphus grabbed the gifts Laurinda had prepared for his grandparents and led her outside.

Laurinda paused at the front door, noticing there were no cars parked outside. "How did you get here? Where's your car?" she asked, puzzled.

"I walked," Adolphus replied, a hint of amusement in his voice. "Funny thing is, my mom's house is right next door to yours."

He nodded toward his family's place, and Laurinda's eyes went wide with surprise. "Wait, your family lives next door? In that big house with the three courtyards?" Laurinda had always loved the cherry trees in that yard. When she was little, she used to sneak over the wall to pick cherries, never once running into anyone who lived there. She'd had no idea that was Adolphus's mother's home.

She laughed awkwardly, rubbing her nose. "I can't believe it. I used to sneak cherries from your yard all the time."

He grinned. "Yeah, but the main entrance is on another street, so you have to go around."

"Let's go around, then."

Walking together toward the Lane family home, Adolphus pointed out a few familiar neighbors along the way. "Everyone here knows each other. My parents love this neighborhood."

They arrived at his front door, but before Adolphus could even knock, hurried footsteps echoed from inside and the door swung open.

"Adolphus, you're back."

Ashby, the family's longtime butler, greeted them with a warm smile. Adolphus nodded and turned to Laurinda.

"This is Ashby, our old family butler. He's been with my parents for years. Ashby, this is my girlfriend, Laurinda."

"Nice to meet you, Ashby," Laurinda said, her tone polite.

She could see how much respect

Adolphus had for Ashby. The way he treated was so different from anything she'd seen in the Austin

him v

family. There really was something special about families with deep roots.

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"Welcome, Laurinda," Ashby replied kindly. "Felix and Tanya are waiting for you both. Come on in."

Ashby led the way, glancing at the gifts in Adolphus's hands. He could tell just by the packaging that they were expensive, but he didn't try to take them.

Inside, Felix and Tanya sat in the main hall, sipping tea and trying to look calm. But beneath the surface, they were anything but relaxed.

Tanya glanced at the door, worry on her face. "Why are they taking so long? Do you think Laurinda doesn't want to come in?"

Felix gave her a soft chuckle. "Why are you so anxious? Ever since you found out Adolphus had a girlfriend you haven't slept well. Now that he's finally bringing her home, you're even more nervous. I don't

remember you acting like this during business meetings."

He reached over and patted her hand. "Don't worry. Adolphus said he'd bring her, and he will. We already agreed, didn't we? Once she walks through that door, she's

family. There's nothing to worry about."

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Chapter 252

[556 words]

"Me? Worried about that? I just thought she might be too nervous to come over. Honestly, this is all your fault. You're way too intimidating. People hear about our family and get scared, so of course Laurinda would be nervous."

"Right, right, blame it all on me. I guess my reputation in Cabinda is just too much for her to handle."

Out in the courtyard, Adolphus and Laurinda could hear the older couple talking. They glanced at each other, both a little stunned. It was hard to imagine that the same man who could make all of Cabinda shake with a single word was now joking like this.

Ashby, standing nearby, looked at Laurinda and wanted to explain that the family wasn't always this dramatic.

"Felix, Tanya, Adolphus is back, and he brought his girlfriend," Ashby called out.

The conversation inside instantly stopped.

Adolphus gave Laurinda's hand a gentle squeeze and led her inside.

As soon as they walked in, Tanya stood up to greet them. She took one look at Adolphus and Laurinda standing together and just knew they belonged as a couple.

The moment she saw Laurinda's face, Tanya understood why her son had finally fallen for someone. Laurinda was genuinely beautiful.

"Come on, sit next to me," Tanya said, reaching for Laurinda's hand and pulling her down beside her. She couldn't take her eyes off Laurinda, as if she just wanted to keep looking at her.

Laurinda wasn't put off by Tanya's enthusiasm. She actually found Tanya's down-to-earth energy kind of adorable, so she spoke up first.

"Tanya, I'm Laurinda. I'm from Apex."

Tanya couldn't help but reach out and gently pinch Laurinda's cheek.

"Oh my, they really do raise them well in Apex. Your skin is so soft and lovely."

Adolphus saw his mom getting a little too affectionate, so he quickly set the gifts down next to Felix and hurried over to gently pull Laurinda away.

"Mom, can you tone it down a little? You're going to scare her," he said, half-joking. Seeing how protective her son was, Tanya laughed and finally calmed herself.

"Alright, alright. It's just, I've never

met such a sweet and pretty girl before. I really like you! Laurinda, how in w long are you planning to stay Cabinda? I heard you're still in your last year of high school. Are you on winter break? Why not stay for the holidays?"

Felix noticed Tanya was getting too excited and cleared his throat to remind her to take it easy.

"Oh, look at me, getting all carried away. I almost forgot to introduce you. This is Adolphus's father. He might seem strict, but he's actually a really good guy."

If Laurinda hadn't already heard about Felix, she might have believed Tanya. But she had, so she knew better than to treat him like just anyone.

She gently slipped her hand out of Adolphus's, stood up straighter, and greeted Felix with extra respect.

"It's really nice to meet you, Felix. I've heard a lot about you."

"Oh really? You've heard of me?" Felix looked surprised. Laurinda

didn't seem like someone whet

just say things to flatter

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people, so he was genuinely curious.

"When my parents were still alive, they used to bring me to Cabinda all the time, so I heard a lot of stories about you and your family. Later, spent a lot of time at the Larsons' place. Beatrice and Tanya are close friends, and heard even more stories from them."

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Chapter 253

[638 words]

When Laurinda mentioned Beatrice and Larson, Tanya's eyes lit up. Her smile grew even warmer, and she leaned in, curiosity sparkling in her gaze.

"So, you're the girl Larson's always talking about. You have a younger brother, don't you?"

Laurinda nodded. "Yeah, my brother's seven. Adolphus took him to the Flame Training Base this morning."

Felix suddenly remembered his oldest son had called earlier, mentioning Adolphus brought a seven-year-old to the base. He hadn't realized that kid was his future brother-in-law.

Felix turned to Adolphus. "Isn't seven a little young for training?"

Adolphus shrugged. "Not really. I was four when I started at Flame, following Locke around. Seven's just about perfect for Jasper."

Laurinda couldn't help but glance at Adolphus, surprised. Four years old? That was even younger than when she'd started at her own camp at five.

Adolphus must have felt her eyes on him. He looked over, their gazes meeting, and he gave her a soft, reassuring smile.

"What's wrong? Worried about me? Don't. The Flame Training Base is good for kids. It's tough, but it's not cruel. I promise."

Felix had to fight back a grin. Adolphus was smooth, saying just the right thing to put Laurinda at ease.

While Laurinda and Felix chatted, Tanya took the chance to call out to Renee. "Renee, could you bring out the gift I prepared for Laurinda?"

"Sure thing," Renee answered, and slipped out of the room. A moment later, she returned, carefully carrying a sandalwood box with intricate gold inlay.

Tanya took the box and waved Laurinda over. "Come here, Laurinda. Take a look at the gift I picked out for you. See if you like it."

She opened the lid and revealed a jade bracelet, its green so vivid and pure it almost glowed.

Adolphus recognized it right away. He started to say something, but Tanya shot him a look that instantly shut him up.

Laurinda was completely captivated by the bracelet, too distracted to notice the silent exchange between Tanya and Adolphus. "This is SQ beautiful," she said softly. "But it's too much. I can't accept something so valuable."

Tanya smiled and shook her head. "Of course you can. It's from me to you. Just tell me if you like it, that's all I want to know."

Laurinda wasn't the type to fuss over politeness. Tanya's kindness was straightforward, and Laurinda didn't see any reason to refuse. She held out her wrist and let Tanya the bracelet on.

slip

After fastening it, Tanya gave her hand a gentle pat. "Look at that. So pretty. Your skin is so fair, this jade was made for you."

Adolphus watched the bracelet on Laurinda's wrist, his dark eyes narrowing just a little. With that jade on her, it felt like she was his for good now.

Laurinda couldn't take her eyes off it. She hadn't seen jade this perfect in a long time so clear, so vibrant. Then she remembered the stones she'd brought back from Northland. she found a good piece, maybe she could make Tanya a matching set of bracelets.

The thought made her grin. She decided right then that she'd open that old stone as soon as she got home.

Just then, a bright voice called from outside. "Mom, I heard little Adolphus is back!" Tanya's face shifted in a flash. She quickly handed the sandalwood box to Adolphus. He moved fast, slipping the box into Laurinda's bag like it was the most natural thing in the world. They all turned toward the door together.

A graceful woman walked in, heading straight for Adolphus. Before reaching him, though, she stopped, her attention caught by Laurinda.

"Well, well, who's this lovely girl?"

Tanya gave her a look. "You're not a kid anymore. At least try to act like an adult. Adolphus, introduce us."

Adolphus just raised an eyebrow at the woman in the sharp business suit. He slid his arm around Laurinda's waist, gently pulling her closer to his side.

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[608 words]

"Seraphina, this is my girlfriend, Laurinda. Laurinda, meet my sixth sister, Seraphina."

"Hi, Seraphina. It's nice to meet you."

"You too. Laurinda, you're beautiful. My brother has really good taste." Seraphina grinned and gave Adolphus a playful pat on the shoulder. Even her usually cool and distant little brother had a girlfriend now. That was definitely headline-worthy in their family.

She slipped her bag off her shoulder, dug around for a moment, and pulled out a fancy box with a big Queen logo on top.

"I had no idea you'd be here today. I only heard from Ashby that our youngest was coming home, so I actually ditched work to rush over. I almost missed you. Since it's our first time meeting, I brought you a gift. Really, don't be shy about it." Seraphina didn't leave Laurinda any chance to say no. She pressed the box into Laurinda's hands and gave her a satisfied little pat, clearly pleased with her own choice.

"Go ahead, open it. See if you like it. It's from Queen's newest collection, and they mixed in some traditional elements. The moment I saw the poster, I was obsessed. It took me forever to even grab one."

Laurinda, encouraged by Seraphina, lifted the lid. Before this, she'd only seen the concept sketches for Queen's new line, never the finished product. She'd been curious, wondering how it would actually look.

As soon as she saw it, Laurinda was blown away. Even as the designer, she hadn't imagined the jade would look this clear and luminous. Jade and diamonds had such different kinds of beauty, and seeing them side by side was almost shocking.

Tanya, who'd been listening to her daughter gush, couldn't help getting curious herself. She stood up for a better look at the box in Laurinda's hands. One glance at the brooch inside and she was just as amazed.

"It's gorgeous. I remember Queen always did diamonds and gemstones before. Is this their first time using jade? The look is totally different."

"It is. It feels more magical somehow."

"Exactly, that's it—magical. Queen is holding a launch event in Cabinda on Sunday. Laurinda, do you want to come with me and check it out?"

It wasn't every day Seraphina met someone who shared her taste. And since Laurinda was Adolphus's girlfriend, she was eager to spend more time together.

"Are you thinking about working with Queen?" Adolphus asked, pulling Laurinda down into a chair beside him, looking up at Seraphina with interest.

He remembered hearing Seraphina mention wanting to collaborate with Queen on a special bridal line.

"That's the plan. You know I do

wedding dresses, and I'm always on the lookout for the perfect jewelry to go with them. I'm just obsessed with Queen's designer. If we could work together, it would be next-level. People would be talking about it for ages."

Talking about her work always lit Seraphina up. She looked especially proud thinking about how far her bridal boutique had come all other

own, without any help from the Lase

family.

Laurinda watched them for a moment, noticing how Seraphina's eyes sparkled and how patient Adolphus was just listening. She reached for her phone and pulled up Henry's contact.

Are you scouting for partners in Cabinda?

Henry replied almost instantly. Yeah, I spotted a few design brands I want to collaborate with and help

promote. If you'd stuck to clothing,

design. I wouldn't even need to look I

at other studios

Laurinda ignored his teasing and replied calmly.

Save me a spot for bridal design. I'll let you know after I check out the sketches.

How did you know I was planning a bridal collaboration? I have my eye on a place called Seraph & Satin in Cabinda. I was just about to talk to them.

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Chapter 255

[625 words]

The words Seraph & Satin jumped out at Laurinda. Adolphus's sister's name was Seraphina. Could it really be a coincidence? Was the brand Henry wanted to work with actually hers?

She quickly typed out a message. "Is Seraphina the owner of Seraph & Satin?"

This time, Henry didn't reply right away. Laurinda waited, checking her phone every few seconds, but there was nothing. After a while, she slipped her phone back into her pocket and tuned in to the conversation happening in front of her.

"I've already sent in my application for the collaboration," Seraphina said quietly. "I just don't know if Queen will pick me."

It was strange seeing Seraphina so unsure of herself. Adolphus lounged back in his chair, looking completely at ease. "Want me to help you out?"

Seraphina raised an eyebrow. "You have connections?"

He shrugged. "Kind of. I know a guy who supplies diamonds to Queen. If you want, I can put in a good word for you."

Adolphus knew how much designing wedding dresses meant to his sister. If she wanted it, he'd give her a hand.

Seraphina shook her head. "No, you know me. I like to do things on my own. If I get in because of you and then mess up, it just makes you look bad too. I'd rather let things happen naturally."

Seraphina sat down beside Laurinda. She caught a soft, pleasant scent and leaned in, trying to figure it out.

"What perfume are you wearing?"

Laurinda smiled. "I'm not wearing any perfume."

"Seriously? Then why do you smell so nice? It's barely there, but it's so good."

Seraphina leaned closer, practically breathing Laurinda in. The scent was comforting in a way she couldn't explain.

"It's probably this," Laurinda said, fishing a small sachet from her pocket. "Adolphus made it for me. I love the smell, so I always keep it with me."

Seraphina took the sachet and inhaled. The scent was unique, calming and fresh all at once. "This is amazing. Where did you get it?"

Laurinda smiled softly, glancing at Adolphus. "I didn't buy it. Adolphus made it himself."

The room went silent. The Lane parents and Seraphina all stared at Adolphus in total disbelief.

Adolphus, who always seemed so aloof, had actually made a scented sachet by hand? For a girl? They could hardly believe their ears.

Adolphus cleared his throat, looking a little embarrassed. He stood up and took Laurinda's hand.

"I'm going to show her around. We'll go check out my courtyard."

He didn't give anyone a chance to respond. He just led Laurinda away, leaving the others staring after them, stunned.

Suddenly, it felt like none of them really knew Adolphus at all. Was this the same guy who always seemed so distant and out of reach?

Tanya was the first to break the silence. "He's changed so much..."

Her husband nodded slowly. The change was almost hard to believe. Maybe this was what happened when you finally found the right person.

Seraphina stumped back in her chair,

staring at the ceiling. She'd always

thought she was closest to

Adolphus, but now she wasn't so

sure. Maybe she didn't know him as

well as she thought.

Meanwhile, Adolphus and Laurinda wandered through the garden until they reached his courtyard.

Laurinda tilted her head, a gentle smile on her lips as she watched him.

He caught her gaze and looked a bit self-conscious. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

She shrugged, still smiling. "It just feels like your family doesn't know you very well."

Adolphus hesitated for a moment. "I guess not. We're not really close. My parents were always busy when I was a kid, and things were kind of chaotic at home. I was the youngest, so they didn't pay much attention to me."

He paused, glancing at the flowers "Seraphina took care of me for a while, but I went abroad pretty soon never really felt close to any

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Chapter 256

[639 words]

Laurinda hadn't expected Adolphus to grow up in a place like this, but the more she thought about it, the more it all just seemed to fit.

"What is it? Not what you pictured?" Adolphus kept his voice low, catching the look of surprise on her face.

"Not really. Earlier today, Fraser called you Adolphus, all formal and proper. I just assumed you'd been pampered your whole life, like the golden child or something."

He let out a short laugh. "Most people think that, just because I'm the youngest. They figure I must be the favorite. But it's not just people outside the family, even my brothers and sisters think so. They're always worried my parents will leave everything to me, so they keep their guard up. Some of them even wished I'd never come back."

Adolphus's eyes narrowed, but his voice stayed calm. Laurinda couldn't quite read what he was feeling.

She just stayed quiet, watching him, waiting to see if he'd say more.

He caught her thoughtful look and it made him smile. He reached out, gently pinched her cheek, then pulled her into his arms.

"Honestly, it doesn't matter to me who ends up in charge of the Lane family. There are so many of them, I never really wanted that responsibility anyway. All I care about is keeping you safe. If taking over the Lane family is what it takes to protect you, then I'll do whatever it takes."

Something in his words made Laurinda's heart flutter. She leaned against his chest, her smile soft and a little shy.

"You don't have to put that kind of pressure on yourself. Just do what makes you happy. As for me..."

She tilted her head up, left the sentence hanging, and stretched up on her toes to kiss him.

Neither of them brought up the family again. Instead, they wandered through the courtyard together, eventually ending up by the old cherry tree in the corner.

"This tree's been here a while, hasn't it?" Laurinda asked, looking up at the branches.

"Yeah. I planted it the year I went abroad. Ashby always said it attracts birds, and sometimes they eat a ton of the fruit overnight. remember you love cherries, and the ones from this tree are prettysweet. You should try them when they're ripe."

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Laurinda grinned, her eyes lighting up. "Deal. But the cherries from this tree are only for me, okay? No sharing."

He laughed, watching her smile at the tree like she couldn't believe she had her own private cherry supply. "Alright, just for you."

Adolphus reached out and ruffled her hair, a soft look on his face. Sometimes he thought Laurinda was so easy to make happy, it almost felt unreal.

After dinner, neither of them seemed in any hurry to leave.

Seraphina came over with her laptop, tugging Laurinda to sit with her and look at her latest wedding dress sketches.

Laurinda asked about the name of Seraphina's studio, and when she heard it, she realized it was the same one Henry had been interested in.

"So, what do you think? Any styles you like? Just wait, when you and Adolphus get married, I'm designing your ceremony dress and your wedding gown. No arguments."

Laurinda looked at the designs on the screen, already imagining how gorgeous they'd look in real life. Seraphina's dresses were seriously stunning.

"Seraphina, I'm only nineteen. You're getting way ahead of yourself."

"I like to be prepared! You never know with you young people. One day you might

just wake up and decide you want to get married, just like that."

Laurinda didn't answer, her eyes still on the designs. She could feel Adolphus watching her, but right now she just couldn't promise him anything.

Seraphina seemed to realize she was pushing too hard and changed the subject with a smile. You guys are going to the Bill family's party tomorrow, right? Got your outfits ready? We could go together if you

want." ne

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[671 words]

Adolphus settled beside Laurinda and gently placed a peeled tangerine in her hand.

"Her dress is ready, and we have someone else to pick up, so we won't head over with you. Let's just meet at the Bill Family's place," he said.

Laurinda bit into a piece of tangerine, her eyes curving as she smiled and nodded. Since she was going with York, it really wasn't convenient for them to go together.

"Okay, but what about the day after tomorrow? Want to hang out? I can take you to Queen's new launch event. If you see something you like, I'll buy it for you," Seraphina offered, her tone bright and welcoming. She honestly enjoyed Laurinda's company. Being friends with her felt so easy and natural, nothing like the complicated socialites in Cabinda, who were always thinking about favors and their own gain.

"Sounds good. Just send me the address," Laurinda replied.

"I'll come pick you up. You just relax at home and wait for me. I promise I'll make your whole day special," Seraphina said, already buzzing with excitement.

Adolphus watched Seraphina's enthusiasm and could already guess what she was up to. He squeezed Laurinda's hand and leaned in closer. "Ready to go?"

Laurinda nodded. "Yeah, let's head back."

As they stood up, Felix and Tanya both looked over.

"You're not staying? We even got your courtyard all set up," Tanya asked.

"Not tonight. Laurinda's stuff is still at Lunaria Lakeside, so we need to get going. Next time, if we want to have dinner here, we'll call ahead," Adolphus said.

He picked up Laurinda's coat and helped her slip it on with gentle, practiced hands. Tanya watched and felt a little emotional. Her youngest son just kept surprising her in the best ways.

"I'll walk you out," Seraphina offered, pulling on her own coat and following them to the door.

After seeing them off, Seraphina returned inside and found Felix and Ashby opening up the gifts Laurinda had brought. She went over to get a better look.

As Ashby and Felix carefully unrolled a calligraphy scroll, Seraphina couldn't help holding her breath. She had an eye for antiques and could spot the real thing immediately.

"Dad, did Laurinda really bring this?" she asked.

Felix was taken aback by the gift, though he kept his face calm. He inspected the scroll through a magnifying glass for a minute, then signaled for Ashby to put it away before Seraphina could get a closer look.

"This girl is really something," he said quietly.

"Something? This is a masterpiece. It's not just generous, it's over-the-top. Does Adolphus know she brought something like this? Seraphina was still in shock, wishing she'd had more time to admire the scroll before Ashby tucked it away.

"I'm sure he does. He carried it in himself. There's also a vase—take a look at that," Felix said, settling down on the soft chaise. His expression grew complicated. He'd never really figured out the true background of Laurinda's parents and now that their daughter was back, she was bringing gifts that only an extraordinary family could give.

"Dad, what's on your mind?" Seraphina asked. She'd just finished looking at the vase and noticed her dad seemed lost in thought. It had been ages since she'd seen that look on his face.

"It's nothing. Did you want to ask me something?" Felix turned to her, recognizing the way she looked when she was full of questions.

"Me? I don't really have anything special. I just wanted to ask what you think of Adolphus's girlfriend. think she's adorable. She's young. sure, but there's a kind of quiet maturity about her. And honestly, seeing Adolphus so willing to do anything for her... it's impressive," Seraphina said. She hadn't known Laurinda for long, but she just had a feeling Laurinda was a genuinely, good person, almost like she and Adolphus were meant to be together.

"They seem good together. It's nice for Adolphus to have someone who can keep him in check. Anyway, it's getting late, and I'm feeling tired. Go enjoy yourself," Felix said, waving her off gently as he leaned back and closed his eyes.

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chapter 257

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- Chapter 258

Chapter 258

[594 words]

The next day after lunch, Laurinda was sitting by the window, soaking up the sun. The doorbell suddenly rang, pulling her out of her thoughts. She checked the time, got up, and went to answer it.

York stood outside, looking a little worse for wear. Laurinda noticed the look on his face and raised an eyebrow.

"Something happen?" she asked.

"It's nothing major, but it's about you. I've already sent FarrVector's PR team to deal with it."

Hearing that it was about her, Laurinda's interest was immediately piqued. A slow, amused smile crept across her face.

York couldn't help staring at her, slightly exasperated. He had never met anyone so eager to watch their own drama unfold. He let out a heavy sigh.

"Aggie and her brother are causing trouble again. They dragged Baily into it, saying you abused an elderly woman and stole assets from the Austin family. Now they're demanding justice for Baily."

He handed Laurinda his phone so she could see the posts for herself.

"I've tried to keep things under control online, but some people just won't quit. They're persistent, always trying to stir things up and push the narrative."

Laurinda read through everything, then handed the phone back and turned to pour York a glass of water.

York watched her, puzzled by how calm she seemed. "So what's your plan? You're not going to do anything?"

"I'm the one who sent her there," Laurinda said, handing him the glass. "Let the rumors keep spreading. Don't bother trying to stop them. When I let her see Baily, I already knew how she'd react. The Charles and Gates families are lucky to have a kid like Aggie, honestly."

She sounded half amused, half sarcastic. Then she glanced up. "Is Finn back yet?"

Right now, Laurinda was more focused on what was happening with the Gates family. She really wanted to know how Finn was holding up, with Aileen's influence growing and the company in trouble overseas. Would the people backing um actually step in? After all, they had worked so hard to get the Gates family to where they were. It would be strange if they just let it all fall apart now.

"There's no word on Finn yet. But they've started looking for Fabian more aggressively. I guess they're worried

e've already moved him somewhere else."

Thinking about the chaos at Apex, York nearly laughed. Fabian was long gone by now. Even if they turned the whole place inside out, they wouldn't find him.

"Any news from Jack? Did Fabian tell him who helped set up that car accident?"

"Fabian's lips are sealed. He hasn't said a single thing. He keeps insisting everything was his idea and that no one else was involved."

York knew how persistent Jack could be. For Fabian to keep quiet under that kind of pressure, he had to admit, the guy was tough.

"They must have promised him something really good," Laurinda said thoughtfully. "Looks like even taking billions from them wasn't enough for them to learn their lesson."

She started to wonder if she should stir things up a bit more. If people had too much free time, they always found new ways to make trouble.

The sound of the door opening made both her and York look up.

Adolphus and Foley came in from outside. Laurinda was surprised to see Foley here. Wasn't he supposed to be at the hospital?

"Foley, you're back. So, Bonnie..."

"Arrow is with Bonnie right now. I'm just here to pick up some medicine. I'll be heading back later," Foley said, sensing her worry.

"Bonnie's doing really well. She should be able to leave the ICU in about a week. You don't need to worry."

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Chapter 259

[654 words]

Foley's words didn't do much to relax Laurinda. Her brow stayed knit together, her voice sharp. "Why didn't you just pick up the medicine in Apex? Why go all the way to Cabinda?"

Foley froze, looking unsure. His boss had made it clear he wasn't supposed to talk about what was happening in Apex, so now he just stood there, searching for a way out.

Laurinda wasn't having it. "What's going on? Is there trouble at the airport?"

Foley glanced at Adolphus for help. Adolphus understood Laurinda well enough to know she wouldn't let this go, so he answered for him.

"Finn's people have taken over the airport in Apex. He's trying to get his hands on Bonnie's medicine, to force you into letting his son go."

"He knows he can't do anything at the hospital, so he went after the medicine instead. As soon as we found out, we changed the flight and brought it to Cabinda."

Laurinda just laughed, cold and low. She couldn't believe Finn still had the nerve to mess with her. Even now, he was pushing his luck.

"I need your computer."

"Use the study. It's unlocked."

Adolphus didn't bother asking what she was planning. He could see how angry she was, and honestly, he'd rather let her vent online than have her storm back to Apex and go after Finn in person.

Once Laurinda was gone, Adolphus turned to York and dropped his voice. "You didn't say anything to her about what's happening in Apex, right?"

York shook his head, looking serious. He hadn't said a word.

If Laurinda ever found out Finn was copying her own tricks, trying to kidnap Bonnie just to use her as leverage, she would be on the first flight back to Apex to tear him apart.

"Good. Bonnie's stable, she's not affected, so there's nothing to worry about."

"We trust you. I'm actually exhausted. Is there somewhere I can get a little rest?" York looked drained. He'd barely slept in days, and with the big event tonight, he needed at least a short break.

"Come with me, I'll show you the guest room," Foley said, leading him away. Adolphus walked over to the study, peeked in on Laurinda typing furiously, then walked off to another room, closing the door behind him.

Apex. The Gates family home.

Finn was pacing with clenched fists, glaring at Alice as she sat on the couch, crying silently with her head down. He was so angry he could hardly breathe.

"All you do is cry. When our son was losing it, you did nothing. When he got taken, you couldn't protect him. What good does crying do now?"

Finn's shouting snapped Alice out of her daze. She looked up at him, eyes wide with shock.

"How can you blame me? It was that woman's fault. She sent Fabian those pictures, made him lose control. told him to wait for you, but he wouldn't listen. He said he had everything planned and he'd get away with it."

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"We had no idea it wouldn't be the authorities taking him, but a group of men in black. You weren't even into home sol had to ask my family for help. You never wanted to help them before, and now you're blaming them for not being useful? Finn, are you really saying you did nothing wrong?"

Finn pressed his fingers to his temples, trying to push back the headache pounding in his head. He had no proof this was Laurinda's doing and he couldn't even come up with an excuse to go denrand his son back from her.

"Finn, Fabian said that woman is Laurinda's friend. Laurinda was kicked out of the Austin family. How could she possibly have friends with that kind of power?"

Finn's head snapped up. He stared at Alice, almost in disbelief. After everything they'd suffered at Laurinda's hands, after she'd sent Aileen to prison, how could Alice still underestimate her?

What was going on in her head? How could she still not see what Laurinda was capable of?

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Chapter 260

[675 words]

Suddenly Finn realized he didn't really want Fabian to come back after all. He waved to the butler. "Go find Harden."

Alice blocked his way, her voice sharp. "Why are you calling for Harden? Finn, Fabian is your son!"

Finn's face darkened. "Move. Who said you could question me? Alice, if you can handle this position, stay. If you can't, then leave."

Alice tried to grab his arm, but Finn pushed her aside, frustration written all over his face. He was bone-tired and had no patience left for this clueless woman.

She had raised a perfectly good son into someone completely useless. Harden, who grew up outside the family, had turned out to be a much better choice.

Finn had already given Fabian a chance. He blew it. He had no one to blame but himself.

Just then, Harden walked in and caught the tail end of the scene. He paused, his eyes narrowing for a second, then he quickly put on a gentle, obedient look and walked over to Finn.

"Finn."

"Come with me to the study."

Finn stood up, a little shaky on his feet. Harden stepped forward and grabbed his arm, steadying him as they walked out together.

A wave of relief washed over Finn. He couldn't deny it anymore. Harden was just better than Fabian.

Laurinda sat in front of her computer, finger hovering over the enter key. She pressed it and a sly smile spread across her lips. Since everyone was so bored, she figured she'd give them something to keep them busy.

After tweaking the Gates Group's software, she turned her attention to Stonehaven. She upgraded the virus she'd brought back from Northland and sent it into the executive's computer. Soon every department's system would go into sleep mode.

That should keep them too busy to bother her for a while.

Satisfied, Laurinda left the study and headed to the living room. She found Adolphus sitting by himself. She dropped onto the couch beside him. "Where's York? Did Foley go home?"

"York's downstairs at Foley's place, getting some rest. Foley has to go to the airport at five-thirty, then head back to Apex."

Adolphus slid his tablet in front of Laurinda and raised his eyebrows. "You did this, didn't you?"

Laurinda glanced at the screen, then nodded. "Yeah, that was me. But it looks like the story still isn't getting enough attention."

Adolphus let out a helpless laugh. He already knew Laurinda had never been the type to sit quietly, but he didn't expect her to drag Baily back into the mess.

"Actually, it was getting a lot of heat, but the Charles family stepped in and killed the story. They're fighting with the James family right now, so they don't want any bad press. No matter what, Bagot is still one them, and if it got out that the kid isn't his, it would look bad."

Laurinda blinked in surprise. She thought York was the one who had dialed down the drama, not the Charles family.

"I was hoping to let things blow up first, then get some influencers to livestream an interview with the siblings. Ask them why they're out here in the middle of nowhere, how they found Baily, stuff like that."

Adolphus watched her closely. He realized Laurinda was setting up a trap, but he couldn't quite figure out who she was aiming for.

"So, you want to reveal their true identities?"

"It's more than that. I want to use them to expose Aileen's scandals, maybe even drag the Charles and Gates families down with her. And at the same time I can finally cut ties with the Austin family for good."

"Even though the Austins have already said I'm not part of their family anymore, there are still plenty of people out there who think I owe them something. They think that because the Austins took care of me when things were good, I should forgive and forget now that they're struggling. They think I shouldn't be so heartless."

"So, I'll let Aggie handle it. Once people start blaming her, they'll stop coming after me. After all, there's a big difference between the real granddaughter and the fake one."

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Chapter 261

[691 words]

Laurinda's eyes sparkled as she looked up at him. He wrapped his arms around her, his voice gentle. "Is there anything you want me to do?"

She shook her head, lips curving into a soft smile. "No, things are good right now. The Charles family has already stepped in and is controlling the trending topics. I'm sure they've found Aggie and Lawrence by now. I want to see how they handle this on their own."

Laurinda was genuinely curious about the Charles family's attitude toward Aggie and Lawrence. Their reaction would shape her next move, so for now, she was content to sit back and watch.

Adah had barely landed in Cabinda before Pearce called her home in a hurry. Stepping out of the airport, she took a deep breath, feeling like the air was fresher here. She let herself imagine her father had called her back for something important, maybe to help with Raines's birthday party. It felt like a sign she was being welcomed home again, proof that the Charles family still needed her.

That illusion shattered the moment she walked through the front door. A riding crop came out of nowhere, striking her hard across the back, splitting her clothes and stinging her skin.

She spun around, breathless and shocked, staring at the man holding the crop. "Dad, are you crazy? Why are you hitting me?"

Pearce's face was cold. "You really have the nerve to ask? Wasn't it you who took Aggie and Lawrence to the train station? Adah, how many more reckless things are you going to do? Isn't ruining yourself enough? Do you have to drag the Charles family down with you?"

Adah was confused and scared. She didn't even have time to check her injury, she just blurted out, "Dad, what are you talking about? Aggie came to me because her cousin threw her out of the Gates family. She asked for my help. She's my sister, Dad. She begged me to get her a ticket. What's wrong with helping her? Why are you so angry at me?"

Her voice shook with frustration and hurt. She hadn't done anything to Aggie, but now her dad was punishing her as if she'd committed some huge crime.

Pearce sneered, clearly not believing a word she said. He lifted the crop again and lashed out, not hesitating for a second. No matter how much Adah begged, he didn't stop.

Bagot returned from overseas just in time to see this scene. He walked into the living room, sat down on the sofa, and watched as Adah was

beaten her clothes stained with blood.

He spoke up his tone cold and unforgiving. "That's enough. Do you even know your own strength? If you keep beating her like this, how is she supposed to go out in public?"

Pearce finally stopped, throwing the riding crop to a servant and waving for the others to take Adah away.

With the room empty except for the two brothers, Pearce sat down and took a sip of tea before asking, "So, what did you find out?"

Bagot shrugged. "Nothing concrete. The Gates family denies everything, says they were hacked. But Finn's already got a plan. He's going to move some funds from the Frostfrod partnership."

A cold smile flickered across his face. He couldn't wait to watch the Gates Group fall apart. Then he'd get his shot at taking over the Gates family finally cleaning up his reputation. He knew exactly what kind of power that would bring.

Pearce didn't like Finn's plan, but with the company's overseas losses piling up, he just wanted someone to turn things around fast.

"We're in this together. Finn shouldn't have to shoulder it all alone. If we get through this as partners, our alliance will be stronger."

He poured a glass of water and set it in front of Bagot. After a pause, he added, "Do you know what Aggie and Lawrence did? I need you to arrange for someone to bring them back here. Then send them abroad. It doesn't matter whose children they are anymore. What matters is that what Aileen did can't come to light. If it does, both the family and the company will be dragged down with it."

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[631 words]

Bagot finally looked up, a cool smile playing at his lips.

"So you're worried people will find out Adah pushed her siblings to go after Laurinda, and if that comes out, it'll hurt her? And you want me to just swallow the loss?"

He knew all about the drama between Adah and Laurinda. Now that Laurinda had Adolphus in her corner, nobody could touch her. Not even the Charles family.

"Come on, how could you say that about me? What I'm worried about is if this turns into a big mess, someone will dig up Aileen's past and drag the Charles family down with it. The James family is already breathing down our necks. We can't let anything slip."

"Bagot, I'm your brother. I'm trying to protect you too. If word gets out that neither of those kids are yours, you'll be the one embarrassed. I'll take care of whatever Adah did. Just bring them back, and I'll handle everything else."

Bagot didn't respond right away. Pearce watched him for a moment, then let out a long, tired sigh.

"Aren't you seeing someone else anyway? You and Aileen never even had real feelings for each other, so why get so worked up about this? Let's just leave it as I said. I'll handle the arrangements for those two to go abroad."

Bagot hated that Pearce was using the woman he kept outside as leverage against him, but he didn't dare push back. He just nodded.

"Alright. I'll have them brought back right away. But... don't touch the woman I'm seeing."

Pearce's mood lightened when he saw Bagot fall in line.

"Relax. I won't get involved with your people. Go take care of it. Tonight, I'm going to Raines' birthday party at the Bill family's place. You sort things out and come along too."

Bagot agreed, stood up, and left. On his way out, he grabbed a folder from Pearce's assistant and headed out of the Charles estate.

Pearce stood by the window, staring outside. The Charles family was getting harder and harder to control. Even Bagot was starting to show his ambition.

Laurinda came out of the closet, already changed. She was always sensitive to the cold, so she skipped the dress and went with a sharp pants. The look gave her a touch of maturity that didn't quite fit her age, but somehow made her even more striking.

Adolphus saw her and his gaze darkened a little. Honestly, Laurinda looked good in everything. The tailored cut of her pantsuit made her figure look even more elegant, and she had this subtle confidence. About her that a dress just couldn't match.

Adolphus was dressed pretty casually too. A black silk shirt with a matching tailcoat lined with deep red. No tie, his collar left a bit open, giving him this easy, effortless charm.

Laurinda walked over and straightened his collar, buttoning up the few undone buttons. She gave his shoulder a quick pat, smiling.

"Looking good is serious business. I don't want anyone else eyeing what's mine."

Adolphus chuckled quietly, then slid his arm around her waist and pulled her closer. "So I'm yours now?"

"Obviously. I'm wearing the Lane family's heirloom on my wrist. If you're not mine, who is?"

She lifted her arm and wiggled her wrist at him, a little smug and a little playful. Did he really think she didn't know what was going on?

She'd figured out the jade bracelet wasn't ordinary the moment she saw it yesterday. Part of the reason she'd accepted it was because it was from Adolphus.

He was the type who never fought

for anything, but deep down, he always knew what was his. Even if he decided to let it go, he'd make sure everyone knew it was only because he allowed it.

Adolphus was surprised she'd caught on. He hugged her a little tighter, unable to hide his excitement.

"You're not scared?"

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Chapter 263

[609 words]

"What's there to be afraid of? It's a bracelet, not handcuffs. Why should I be scared? Even if one day we're not together, I'll just give it back to you."

Laurinda's big, honest eyes met Adolphus's. She was completely serious.

She wasn't the type to get tangled up in doubts or insecurities. She never thought she wasn't good enough for Adolphus, never questioned whether she deserved his gift. Right now, she was with him, and she deserved every bit of happiness. If things changed someday, if they had to part ways or stopped loving each other, she'd just return the bracelet. No big deal. Nothing to be afraid of.

Before Laurinda could finish, Adolphus leaned in and kissed her, cutting her off. She pushed him away, laughing.

"Hey, you totally ruined my lipstick!"

"Don't talk about breaking up," he shot back. The idea of Laurinda not being by his side was something he couldn't handle. Just hearing her mention it made his chest tighten.

She caught his deep, intense gaze and felt herself being drawn in. With a soft smile, she nodded.

"Okay, okay, no more breakup talk. Back to the bracelet. Since I dared to accept it, I'll take responsibility for what it means. I'm not someone who just goes along with anything, you know."

"You don't have to be. When you're with me, you can do whatever you want."

Laurinda lit up at that. She loved hearing it. Having someone who adored her without limits made her feel incredibly lucky.

The Bill family was one of the four most powerful families in Cabinda. Raines Bill's reputation was second to none, and his eightieth birthday party was the event of the year. They'd rented out all of Villa Sera, sparing no expense.

Everyone at the party was a big name in Cabinda, and all the younger family members showed up to pay their respects. The parking lot in front of Villa Sera was packed with one luxury car after another, each arrival more impressive than the last.

Guests stepped out of their cars into

the cold evening, acting like they didn't even feel the chill. Their

designer outfits and formal dresses were a clear sign of how much respect they had for Raines.

Right then a Phantom with a license plate full of eights rolled up to the front entrance. The guests heading inside all turned to stare, eyes wide with surprise

"What the heck? He's actually showing up to Raines's party?"

"This is wild. He never comes to these things. He didn't even show up for Albin's birthday last week. Why's he here for the Bills?"

"Maybe he lent his car out? Everyone knows he never goes to parties, not even his own family's."

"Are you kidding? You should know by now, he'd never let anyone else touch his car. Not even his own brothers."

A few people who didn't get the hype whispered, "Wait, who are you talking about?"
"Seriously? Adolphus."

Every single person's eyes locked on the car, waiting to see who would step out.

The door opened and two men got

out. Under the lights, they looked every bit as striking and intimidating as the rumors said. Everyone instantly recognized Adolphus in his bold red coat and couldn't help but sigh-he was just on another level.

The man from the passenger side walked around and opened the back door. A girl climbed out, bundled up in a white puffer jacket.

"Wait, there's a woman? Since when does Adolphus have a girlfriend? Didn't they just deny the rumors the other day?"

"Who is she? I haven't heard of any family tying the knot with the Lanes."

"Her jacket's collar is so high you can't even see her face. And seriously, who wears a puffer jacket to a party like this?"

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Chapter 264

[561 words]

"So what if she's wearing a puffy jacket? She's standing next to Adolphus. She could show up in rags and no one would dare say a thing."

The crowd was still murmuring when Adolphus walked straight over to the girl, took her hand, and leaned in to whisper something in her ear.

Every socialite in the room was practically green with envy. No one had ever seen Adolphus act like that for anyone. The Lane family girls had always tried to get his attention by leaning in, even standing on tiptoe just to get a little closer. But here he was, bending down for someone else.

"It's crowded in there," he murmured. "If you get tired of it, we can just head home."

Laurinda answered with a quiet "mm," lifting her hand to smooth her hair. As she moved, a flash of green caught the light on her wrist—delicate, pale, and unmistakable.

Everyone who saw it froze. No one could believe what they were seeing.

That bracelet... wasn't that the matriarch's? The one from the Lane family? How could it possibly be on this girl's wrist?

Did this mean Felix had really decided to hand the family over to Adolphus?

The news hit the crowd hard. Almost everyone there had tried, in one way or another, to cozy up to the different branches of the Lane family, but nobody had managed to get close to Adolphus.

Ignoring the stares, Adolphus and Laurinda intertwined their fingers and headed for the hotel entrance. York glanced over the crowd and followed right behind them, his steps relaxed and natural.

Inside, Laurinda unzipped her jacket and let the collar fall, revealing features so beautiful that the whole room seemed to stop and stare.

"Oh my god, she's stunning. I always thought Adolphus was the definition of gorgeous, but she's even prettier than he is. Whose daughter is she?"

"I have no idea. I've never even heard of someone this beautiful in Cabinda."

"No wonder Adolphus never looked

twice at

"NO used to think Adaxet She doesn't even compar girl?

was gorgeous but next to

.net>

"Alright, that's enough. They're already inside. Let's go in too."

Just then, another car pulled up nearby. The doors opened and Bagot and Pearce got out at the same time.

People looked around, confused. Raines's birthday party was turning out to be a real spectacle.

The moment Adolphus and Laurinda

step greet them.

stepped into the hotel, Sam hurried

over Seeing the two? of them together, he smiled and said, "Adolphus, Laurinda, York."

The guests nearby turned to look, curiosity lighting up their faces. Was this really the York they were thinking of?

While Sam chatted with Adolphus, Seth walked over too, holding a wine glass.

"Adolphus, long time no see. I stopped by Ashby the other day and heard you've been in Apex."

Sam shot his dad a look, rolling his eyes at the obvious small talk.

"Yeah, I've been in Apex lately. My mentor lives there, so I've been staying for a bit."

Catching his son's silent message, Seth just smiled and turned to Laurinda.

"And Laurinda, thank you for helping us out so much. I've been meaning to thank you in person, but things have been so busy. It's an honor to have you at my father's birthday banquet. When things calm down, you have to let me host you properly."

"Seth, you're too polite. Sam and I are good friends. It was just a little favor, really.

No need to make a big deal out of it."

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Chapter 265

[561 words]

Seth chatted with Laurinda, always aware of the curious stares drifting their way. He kept things polite and light. "I'd love to take you out for dinner sometime, if you're interested."

"It would be my pleasure, Seth," Laurinda answered, her smile soft and composed. She figured that since Adolphus thought so highly of Sam, the Bill family was clearly on their side. She wanted to make a good impression.

"Great, it's a date. We'll set up a time soon."

Laurinda nodded, the conversation dropping off naturally.

Once their small talk wrapped up, Seth's attention shifted to York. Sam had already mentioned that York from FarrVector would be coming with Adolphus. There was no need to guess the tall, good-looking guy in front of him had to be York.

"So you're York, the one running FarrVector. Very impressive. Not many people your age accomplish so much."

As soon as Seth mentioned FarrVector, a ripple went through the room. Executives from every tech company glanced over, suddenly interested. Most of them had been following FarrVector's latest projects, hoping for a chance to connect, maybe even start a partnership. In no time, they were gathering around, glasses in hand.

Seeing the crowd grow, Adolphus slipped his arm around Laurinda and steered her away, following Sam toward Raines's private lounge.

"I'll take you to meet my grandfather first," Sam said. "Felix and Agrippina got here early. They're inside catching up with Jed and Edna."

Laurinda glanced at Sam, a little puzzled. "You mean the Main family? Irvin's family?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Oh, so the broken engagement didn't make things awkward?"

Laurinda's curiosity was piqued. She raised an eyebrow at Sam, genuinely interested to know if people could still be friends after calling off a wedding.

Sam saw the look on her face and couldn't help but smile. "Come on, we're all part of the same circle. A broken engagement doesn't change that. We still see each other all the time, whether we want to or not."

"Oh," Laurinda replied, sounding a little disappointed. This wasn't as dramatic as she'd imagined.

Adolphus looked down at her, his gaze soft and affectionate. He pulled her in close and tapped her forehead with his finger.

"You really need to stop reading

those over-the-top romance stories.

Our families don't let us act on every little

whim. No one turns into

enemies just because of a broken engagement."

Laurinda didn't mind his teasing at all. Instead, she leaned against him, tilting her head up with a bright, sweet smile. "What about you? Do you ever get to be impulsive?"

"I'm not breaking any engagements. And you're not getting rid of me, either."

Adolphus's answer was firm, a little possessive. He had no intention of letting Laurinda slip away. If she left, who else could watch over her?

When they arrived outside the lounge, laughter spilled into the hallway.

Laurinda leaned into Adolphus, her voice thoughtful. "It's really special, having close friends around you even as you get older."

"Yeah, they've been tight since they were young. Now that they have more free time, their friendship's only gotten deeper."

Sam opened the door, letting Adolphus and Laurinda in first before stepping in himself.

Laurinda immediately noticed a girl who looked a lot like Irvin, pouring tea for the elders in the room.

“Look who's here, what a surprise!

Adolphus, it's not every day you show up at a party. Raines, you must have some serious influence,” Jed called out pausing for a second before breaking into a friendly tease.

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Chapter 266

[556 words]

He really was jealous. There weren't any grandkids in his family around Adolphus's age. If his wife hadn't been close friends with Tanya, the Main family and the Lane family probably would have drifted apart by now.

Raines could hear the envy in Jed's voice and just laughed quietly.

“It's not like I have any special connections. Adolphus's girlfriend did our company a huge favor, so Sam got the chance to invite Laurinda to my birthday dinner. That's the only reason he agreed to come. Everyone knows he hates parties. You really think I'd be the one person he'd make an exception for?”

Raines turned to Laurinda with a warm, fatherly smile and nodded.

"They look great together. Honestly. Eda was here bright and early, showing off that her youngest finally found someone."

Adolphus just smiled at the teasing and gently squeezed Laurinda's hand.

"Laurinda, let me introduce you. This is Raines, our birthday star. That's Jed, and Edna. And this is their granddaughter, Cathleen."

Cathleen, who had been sitting quietly nearby, looked up in surprise when she heard her name. She gave Laurinda a shy little nod.

Laurinda nodded back and greeted the elders with ease, then brought out the gift she'd prepared for Raines.

Seeing the present in her hands, Felix couldn't help but twitch his lips. He was dying to know what fancy thing Laurinda was giving away this time, worried she might have picked something priceless from home without even realizing it.

Raines was a little surprised Laurinda had brought him a gift. He glanced down at the box, his smile deepening as his eyes crinkled.

"Can I open this now?"

"Of course. Let's see if you like it, Raines."

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Raines asked Adolphus to help him open the box. When he saw the scroll inside, his face lit up. He hadn't expected Laurinda to know exactly what he liked. This gut hit the mark.

He carefully took out the scroll and unrolled it, his eyes going wide in amazement.

Felix and Jed crowded closer for a look, then fell silent.

Felix felt a mix of emotions. The painting wasn't as valuable as the one Laurinda had given him before, but it was still a pretty impressive gift.

"Laurinda, isn't this a bit much?" Raines had seen a lot in his life, but even he sounded a little shaky as he looked at the painting.

"It's not too much, as long as you're happy with it. It's just a gift. You can't really put a price on something like this."

Laurinda flashed Raines a bright smile, her dark eyes sparkling. Anyone could see she meant every word.

Raines looked at her with genuine admiration. It was obvious she wasn't just any girl.

"I'll gladly accept your gift. You

should come visit my place sometime-bring Adolphus with you. treasures

I've got Dig

like to see,

"I'd love that. When I get the chance, I'll have Adolphus take me over. I heard from him that your chef is amazing."

"That's right. That boy's favorite thing in the world is my chef's chestnut pastries. I'll have Sam send some over for you tomorrow."

From her seat in the corner,

Cathleen watched Laurinda chatting

so smoothly with the elders, a flicker of envy in her eyes. She'd been trying so hard, but she just couldn't manage to be as comfortable as Laurinda.

As more and more guests arrived to wish Raines a happy birthday, Adolphus took

Laurinda's hand and led her away from the crowd.

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[604 words]

Edna glanced over at her granddaughter and spoke up.

"You're about Laurinda's age, aren't you? Why not go walk around with them for a bit?"

Laurinda stopped when she heard Edna, turning back to Cathleen with a warm smile and reaching out her hand.

"Want to come with us?"

Cathleen was caught off guard. She hadn't expected Laurinda to invite her so directly.

While she hesitated, Laurinda didn't let her off the hook.

"Irvin and I are classmates. I've heard about you. Come on, let's go together."

"You know Irvin?"

"Of course. We can talk while we walk." Laurinda raised her eyebrows just a little, her confidence and lively energy putting Cathleen at ease.

"Alright."

Cathleen took Laurinda's hand. As she did, the bracelet on Laurinda's wrist slipped into view. The group nearby suddenly went quiet, their eyes all drawn to the bracelet. First there was shock, then everyone glanced at Tanya in surprise.

Tanya sat there, calm as ever, her expression unchanged. She was the one who had given away the bracelet. If anyone had a problem, they could talk to her about

it.

Meanwhile, LenLeal was chatting with guests at the party when he heard that Tanya had given away the family's heirloom jade bracelet to some young girl. He barely reacted. It wasn't that he didn't care, he just didn't buy it. He was sure Tanya wouldn't be foolish enough to give up the Lane family's legacy to Adolphus. Adolphus hadn't really accomplished anything yet. Why would he be qualified to take over the family?

Locke heard the news and looked at his wife, a satisfied smile appearing on his face. Maybe Adolphus had finally grown up and was willing to accept his place in the family.

Looking up, Locke spotted Adolphus coming around the corner. He waved him over. Adolphus caught sight of Locke and Abigail and quickly walked up to them. "You're both here?"

"Yeah, we heard Raines's lounge was crowded, so we didn't bother going in. When did you get back? Why haven't you come by the house yet?"

Adolphus had spent more time with Locke than anyone growing up, so he immediately understood what Locke really wanted to know. He was asking about Laurinda.

"I got back the day before yesterday. She's still young and a little shy. I'll bring her to meet you both another time."

"You're really protective, huh? We finally get the chance to meet her today and you're not even going to introduce us?" Locke shot Adolphus an annoyed look. He'd been so good he'd brought her to meet his parents and even to the Bill family's party, but couldn't bother introducing her to him?

to this kid and now Adolphus

"She went to the bathroom with Cathleen. If you really want to meet her I can bring her over to say hello later. Adolphus sounded so casual, almost like he was being forced into it."

Locke clearly wasn't happy, but Abigail just laughed and patted his arm.

"Oh, don't tease him. You'll meet her soon enough. If you're that curious, you can always sneak a peek later. Just don't scare Laurinda."

Locke stared at his wife, eyes wide.

"Sneak a peek? Am I not allowed to meet her out in the open? I practically raised

this kid. What's wrong with me wanting to meet his girlfriend?"

Abigail, surprised at his reaction, quickly tried to calm him down.

"Alright, alright, I know you care about Adolphus. You weren't even this wound up when your own son brought a girlfriend home. Adolphus, could you bring her over to meet Locke?"

Yotherwise he won't be able

to sleep tonight." s̄wnovels

"Sure, I'll bring her over in a bit."

Adolphus's eyes sparkled with laughter. He loved winding Locke up, especially

when he could get him this worked up.

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Chapter 268

[597 words]

His relationship with Locke was anything but ordinary. Growing up, Locke had always been there for him, offering care and support. He felt like a big brother, sometimes even a father, and always a mentor and true friend. Honestly, Locke was one of the most important people in his life.

"That's more like it," Locke finally said, his stern look easing into something warmer. "Dad called me first thing this morning. He said you brought a girl home to see him and Mom. He was practically bragging, like he wanted me to know he's more important to you than I am."

Abigail stared at Locke, totally at a loss for words. Who would have guessed both Locke and Felix were this childish? Competing over who mattered more seriously?

Adolphus wasn't about to fall for it. He knew exactly what Locke was up to, trying to nudge him into bringing Laurinda over for dinner. But Laurinda hated those kinds of things, and there was no way he'd drag her into it without asking.

When Adolphus didn't answer, Locke's frustration bubbled up again. "Hey, I'm talking to you! At least say something."

"I can't decide things for her. If you want, ask her yourself." Adolphus gave him a small, smug smile.

Locke and Abigail stared at him, caught off guard. Was this really Adolphus? He seemed so much more alive right now.

Suddenly, someone in the crowd whispered, "There's trouble by the bathrooms. Some rich girl actually tried to start something with the Charles family. Doesn't she know that's Adah's sister?"

"Yeah, and did you see her outfit? Who wears a puffer coat to a party like this?"

Adolphus's whole vibe changed in an instant. He took off toward the restrooms in long, determined strides, with Locke and Abigail hurrying after him.

As he moved, people automatically stepped aside, making a path for him. The hem of his red-lined coat swung behind him, and his cool, commanding presence made everyone tense up a little.

When he reached Laurinda, he scooped her gently into his arms and leaned down, his voice low and soft. "What happened?"

Laurinda was still tense, but just hearing his calm, deep voice took the edge off her anger. "Cathleen went to the restroom, when out of nowhere this crazy woman barged in and dumped a drink all over her she said, her words sharp and cold.

Adolphus looked where she was looking and saw two women being dragged away, both of them drenched and still trying to fight back. He took Laurinda's hand, pulled her gently a step back, and asked, "Then what?"

"Cathleen's super sweet, she'd never start drama was invited to Raines's birthday, so obviously I wasn't looking for trouble either

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was just helping Cathleen clean up her dress, being patient, when that woman went off she grabbed me and started yelling that I was shameless, accusing me of stealing her sister's boyfriend or something..."

Laurinda broke into a sudden laugh, glancing at the curious faces around them. "I mean, when exactly did you become her sister's boyfriend, Adolphus? Because I must have missed that part."

Adolphus frowned, his gaze drifting back to the woman who looked like she'd been fished out of a pond. Charles family again. He squeezed Laurinda's cold hand, his voice gentle and sure. "Hey, I'm all yours."

That one line was enough to steal the spotlight. The sweetness practically made everyone's teeth ache.

Way in the back, Locke clicked his tongue. "Adolphus, don't believe a word she says! You have no idea how bad she was! She shoved my head in

fn the toilet! Seriously, alt this water on my head and my clothes-it's her fault..."

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Chapter 269

[601 words]

Thalia barely got a word out before she realized the people who'd been holding her back had already let go. They stepped away, putting distance between them and her, and the looks from the crowd turned sharp and judgmental.

Her expression twisted. This wasn't the reaction she wanted. She'd hoped to come off as the victim, not end up being the one everyone avoided.

Laurinda looked at her coolly, her tone light but cutting. "Your mouth is disgusting. If you've been spouting crap, maybe you should rinse it out in the toilet."

Color rushed to Thalia's cheeks. She pointed at Laurinda, her voice shaking with anger. "You... you..."

"What about me? Why don't you repeat what you just said to Cathleen? She's too nice, she can put up with your filth. I'm not that patient. You mouth off at me, I'll clean it for you. What's wrong? Still thirsty for more toilet water?"

Sam rushed over, his voice tense. "What's going on here?" The second he saw Laurinda and Adolphus at the center of it all, his gut clenched. Seriously, who had the nerve to mess with these two?

Guests parted to make room for Sam. Thalia spotted him and instantly threw herself into his arms. Sam didn't have time to dodge. She clung to him, sobbing, "Sam, they're picking on me!"

Laurinda frowned, a look of pure annoyance on her face. She tugged Adolphus back, keeping a healthy distance. "Gross. Now you're dirty too, Sam. You should keep away from her."

Sam snapped back to his senses and quickly shoved Thalia off. Only then did he get a good look at the woman clutching him. His eyes widened with disbelief. "Thalia? That's you?"

"Sam, she's bullying me!" Thalia tried to point at Laurinda, but her finger shifted to Cathleen once she noticed Adolphus standing close by.

Cathleen stood off to the side, her cheeks burning, fists clenched tight at her sides. She looked completely lost, eyes swimming with panic, like she might cry any second.

Laurinda's gaze shifted to Cathleen,

her voice cool but sharp. "Irvin can't protect you forever. If you don't figure out how to stand up for yourself, people like her will keep fanning all over you. Is that what you want? She's literally cursing you out to your face. If you don't do something, you're embarrassing the whole Main family."

The guests were all holding their breath. Sam was already here, but Laurinda was still stirring things up. This was Raines's birthday. For the Bill family's sake, shouldn't she be helping to smooth things over?

Thalia scoffed, clearly not taking Laurinda seriously. "Yeah right, like she'd dare—" Suddenly she shrieked. "How dare you hit me! I'll rip you apart!"

She didn't even get to finish before Cathleen, shaking but determined, slapped her across the face. The sound echoed. Thalia staggered, her face stunned and blank, then she went wild, lunging for Cathleen in a blind rage.

Sam acted fast, yanking Cathleen behind him and putting himself between the two. As Thalia charged, he kicked her back, his voice hard. "Thalia, cut it out or I'll have you thrown out myself!"

Thalia landed hard, looking up at

Sam in shock. She looked totally betrayed, her voice high and hurt.

"Sam, you broke up with her! Wel

are you still protecting her? I'm your
new girlfriend, frow
new girlfriend, how could you do this
to me?"

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Sam pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling a headache coming on. New girlfriend?
Since when?

"I never said you were my girlfriend.

The first time we met, I told you straight up, I'm not interested, don't get involved with
me." His voice was ofd as he glared at her. vimalling Pearce. He's taking you home."

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Chapter 270

[604 words]

Sam didn't give Thalia a chance to react. He just turned around and walked straight to
the lounge where Pearce was chatting with Raines.

When Thalia realized Sam was going to get Pearce, she didn't look worried at all. In
fact, she looked even more pleased with herself. She lifted her chin and shot a smug
look at Laurinda and Cathleen.

"I'm telling you, once Pearce shows up, you're done for," she sneered, glaring hard at
Laurinda.

Thalia had already heard about Laurinda from Adah. She was convinced Laurinda had
only managed to attract Adolphus because of her looks. To Thalia, Laurinda was just
another pretty face with no family background, only good for being someone's plaything
in their circle. She couldn't wait to see Laurinda lose everything. She figured it was only
a matter of time before Adolphus came to his senses and dumped her.

Laurinda turned to Adolphus with a lazy smile. "Does the Charles family have a family history of insanity, or is it just her?"

Adolphus looked back at her, the corners of his mouth lifting. "Could be. Mental illness does run in families, I've heard."

Thalia's face twisted with rage. She hadn't expected Laurinda to insult her like that, right in front of everyone. Wasn't she afraid of messing with the Charles family?

Thalia scrambled to her feet and lunged at Laurinda. "Laurinda, I hope you rot!"

A deep, commanding voice rose above the commotion. "That's enough. Do you really think you can act out here?"

Everyone turned as Pearce walked into the room, his steps steady and his expression dark. He glanced at Thalia, taking in her messed-up appearance with a frown. "What happened to you?"

"Pearce, it was Cathleen and

In

Laurinda. They ganged up on me," Thalia cried; clutching her stomach as she hurried to his side, tears streaming down her face. "I just went to the bathroom, I didn't do anything, and she shoved my head in the toilet. Look at me.

Pearce's eyes narrowed as he looked over at Laurinda. The coldness in his gaze was enough to make anyone shiver. If looks could kill, Laurinda would be gone.

"So, you're Laurinda?"

"That's right. I'm Laurinda." She met his stare head-on, not backing down at all. There was even a hint of a smirk on her lips, as if she was daring him to do something.

Pearce couldn't stand the way she looked at him, so he turned his attention to Adolphus. His tone was stiff. "You're just going to stand by while your girlfriend acts up at the Bill family's party?"

Adolphus let out a short laugh. "Come on, Pearce, don't exaggerate. My girlfriend's actually pretty shy and never causes trouble. If Adah's sister somehow managed to push her buttons, that's on her."

The people nearby were stunned into silence. With the way Laurinda had just stood up to everyone, no one would ever call her shy or sweet. They couldn't believe Adolphus could say it with a straight face.

In the back, Abigail leaned over and nudged Locke's shoulder. "You seem to be enjoying this mess. Aren't you going to do something? Don't let Laurinda get scared."

Locke grinned. "Scared? No way.

Laurinda might look sweet, but

there's no one with a sharper look in

their eyes. Didn't you notice?

Adolphus isn't even stepping in. He's just letting her handle it herself."

He looked so proud, as if he'd just watched a winning play. To him, Laurinda and Adolphus were a perfect match. He was more

convinced than ever that her

mother

was right. The Lane family would be

in good hands with Adolphus.

Pearce's frustration was clear as he stared at Adolphus. His anger was written all over his face. "You're really going to let her get away with this?"

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Chapter 271

[614 words]

"Pearce, you heard me. She's my girlfriend. If I don't stand up for her, who am I supposed to protect? Someone else? Let her get bullied?"

Adolphus moved forward, blocking Laurinda from Pearce's glare. He met Pearce's furious stare with a cool, almost mocking smile.

"So, you really think Adah did nothing wrong?"

"That's ridiculous. She's the one who got bullied so badly. How could she possibly be at fault? Pearce, out of respect for your parents, I can let it slide that you spoke back to me. But Laurinda has to apologize to Thalia today."

Pearce clenched his jaw. He couldn't believe that even after bringing up Adolphus's grandparents, Adolphus would still ignore their family ties and refuse to give him any face.

If Adolphus dared to talk back again, Pearce was ready. He'd use it as an excuse to stir up drama, ruin Adolphus's reputation in Cabinda, and maybe even make sure he could never go back to the Lane family.

Locke could barely hold back his anger. Pearce was actually threatening Adolphus by dragging family into this. The Charles family clearly thought they could walk all over them.

Just as Locke was about to step up for Adolphus and Laurinda, Thalia's shrill, filthy insults suddenly filled the hall. Every word was so crude, the crowd was stunned. No one had ever heard someone curse like this before.

"Turn it off! Turn it off right now! Who did this? Who's messing with the speakers? Turn them off!"

Thalia hadn't expected her rant against Cathleen and Laurinda to go public. She was panicking now, completely forgetting about her stomachache, and screaming at the sound system.

But no matter how loud she shouted, the audio kept playing. With everyone staring at her in disgust, Thalia looked helplessly at Pearce.

"Pearce, it wasn't me! It wasn't! It was her! They're framing me!"

Pearce's face turned ashen. He'd never expected to get exposed this fast. He shot Laurinda a glare, sure that she was behind all this.

He'd been so confident Thalia was the victim, thinking there wouldn't be any cameras in the restroom. He never imagined Laurinda would actually record what happened.

"Bagot, get her out of here."

Bagot stepped out from the crowd and grabbed Thalia, ready to drag her away. But then a commanding voice rang out from the back of the room.

"Hold on a second. You think you can just insult our family and walk away? Don't you think you owe us an explanation?"

Jed and Edna walked over, with Adolphus's grandparents close behind. All four of them looked furious.

The guests watched as the elders approached, realizing there was no way this was going to end quietly. The Charles family was about to be in serious trouble.

Jed went straight to Cathleen, frowning at the stain on her dress. Then he looked up at Pearce.

"My granddaughter has always been polite and well-behaved. She's never the one to start trouble. But somehow, trouble keeps finding her. First, your darling daughter Adah went out of her way to insult my granddaughter, saying she was boring and not good enough for Sam."

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"Cathleen is sensitive and anxious. Adah's words pushed her into depression, and in the end, she had no choice but to break off her engagement to Sam."

go. We

"Even then, our family let it didn't come to the Charles family with accusations when we had no proof What did you think we're that easy to push around? And now you send another daughter to bully my granddaughter?"

"Just listen to what she said. Honestly, if you shoved her head in a toilet, you'd be insulting the toilet."

When Jed finished, the whole place went dead silent. Even Pearce, who'd been so arrogant a moment ago, couldn't bring himself to say a single word.

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Chapter 272

[643 words]

"So, turns out all the Charles family daughters have a thing for being the other woman, huh? I used to think it was just Rea who liked chasing after old men, but I guess every

daughter's got a talent for homewrecking. Maybe it runs in the family, right along with the crazy genes."

The crowd murmured and turned to see who had spoken. To everyone's surprise, it was Len's ex-wife, Cara.

Out of everyone here, Cara was the last person anyone wanted to hear from, but she was the only one with the right to talk. Back when Len dumped her for Rea, the scandal had been all over town. Even their kids ended up changing their last name to hers.

"Cara, shut up!" Patten snapped, his voice tight.

Cara just arched her brows, looking completely satisfied with herself.

"Shut up? Who do you think you're talking to? You can boss people around, but you don't get to control me. She's the one who did something shameless, but nobody's supposed to mention it? Rea worked her way up by being the other woman, and now all her sisters are following in her footsteps. The whole family's got no shame."

Patten's face turned red with anger, but there was no use arguing. Cara was right. He had no say over her anymore, not since they'd cut ties.

He let out a frustrated huff, grabbed Rea's arm, and stalked off, wanting to get out of there before things got even more embarrassing.

Jed glanced at Pearce, who still hadn't said a word, and decided to press on.

"Pearce, you sure were aggressive when you yelled at Laurinda earlier. What's wrong now? Cat got your tongue? You know you're in the wrong, so how about thinking about how you're going to apologize to my granddaughter. Otherwise, we're not done here."

Jed had come forward for one reason, to stand up for his granddaughter. If he didn't, the Main family would be the laughingstock of the whole city.

"And while you're at it, don't forget you owe me an apology, too," Laurinda added, stepping forward with a casual confidence that bordered on daring. "You insulted me for no reason."

She'd been quiet until now, waiting for the perfect moment. All she wanted was to watch Pearce and the Charles family lose every bit of pride they had left.

Turn the tables? Not a chance.

Pearce just stood there, silent. He'd arrived at the party full of confidence, and now he'd lost face because of Thalia.

He could still hear the things he'd
said earlier echoing in his head. Now he was
supposed to apologize)
just couldn't bring himself to do it.

He shot a look at Thalia, marched over, and pulled her away from Bagot, shoving her in front of Jed.

"You caused this mess. Fix it. Apologize to Cathleen and..... Laurinda. Do it now."

Thalia was stunned. She'd always thought Pearce would protect her, no matter what. How did it end up like this?

"Pearce, I..."

"Apologize! Did you not hear me?" Pearce barked, feeling all the eyes on him. He lost patience and kicked Thalia hard.

Thalia crumpled to the floor, curling up from the pain, unable to get a word out.

Jed's expression hardened. "Fine. If Pearce won't apologize, then we're not going to just swallow this insult. Since it's Raines's birthday, let me make something clear. From today on, the Main family and the Charles family are done. Any business connections we have will be ended as soon as possible. We don't need your apology anymore. From now on, we'll go our separate ways."

He shot Pearce a look filled with nothing but disgust, took his granddaughter's hand in one of his and his wife's in the other, and walked out.

Tanya hurried over to Laurinda and gently squeezed her hand. "I'm here for you," she whispered. "I won't let anyone treat you unfairly. .net>

Laurinda stopped her with a small shake of her head. "I can handle this myself."

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[611 words]

Laurinda always knew her own mind, so Tanya just smiled warmly and let her take charge.

Facing Pearce, who looked like a thundercloud, Laurinda kept her tone bright and steady. "Since Jed isn't asking Bagot for an apology, I doubt I'd get one either. I'll just have my lawyer contact Bagot directly. Adah still owes me for my medical bills, and my horse's treatment. Make sure Bagot doesn't forget to pay me back."

She didn't wait for Pearce to respond. Instead, she looped her arm through Tanya's and led her toward the lounge, head held high.

Once the elders had left, Seth moved through the crowd and stood next to Pearce. He glanced at Thalia, still on the ground, then spoke with a cold, steady voice. "You've completely ruined my father's birthday, Charles family. I can't let you stay. Please leave. My lawyers will be in touch about today's damages."

Pearce looked at him, stunned. With his status in Cabinda, how could the Bill family just throw him out? Did they really hold him in such low regard?

"Seth, are you serious?"

"Even if you stayed, you'd only embarrass yourself more. Save yourself some dignity and leave," Seth replied, not bothering to argue. He waved to the security guards, signaling them to escort Pearce and his people out.

Back in the lounge, Edna and Tanya sat on either side of Laurinda, each holding one of her hands. Edna gently checked Laurinda's injured palm, while Tanya thanked her for stepping up to protect Cathleen.

When Edna found out Laurinda was the one who had introduced Cathleen to her psychologist, her gratitude only grew. She even invited Laurinda to visit her home.

Jed, meanwhile, turned away from the group and looked at Adolphus. He hesitated a moment, then asked, "What do you think I should do about the Charles family?" Adolphus hadn't expected Jed to ask for his advice. He raised his brows, letting out a low chuckle. "Are you really asking me for ruthless ideas?"

"Come on, don't play coy. I know you're not just going to sit this out," Jed replied. He knew Adolphus would never let the Charles family get away with hurting Laurinda.

Adolphus smiled, his voice casual. "Work with the James family. Help them rise up, and there won't be any room left for the Charles family. Let them go back to where they started. That's the ending they deserve."

His words were calm, but they hit the other three like a bolt of lightning. In that instant, they finally understood why the James family had suddenly returned to Cabinda.

"Alright, I'll have Irvin reach out to the

James family tomorrow to talk about working together. The Charles family needs to be put back in their place and agreed. He glanced at Adolphus for a moment, then nodded at Felix in approval,

With that settled, the banquet officially began. The five elders were invited out together, and Laurinda and Adolphus followed at a relaxed pace.

Cathleen returned in a new dress, walking up to Laurinda with a confidence she hadn't shown

before. "Thank you for helping me

today if you hadn't stepped in, probably would've just put up with it. But once I spoke up, I realized they aren't as scary as I thought. I was just too scared before."

Watching Cathleen's face light up, Laurinda grinned, her eyes

softening. She pulled Cathleen into a casual side hug. "That's all that matters Irvin's been worried about you, but you're doing great now. You'll only get stronger from here."

Cathleen nodded, her smile full of gratitude. "I know. Thank you."

She went off to find Edna and Jed, while Adolphus took Laurinda's hand and they made their way toward the center of the banquet, ready for whatever came next.

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Chapter 274

[570 words]

Laurinda noticed Adolphus scanning the room, clearly searching for someone. She raised an eyebrow and asked, "Who are you looking for?"

Adolphus glanced at her. "Locke wants to meet you. Should we go say hi?" He waited for her answer, making it clear they'd only go if she wanted.

Laurinda wasn't surprised by his reply. Since Adolphus's grandparents had shown up for the Bill family's birthday banquet, it would have been strange if the other Lane family members weren't here too.

"Alright, let's go," she said.

Adolphus spotted Locke standing in a quiet corner. He took Laurinda's hand and led her over, but Abigail was nowhere to be seen.

Locke was in the middle of an intense conversation with someone named York. They were deep into the technical details of how FarrVector's newest product could be used in weapons radar systems.

York noticed Laurinda and Adolphus approaching. He nodded a quick greeting, then kept explaining the software to Locke.

Locke was so focused he didn't even realize anyone else had joined them. He just wanted to seal the deal with York as soon as possible.

"York, would you be interested in working together? After hearing your thoughts, I really believe your company's software is exactly what we need," Locke said, eager to move forward.

York was caught off guard by the sudden proposal. He glanced instinctively toward Laurinda.

Locke followed York's gaze and finally noticed Laurinda and Adolphus standing behind him. He blinked in surprise.

"When did you guys get here? Laurinda, you know Mr. York?" Locke asked.

Laurinda nodded. "Yeah, we know him. He came with us."

Adolphus looked around at the people nearby, then spoke in an even tone. "This is Raines's birthday party. Probably not the best place for business talks. If you want to discuss a partnership, maybe you should find somewhere more private."

Locke realized he'd gotten ahead of himself. He turned to York, apologetic. "Sorry, I got a little too excited and didn't think it through. When would you have time to talk things over?"

York looked at Laurinda again. She didn't seem to mind, so he thought for a moment. "How about next Monday?"

Locke frowned. "Monday's a bit far off. I have to be at headquarters the day after tomorrow. Is there any way we could meet sooner? If daytime's tricky, we could always grab dinner together."

He really didn't want to wait. The project was too important to him, and he didn't trust anyone else to handle it right.

Laurinda could tell how eager Locke was. She spoke up, her tone light. "Are you busy tomorrow afternoon?"

Both men turned to her. York looked apologetic. "I've already agreed to meet Mr. Williams from The Williams Group tomorrow. It wouldn't be right to cancel on him."

Laurinda tried another angle. "What about tomorrow evening? Any plans then?" She wasn't sure what York's schedule was like.

York hesitated. "I'm not sure about the evening. Do you have anything going on? If you're free, maybe you should handle it. Nobody knows this software better than you." His voice... dropped a little, but Locke caught every word.

Locke stared at Laurinda, surprised. He hadn't expected the girl Adolphus brought—supposedly a high school student—to be this capable.

Laurinda shot York a sharp look, annoyed that he'd said so much, but she didn't bother denying it. She put on a businesslike expression and turned to Locke.

"If you're interested in the program, Mr. Lane, I can talk to you about working together," she said, all professionalism now.

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Chapter 275

[616 words]

Locke watched the way Laurinda's mood shifted. He let go of the idea of teaming up with FarrVector for now. The urgency in his voice faded, and he spoke with a lazy drawl.

"So, you're this brat's girlfriend? Do you even know what my relationship is with him?"

Laurinda caught the change in Locke right away, and a small smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. She glanced at Adolphus and tossed the question right back to him.

"Adolphus, aren't you going to introduce who Locke is?"

Adolphus couldn't help rolling his eyes at the way she put it, like she'd just made Locke out to be his dad. He slid an arm around Laurinda's waist and pulled her gently against him.

"This is my brother, Locke. Locke, this is Laurinda, my girlfriend."

Laurinda's voice was soft and sweet as she greeted him.

"Hi, Locke."

Locke nodded, looking pleased.

"There you go. That's better. We're all family, but you were acting all business-like. No need to be so stiff with us. Even if we've got some work to talk about, there's no reason to keep things so formal. I promise I won't let you guys get the short end of the stick. You just let me know when you're free, and we'll sit down for a proper chat about working together."

Laurinda grinned.

"No problem. Since we're all family, I can have my team set things up for you first. Try it out and see how it works. We'll talk details after. It's our first time using this software in a real operation, anyway."

Locke hadn't expected he could actually get a trial run. That settled it for him. He and Laurinda quickly settled on a time for installation and testing, and he made up his mind on the spot. He was taking Laurinda to the Flame Training Base today.

He told Adolphus and Laurinda to wait a minute, then hurried off to find Abigail. Together, they went to wish Raines a happy birthday and hand over their gift.

After that, Locke gathered Adolphus and Laurinda and slipped out of the banquet, leaving York behind to handle the party on his own.

Outside the hotel, Patten watched as Locke hurried away with Adolphus and Laurinda, his brow furrowed with concern.

Standing next to him, Rea tugged on his sleeve, her voice dripping with jealousy.

"Locke and Adolphus are getting way too close these days. Now even Adolphus's girlfriend is in Locke's inner circle. That girl's got no family, no background, just a pretty face," but Adolphus treats her like she's made of gold."

Patten gave her a sharp look.

"Enough. Isn't it embarrassing enough already? Go keep your sisters in check. Why are they always up to something shameless?"

Honestly, if she hadn't tried to force Adah on Adolphus, his parents wouldn't be so upset with him. She never thought things through.

Rea sniffed, not backing down.

"You're always blaming me. Your ex-wife insulted you right to your face and you didn't even defend yourself."

Patten's face darkened.

"Don't bring her up. You two have done nothing but make me look like a fool."

He didn't want to argue anymore. He shook off her hand and stalked off, unable to stand another minute at the party. He could feel the other guests whispering and staring.

By the time Laurinda and the others reached the Flame Training Base, the whole team was already in bed. Locke barely gave Laurinda a chance to look around before leading her straight to the

engineering department.

He

already arranged a private workspace just for her.

"Laurinda, let's skip the formalities. We've got a drill coming up in a week. That gives us the perfect window to test your software. If it performs well we'll roll it out and molly ditch all that old, outdated tech." . FindNovel.net

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Chapter 276

[609 words]

Laurinda knew Locke was impatient, but she hadn't realized just how impatient until he dragged her straight to the studio without a second thought.

Adolphus glanced around, taking in the place with a slight frown. "Locke, does this really have to be done tonight? She needs her rest."

Locke didn't even look up. "She can rest, no problem. As soon as Laurinda checks the equipment and makes a list of what she needs, she's free to go. I'll have everything ready for her by morning."

He'd been stuck on this technical problem for ages, and now that he finally had a chance to fix it, he wasn't about to waste a single minute.

Adolphus looked like he wanted to argue, but Laurinda stopped him with a small shake of her head. She sat down at the computer, pulling up some tests to check the network speed and computer specs.

Her phone started ringing. Adolphus handed over her backpack, and Laurinda took out her phone, glanced at the screen, and hung up without a word. She slipped it back into her bag and started typing again, completely focused.

She didn't leave the studio for five days. When she finally stepped out, the tests had gone perfectly. Locke was swamped with follow-up work and couldn't even come to see her off.

Waiting outside were Adolphus, Jasper, and Teddy. Jasper and Teddy were still in their base training clothes, looking like they'd just come straight from the field. "Laurinda!" Jasper called out, running toward her. He stopped himself just in time, remembering how strong he was now and not wanting to knock her over.

Laurinda grinned, noticing how much more solid Jasper looked after just a few days apart. She raised her eyebrows in approval and ruffled his rough, buzzed hair.

The longer hair at the back was gone, but he was just as handsome as ever.

"What are you two doing here? Isn't training keeping you busy?"

Jasper beamed. "I ran into Adolphus yesterday, and he told me you'd be out today. So, after I finished training, I came straight here to find you."

He looked up at her with bright eyes. Even though he didn't see Laurinda often, he'd missed her a lot these past few days. Sometimes he couldn't help but wipe away tears when no one was looking.

Laurinda gently pinched his soft cheek, noticing his eyes were a bit red. She knelt down and pulled him into a hug.

"What's wrong? Too tired?"

Jasper shook his head, stubborn as

ever. "I'm fine, just miss you

sometimes. Missing you makes me

want to work harder When I get out

I'll

of here be strong enough to

Stand next to you, no more hiding."

There was a determined look on his face. He wanted to be someone who could protect Laurinda, not just be her weakness.

"You will. You're going to be a real man, I know it. Once you're out of here, I won't have to worry about anyone finding out about you anymore."

Laurinda stood and turned to Teddy. "How about you? Getting used to it?"

Teddy puffed out his chest and grinned. "I'm great. This is way better than the lab. I think I'm actually starting to get some muscle."

Laurinda smiled at him, her eyes full of pride. There was no question he'd gotten stronger these past few days.

"Let's go. We were supposed to have dinner with Seraphina tonight, but we had to cancel when we decided to come here last minute."

Adolphus held out his hand.

Laurinda smiled and took it with one

hand, grabbing Jasper's with the

other Teddy fell in behind them as

they headed toward the parking lot.

Adolphus drove, Laurinda in the passenger seat. Jasper and Teddy crashed in the back, falling asleep almost as soon as the car left the base.

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[652 words]

Adolphus turned to Laurinda, his voice soft. "Are you tired? Want to take a nap?"

Laurinda kept her eyes on her phone and shook her head. "No, I'm good. I've actually rested pretty well."

The last five days had been hectic, but she'd still managed to get some downtime, so she was feeling decent. What really put her in a good mood, though, was seeing someone from Stonehaven losing their mind and placing orders on the dark web. That virus she'd planted was doing its job, giving Stonehaven all kinds of headaches.

"How's the Charles family doing?" Laurinda asked. Stonehaven wasn't the only group she was keeping tabs on. She was dying to hear if the Charles family had finally hit a rough patch.

"Things are pretty bad for them," Adolphus said. "They got hacked, some of their systems were tampered with, and a whole batch of their products is faulty. It's a big loss. Plus, the Main family is putting pressure on them, so a lot of companies are breaking off their partnerships with the Charles Group. Even the ones who haven't cut ties aren't renewing their contracts. Their supply chain is falling apart."

"As for their private family drama, I haven't paid much attention. Sam told me Pearce's wife tried to take Adah and Thalia to apologize to Cathleen at the Main family's place, but they weren't even let in."

Laurinda couldn't hide her satisfaction at the Charles family's mess. She glanced at Adolphus, picking up on the fact that he wasn't telling her everything. Resting her chin in her hand, she asked, "Are you hiding something from me?"

Adolphus laughed quietly, clearly amused. "You can always tell, can't you?" He reached out and gave her cheek a playful squeeze.

"After the banquet, Pearce tried to get back at you. But honestly, he picked the most ridiculous way—he copied Aggie's old tricks."

"Now, not only has Aileen's scandal come out, but so has the news that she cheated on Bagot. People also found out that Aggie and Lawrence are Austin family descendants, and their whole publicity stunt was exposed."

"One revelation after another, and the Charles family's reputation is basically destroyed. Bagot's become a joke around Cabinda theard he and Pearce had a massive falling out"

"Also, because Aileen's involved in a big case and there's so much heat online, both the Gates Group and the Charles Group are being investigated. It's not affecting them too much yet, but if they find real problems, there could be a huge shake-up. I'm not even sure if the Gates Group can handle that right now."

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Laurinda was shocked. She'd only been away for five days, and Adolphus had handled so much. She turned toward him, propped herself up, and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"You're incredible. While I was gone, you finished everything I wanted to do."

Adolphus looked proud of himself, a smile tugging at his lips. "They were too impatient. They didn't just leak stories about you they even hired people online to try to ruin your reputation. I couldn't just sit back and wait for you to finish your stuff, so I stepped in. I hope I didn't mess up your plans."

"Of course not," Laurinda replied. "The Austin family only has Baily left now, and she can't stir up any trouble. I'm officially done with all of them."

"Now that Bagot and Pearce are at odds, Bagot's not going to go easy on his precious kids. I doubt Aiken's having a good time in prison, either."

Laurinda had barely finished speaking when her phone rang. She glanced at the screen—it was the old police officer calling. She picked up. "Alis, what's up?" "Alright, I got it."

After she hung up, Adolphus looked over with concern. "What happened?"

"Aiken's dead. He got into a fight in prison, hit his head on the wall. By the time they found him, he was already gone. I'm pretty sure Bagot had something to do with it."

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Chapter 278

[590 words]

"It's really not surprising. If Bagot wanted Aiken dead, it would be way too easy." Adolphus sounded calm, almost bored. He'd heard plenty about Bagot's dirty tricks.

Laurinda sat by the window, her mood light and easy. She watched the scenery rolling by and said, "I wonder what Aileen will do when she finds out Aiken's dead."

Adolphus glanced over, puzzled. He wasn't sure what Laurinda meant. He didn't know much about Aileen and Aiken's relationship. "Was Aiken actually important to her?" he asked.

Laurinda shook her head. "Honestly, I don't know. But I want to take a risk. Or maybe I just want to push Aileen to protect herself. She needs to see that if Bagot could kill Aiken, he could just as easily kill her. Or even her daughter."

"If she wants to stay alive, if she wants to protect her kids, she only has one choice. She has to get rid of Bagot before he comes after her."

Adolphus understood, but he knew it wouldn't be easy to convince Aileen. He looked at Laurinda, so relaxed, and figured she must already have something planned.

"You've got a plan, don't you?" he asked.

"Not yet. Right now, I just need you to get a message to Aileen for me. If she's willing to cooperate, then I'll start working on the next steps."

"Alright. I'll handle it." Adolphus met Laurinda's bright eyes and felt completely willing to do anything for her. Taking care of Bagot was nothing. If she wanted to turn Cabinda upside down, he'd have her back all the way.

The car pulled up at Lunaria Lakeside. Adolphus handed Teddy the key card for Foley's place and told him to take Jasper to freshen up. Then he led Laurinda straight back to his own apartment.

In front of Foley's door, Teddy and Jasper stood silently, watching the elevator doors close.

"So, your sister just let Adolphus take her?" Teddy asked, looking a bit lost.

Jasper shrugged, helpless. "What else could I do? You want to try stopping them? Think you could take my sister? Or Adolphus?"

Teddy shook his head. He knew better than to mess with either of them.

"Exactly. We just go along with whatever they decide. There's no way we could get involved. Might as well accept it."

Jasper picked up his backpack, took the key card from Teddy, and opened the door. He found a guest room and headed straight for a shower.

Meanwhile, at Adolphus's

apartment, he pressed Laurinda gently against the wall and kissed her. Laurinda didn't resist. She wrapped her arms around his neck, their breaths mingling in the quiet.

Later, at dinner, Seraphina shared her news. She'd just signed a contract with

Queen for her studio, and she'd brought Laurinda a present.

"Here, try this bracelet on. I saw it and thought of you right away," Seraphina said, taking it out of the box and holding Laurinda's hand as she slipped it on her wrist.

When she pushed up Laurinda's sleeve, she noticed the jade bangle. "So it's really yours. I heard about it at the banquet and ask, but then Abigail said your

With

Locke to take care of something."

Laurinda took the bracelet from Seraphina and admired it in her palm. It was beautiful. She turned and handed it to Adolphus so he could help her put it on.

"The jade bangle was a gift from Tanya when we first met. Is there some special meaning behind it?" Laurinda asked, playing dumb.

Adolphus just watched, amused, as Laurinda teased Seraphina.

Seraphina laughed, shaking her head. "No, no special meaning at all. But this bracelet really suits you. It looks gorgeous on you."

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Chapter 279

[674 words]

Seraphina nudged Adolphus under the table with her foot, subtle but pointed. She just couldn't believe he hadn't explained to Laurinda what that jade bracelet really meant.

Adolphus barely glanced at her. He kept calmly placing food on Laurinda's plate, never missing a beat. By the time dinner was over, he still hadn't bothered to clear things up for Seraphina.

After they left the restaurant, Teddy took Jasper back to the Flame Training Base. Seraphina ended up in the back seat of Adolphus's car, pulling out her latest design sketches to show Laurinda.

Laurinda flipped through the drawings, genuinely impressed. Seraphina had real talent. Every sketch was gorgeous, each one more stunning than the last. The designs sparked her own inspiration, and she suddenly wanted to create a set of jewelry to go with Seraphina's wedding dresses.

Laurinda was still lost in thought when her phone started to ring. She glanced at the number and hit decline right away. The same call came through three more times, and she ignored it every time. That's when a new message arrived, just a single photo. Laurinda looked up and said, "Can you pull over? I need to take this call."

Adolphus watched her through the rearview mirror, reading the worry on her face. He pulled over. Before the car had even fully stopped, Laurinda had jumped out, phone already pressed to her ear.

Seraphina watched her leave, anxiety creeping into her voice. "Aren't you going to check on her?" she asked Adolphus.

He shook his head slightly. "If she wanted us involved, she wouldn't have asked me to pull over. She'll handle it."

Outside, Laurinda's phone rang again. This time, she answered. A deep voice came through, rough with irritation.

"So you finally picked up. Laurinda, this has gone far enough. Do you really want to push those old men until they drag you back? Just stop already."

Laurinda let out a short, cold laugh. "Let them try. It's not like they haven't done it before."

"What do you want, Laurinda? You hijacked that shipment, and I didn't even go after you for it. Are you really set on burning Stonehaven to the ground before you're satisfied?"

The man's words came out sharp, every syllable bitten off. He was clearly struggling to keep his temper. He'd already let her get away with so much, yet she was still so stubborn.

Laurinda, on the other hand, felt lighter hearing his frustration. "Kenny, shouldn't I be asking you that? If those people hadn't messed

with someone close to me, would

have just minded our own business. But that's not possible anymore."

Kenny fell silent. The truth was, he hadn't known what those men had done to her until it was too late. He let out a heavy sigh.

"I know they pissed you off, and you've made your point. I swear, no one will go

near your friends again. Can't you just let Stonehaven go this time?"

His tone softened. Whatever trouble Laurinda stirred up, he would handle it. He just wanted her to stop fighting.

"You swear? What does that even mean coming from you? Kenny, you're nothing but a puppet. You're supposed to be the boss of

I.ne

Stonehaven, but everyone knows you take orders from those old gu

Honestly, it's pathetic."

guys.

"Don't try to talk me down. I'm not letting this go. If they want a fight, they can come

at me directly. I've only got one life, and I'm not afraid to bring them down with me."

When Laurinda decided to act, she never intended to let things slide. She wasn't about to compromise, not before she got what she was owed.

Kenny felt a headache coming on. He knew Laurinda meant every word. She always did. He forced himself to stay calm.

"Then what do you want, Laurinda? Just tell me what it'll take for you to let this go. I'll do whatever I can."

"I don't need you to do anything,"

Laurinda said, voice steady. "I'm fine with how things are. When my friend is better, Stonehaven's problems will be over. Just keep your people in check. If they mess with me again, Stonehaven can start digging its own grave."

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[542 words]

Laurinda didn't bother arguing with Kenny anymore. She hung up, not even

hesitating. Threats didn't scare her. She'd reached a point where nothing really mattered. If she had to drag all of Stonehaven down with her, so be it. She had no regrets left.

Kenny sat in his office, staring at his phone after the abrupt end to their call. He knew Laurinda hated him now too. But what else could he do? Dealing with those stubborn old men was the only way he knew to keep her safe.

Someone knocked on the office door. Several elders walked in, their faces tense as they took in Kenny's troubled expression.

"Still no word from Laurinda?" one of them asked.

"I talked to her. This isn't her fault. The virus must've come from the files I brought back. I'm already working on a fix, so there's no need to panic."

The elders exchanged looks, their brows drawn tight in frustration.

"Kenny, what's going on with you lately? First you lost a shipment worth billions, and now because of you, Stonehaven's entire network is down. Do you have any idea how much damage you've caused? If you can't handle this, remember, your job isn't set in stone."

Kenny looked at them, his eyes cold, voice steady.

"If you're so worried, go out there and see if anyone else wants to clean up this mess."

One of the elders spluttered, clearly offended. "Kenny, do you really think you're untouchable?"

The head elder pointed at Kenny, his hand shaking. He knew perfectly well no one else could hold this position. That was why they only dared to go after Laurinda behind Kenny's back, never to his face.

Kenny didn't bother responding. He picked up his coffee and took a sip.

"Let me give you some advice. Stop trying to make life difficult for Laurinda. Did you all forget what she did? She took out three of our major bases by herself. If she decides to go off the rails, not even I can stop her. Are you sure you want to risk that again?"

The elders went quiet, their faces paling as they remembered what Laurinda was capable of.

"That's enough. If there's nothing else, you should go. You're not young anymore. Maybe it's time to go home and enjoy your grandkids. enjoy your

Some things are better left to others now."

The elders, realizing they had nothing left to say, left Kenny's office with sour expressions.

Outside, one of them muttered, "Kenny isn't so easy to control anymore."

They could feel his shift in attitude. He wasn't the same as before.

Back at home, Adolphus was

up

cuddled with Laurinda on the

sofa He could tell she was

Leaning in, he gently bit her

"Ow! What was that for?" Laurinda grabbed his hair, her voice half annoyed, half teasing.

"You're totally out of it. I was talking to you, but you didn't even notice. I asked when you're heading back to Apex."

His warm breath tickled her skin, making her squirm.

"If

tomorrow, we'll go back

York's probably staying a

few more days, right? Let's just let him do his thing. thing."

"Alright, I'll handle it. We'll leave tomorrow afternoon."

With their plans set, they headed to bed. Laurinda slept deeply, not waking until midday.

When she finally came out of her room, she spotted Adolphus just coming in, suitcase in hand.

"Where did you go?" she asked.

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Chapter 281

[662 words]

"I just got back from my parents' place. Inside this bag are some holiday gifts they put together for you. Honestly, I'm not even sure what's in there. They were hoping you'd spend the holidays with us, but I turned them down. Maybe after the New Year, if you're up for it, we can go visit them."

"Alright, let's talk about it after the holidays."

Laurinda had always had a good impression of the Lane family, and she didn't mind the idea of spending more time with them.

She and Adolphus quickly unpacked everything. Neither of them had eaten lunch yet, so Adolphus suggested they head out to a private restaurant owned by Balaam's son.

Seraphina insisted on driving them to the airport, so she tagged along for lunch, too.

Sitting in a private room, Seraphina looked out the window at the restaurant's warm decor and couldn't help but grumble. "Kendrick really spoils you. You can get a table here any time you want. You have no idea how many times I've tried to make a reservation and failed. The last time I ate here, I had to crash someone else's dinner. I still don't get why this place is so popular."

Adolphus poured Laurinda a cup of tea and glanced at Seraphina, his voice casual. "You do have Kendrick's number, right? Why don't you just message him directly? Do you really think he'd say no to you?"

Seraphina let out a sigh. "Don't even start. Kendrick actually deleted my number. I couldn't get a table after that, and I swear he did it on purpose."

Laurinda, who had seemed a little tired before, suddenly perked up. Her eyes sparkled with curiosity as she looked at Seraphina. "What did you do? Why would he delete your number? Come on, spill it. Maybe I can help you fight your case."

Adolphus caught the glint in Laurinda's eyes and knew she was itching for some juicy gossip. He thought she was getting cuter these days, so much more lively than she used to be, when she always kept to herself.

"I didn't do anything, honestly. It was about six months ago. I was dating this guy, and brought him and some friends here for dinner. Kendrick happened to be there, doing his

in

rounds. I introduced my boyfriend

by Boyfriend to

him, and after that, I could never get a reservation again."

Just talking about it made Seraphina frown. That dinner had been for her boyfriend's mom's birthday, and he'd boasted that he knew the owner and could definitely get them a table. In the end, he couldn't, and it was honestly embarrassing.

"A boyfriend? How come I never heard about this?" Adolphus narrowed his eyes, a

little suspicious. Seraphina was twenty-eight, so dating wasn't a big deal, but the

fact that he hadn't heard about it was odd.

"Oh, we broke up ages ago. We were

Pet

only together for a month or so. I thought since he was into art too, we'd have a lot in common, but I was wrong. Not only did we have nothing to talk about, but we also didn't even like the same things. So, we broke up." Content bétongs

It wasn't like she could admit she'd hidden her background from him, failed to get the reservation, and made him unhappy, right?

Laurinda leaned her chin in her hand and took a slow sip of tea, a thoughtful look on her face. She was clearly thinking something over, a small smile playing at her lips.

Seraphina noticed Laurinda smiling and leaned in, puzzled. "What's so funny?" "Nothing. I was just wondering, how long have you known Kendrick?" Seraphina thought for a moment. "It's been ten years, I think. Adolphus started studying with Balaam ten years ago, and that's when I met Kendrick."

"Ten years, huh..." Laurinda was honestly surprised. Kendrick had liked Seraphina for that long and never said anything? He'd almost missed his chance with her.

"What is it?" Seraphina frowned, noticing Laurinda's expression getting stranger. For some reason, Laurinda's smile seemed to have a bit of a teasing edge.

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[545 words]

Yeah, that's right. It was totally flirtatious.

Before Seraphina could even ask what was going on, the private room door swung open. A guy in a chef's uniform came in, pushing a cart loaded with food.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

Laurinda looked up and almost did a double take. The man was huge, like he could walk through a set of double doors without turning sideways. And he was definitely attractive, way more than she expected from a chef. He even had muscles.

He started setting the dishes on the table, then sat down right next to Seraphina like he belonged there. Still, he didn't look at her, acting all moody and distant.

"Why are you two heading back so soon?" he asked, directing his question at Adolphus.

Adolphus handed Laurinda a fork and barely bothered to answer. "We've been here more than a week. She's got classes back at Apex." He paused, then turned to Laurinda. "Oh, let me introduce you. This is my girlfriend, Laurinda. Laurinda, this is Kendrick."

"Nice to meet you, Kendrick."

"Hi." Kendrick smiled at her. "I didn't bring a gift, but here, take this." He pulled out a shiny gold card. "It's our restaurant's VIP card. You never need a reservation, and you can order anything you want."

Seraphina suddenly interrupted, pouting. "Wait, we've been friends forever and I never got one of those."

Kendrick finally glanced at her, looking honestly surprised, like he'd just noticed she was there. "Oh? When did you get here, Seraphina?"

She stared at him, half annoyed, half confused. "Seriously, Kendrick? I'm right here. Are you pretending I'm invisible?"

He shrugged. "Didn't see you before, but I see you now. Didn't you say the food here was just so-so? What are you doing back?"

His tone dripped with sarcasm and it made Seraphina frown. She didn't remember ever saying that.

"When did I ever say your food was just okay? Are you looking for a fight or something?"

Kendrick's cold shoulder was getting to her. They hadn't seen each other in forever, and now he was acting like this? It hurt.

He snorted. "Your attitude really is..."

He stopped himself, noticing how her eyes were getting red. He bit back the rest of his words.

"You've always known what I'm like. You never had a problem with me before. Why are you picking on me now?"

"Things change. Don't start with me. If you're mad, go yell at your boyfriend. I'm not here for that."

With that, Kendrick stood up. He'd

wanted to hang out and chat with Adolphus but now he couldn't even sit still. The idea of Seraphina's boyfriend was clearly bugging him.

"Adolphus, Laurinda, you guys eat. I've got things to do."

He slid the gold card toward Laurinda and walked out without looking back.

"Hey! We're not done talking! When did I ever say your food wasn't good?" Seraphina jumped up and hurried after him.

Laurinda watched them leave, grinning like a cat who just got into the cream.

Adolphus caught her look. She

seemed ready to sprint out the door just to watch the drama. He put a piece of steak on her plate. "Eat first. When did you get so nosy

Laurinda took a bite, then laughed. "I never realized watching other people's drama was this fun. Is Seraphina really that clueless?

Kendrick's jealousy is so obvious How does she not see he's into her?"

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Chapter 283

[1,082 words]

"Probably. Kendrick used to give me desserts to pass to Seraphina. Honestly, when I came back from abroad, I thought I'd hear something good about the two of them. But no, as soon as I asked around, I found out Seraphina has barely spoken to Kendrick since I left."

Laurinda sighed, feeling a bit helpless. She could tell Seraphina didn't dislike Kendrick. It was just obvious Seraphina had never thought of him as anything more than a friend.

Oh well. Laurinda barely had any experience with relationships herself, so there was no way she was about to play matchmaker. Better to just let things happen on their

own.

They finished eating, but Seraphina still hadn't come back. Laurinda glanced at Seraphina's phone left on the table and laughed. "Is Seraphina always this unreliable?"

Adolphus smiled. "Only sometimes. I'll give Kendrick a call."

He dialed Kendrick, who just told him Seraphina would be back soon, then hung up.

And just like that, Seraphina walked in. She threw on her coat, picked up her bag and car keys.

"I'll drive you guys to the airport."

"You haven't eaten yet. Aren't you hungry?" Laurinda and Adolphus stayed put, looking at her. There was definitely still time for a meal.

"I'm not eating. Anger is enough to fill me up. I have never met a man so impossible. His cooking is average at best! If I ever come here again, you can call me a dog." Adolphus actually burst out laughing. He stood up and handed Laurinda her coat. "What's so funny?" Seraphina glared at him, not seeing the humor at all.

"Nothing, just... I have a feeling you're going to regret what you just said." Adolphus arched his brow, slipped his arm around Laurinda's waist, and led her out.

"Regret it? No way."

Seraphina felt her chest tighten just thinking about Kendrick's cold attitude. She didn't remember doing anything wrong, so what was he even mad about? The whole thing was ridiculous.

When they got to the airport, Adolphus didn't let Seraphina come inside. He pushed the luggage cart, and Laurinda sat on top of one of the suitcases as they made their way in.

Inside, Laurinda spotted someone familiar and waved toward the exit.

Shirley saw her too, shoved her suitcase at her little brother, and ran straight for Laurinda.

"Laurinda, where have you been? We tried to reach you for our New Year's get-together, but you never answered. You have no idea how worried I was. If Irvin hadn't told me you were fine, I would have called the police."

Laurinda gently patted Shirley, who looked like she was about to cry, her smile soft and warm.

"Something happened recently, so I didn't get a chance to reach out. Are you guys here to see Odom?"

Shirley saw that Laurinda was okay and didn't push for details. She just grinned and nodded.

"My dad's too busy to come back to Apex for the holidays, so my mom brought me and my brother here. Are you just getting in, or are you leaving?"

Only then did Shirley notice Adolphus standing behind Laurinda. She gave him a nod as a greeting.

"We're heading back to Apex. I got you a New Year's present, by the way. Send me your new address later and I'll mail it to you."

"That's funny. We all got you gifts too. Gave them to Irvin, actually. He came to the last class dinner, so we figured he could get them to you."

"Perfect. I was planning to see him when I get back anyway, so I'll pick them up then."

Once they started talking, it felt like they couldn't stop. Adolphus just waited off to the side, not rushing Laurinda at all. Eventually, Shirley's mom walked over. Laurinda greeted her politely. "Hello."

"Laurinda!" Shelton grinned at her. He'd always liked Laurinda, especially since she always brought him gifts.

Mabel walked up, took Laurinda's hand, and looked at her with concern. "Are you spending the holiday alone? Why don't you come to our place?"

She glanced quickly at Adolphus, a little worried about Laurinda traveling with a guy.

"It's fine. I'm celebrating with the Larson family this year, so there's no need to worry about me."

"Oh, that's good." Mabel looked relieved and didn't say anything more.

"It's getting late, and we shouldn't keep the car waiting. Let's catch up on the phone soon."

"Alright, take care."

Laurinda waved goodbye. Shirley looked reluctant to leave, but the thought of seeing Laurinda again once school started cheered her up, and she left with her family.

Adolphus took Laurinda's hand and started toward the boarding gate. Laurinda frowned. "We haven't checked in yet."

"It's fine, we can just go straight up."

They made their way to the gate. As

soon as they got there, a flight

attendant spotted them and hurried over, gave Adolphus their tickets, and led them through a private entrance

Laurinda remembered Jasper's teasing about Adolphus and realized he really did have some unusual connections at the airport.

By the time they got back to Apex, it was already dark. As soon as they stepped out of the airport, they saw Sam waiting Laurinda blinked in

surprise. "When did you get here?"

"Three days ago. I had a few things to handle. Come on, get in. Are we headed straight home or stopping for dinner?"

"To the hospital."

Laurinda still couldn't stop worrying about Bonnie. Even though Bonnie could use her phone now and messaged every day to say she was fine Laurinda needed to see her in person.

They drove to the hospital. Bonnie had been moved to a regular room. As they reached the door, even before they could open it, Bonnie's irritated voice carried through.

"Harrell, what is wrong with you? I've told you to stop coming here. That one wild night we had meant nothing. Just seeing you annoys me."

Laurinda's jaw dropped. She had no idea Bonnie and Harrell had a "wild night." What were the odds?

Adolphus gently pushed Laurinda's chin up, closing her mouth. He took her hand and stepped back a bit, whispering, "Should we still go in?"

Laurinda's eyes sparkled. She nodded hard. Gossip like this? No way she was missing out.

Her expression made Adolphus laugh. This was a side of Laurinda he hadn't seen before, and honestly, he was a little worried all this drama would rub off on her. Laurinda knocked softly on the door. Harrell opened it, surprised to see them.

"You're back."

"Yeah," Adolphus said, handing over the gifts they'd brought.

Harrell took the gifts and figured right away that they must have heard the argument.

Laurinda went straight to Bonnie's bedside, ignoring what she'd just heard. "How's your recovery?" she asked gently. "Is there anything you need?"

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[609 words]

When Laurinda spotted Shirley's mom, she greeted her with a warm smile. "Hi."

"Laurinda!" Shelton called out, his whole face lighting up. He always got excited to see her, probably because every time she visited, she brought him a bag full of gifts.

Mabel walked over, reached for Laurinda's hand, and gave her a gentle squeeze. "Are you really going to spend the holiday by yourself? Why not come stay with us?" She glanced over at Adolphus as she spoke, her protective instincts kicking in. Laurinda had always been like family to her, and the idea of Laurinda spending time alone with a guy made her uneasy.

Laurinda shook her head, smiling. "It's okay, really. I'm spending the holiday with the Larsons this year. You don't need to worry about me."

Mabel's shoulders relaxed. "Alright, then." She trusted the Larsons, so she didn't push it any further.

"It's getting late. We shouldn't keep the car waiting outside. Let's head out. If you need anything, just give me a call."

"Okay, take care," Laurinda replied, waving at the three of them. Shirley looked a little sad to say goodbye, but knowing they'd see each other again once school started made her perk up. She left with a smile.

Adolphus reached for Laurinda's hand, leading her toward the boarding gate. Laurinda frowned. "Wait, didn't we forget to check in?"

"No need. We can just head straight over," he said.

When they got to the gate, a flight attendant spotted them and hurried over, handing Adolphus their tickets. Without missing a beat, she led them through a private

entrance.

Laurinda suddenly remembered Jasper teasing Adolphus about his special connections. Now it all made sense. This man really did have some pull at the airport.

By the time they landed back in Apex, night had already fallen. They stepped outside and spotted Sam waiting by the curb. Laurinda blinked in surprise. "When did you get here?"

"Three days ago," Sam replied. "Had some things to take care of. Come on, hop in. Are you two heading straight home or do you want to grab something to eat first?" "I want to go to the hospital," Laurinda said.

She couldn't relax until she saw Bonnie herself. Even though Bonnie could use her phone again and sent messages every day to let her know she was okay, Laurinda needed to see her in person. 'FindNovel.net

They pulled up outside the hospital. Bonnie had been moved to a regular room which was a relief. As they stood outside her door, they suddenly heard Bonnie's voice, loud and irritated.

"Harrell, what is wrong with you? I've told you a million times, stop coming here! That one crazy night meant nothing. Honestly, I can't stand the sight of you."

Laurinda's eyes went wide and her jaw dropped. She had no idea Bonnie and Harrell had ever... well, had a thing. What were the chances?

Adolphus lifted Laurinda's chin with his finger, gently closing her mouth, then took her hand and stepped back. He whispered, "Should we still go in?"

Laurinda's eyes sparkled. She nodded, practically bouncing in place. Gossip this fresh was too good to pass up.

Her excitement made Adolphus chuckle. Laurinda wasn't the shy, reserved girl she used to be. He worried that all this drama might turn her into someone else, but right now, he couldn't help but smile at her enthusiasm.

Laurinda knocked softly. Harrell opened the door, a little surprised to see them both standing there.

"You're back," he said.

"Yeah," Adolphus replied, handing over the gifts they'd brought.

Harrell glanced at them, clearly guessing they'd heard the argument inside.

Laurinda walked over to Bonnie's bed and, acting like she hadn't heard a thing, sat down and spoke softly. "How are you feeling? Any pain or discomfort?"

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[663 words]

"Everything's fine, really, don't stress about me."

Bonnie couldn't help feeling a little awkward. She figured Laurinda must know she'd just snapped at Harrell.

Laurinda glanced at the food on the table, her brows drawing together. "You still haven't eaten? It's so late."

"I already had dinner. Arrow fed me earlier." Bonnie glanced away, picking at the blanket. "Harrell brought the chicken soup. I'm just not hungry, so I don't want it."

She avoided Laurinda's eyes, unsure how to explain what was going on between her and Harrell. It was complicated, way more than she could lay out in a few words.

"If you don't want it, then skip it." Laurinda's tone was gentle. "You need to focus on getting better and keeping your spirits up. If there's anything you're craving, just tell me. I can have our chef whip something up for you."

"She can't just eat whatever she wants right now," Harrell cut in, sounding tense. He hovered nearby, clearly worried Laurinda might actually grant Bonnie's wish and bring her forbidden foods.

Bonnie rolled her eyes. "You're not my doctor, Harrell. Why do you have to be so controlling? My doctor is Adolphus, and he hasn't said anything, so just... zip it, okay?"

Every time Harrell tried to micromanage her, Bonnie got a headache. It was her body. She could handle herself. She didn't need him jumping in every two seconds.

Adolphus picked up the chart from the bedside. He skimmed it, then spoke in a calm, even voice. "Actually, Harrell's right. You shouldn't eat just anything right now. Your wound is still healing. Laurinda had some special meals prepared for you— Arrow probably gave you one for dinner. Hang in there a few more days. Once you're further along, you can have something with more flavor."

He remembered Laurinda mentioning that she and Bonnie had similar tastes, both fans of spicy, heavy food. But with injuries like this, there was no way Bonnie could indulge just yet.

Adolphus set the chart down and glanced at Harrell, who looked like he still had plenty to say. Walking over, Adolphus took Harrell by the arm.

"Let's give them some time alone. You and I can go over Fidelia's situation."

Before Harrell could protest, Adolphus steered him out of the room. They ended up in Adolphus's office, where Harrell looked a little sheepish.

"You heard everything, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I did," Adolphus replied, his tone neutral. "It's not my place to butt in, but she's still a patient. You should think about her recovery. She needs peace and quiet."

He gave Harrell a reassuring pat on the shoulder. Adolphus knew Harrell cared about someone, but he hadn't expected it to be Bonnie. Life could be unpredictable like that.

Harrell dragged over a chair and sank into it, rubbing his face. He let out a long, tired sigh.

"I know, but if I don't stay on her, she'll slip away. You have no idea how slippery she is. If she wasn't stuck in that hospital bed, she'd already be gone."

Adolphus frowned, considering if he needed to have a proper talk with Laurinda, just in case she ever decided to vanish like Bonnie. With. she wanted to

Laurinda's skills if she w

disappear, he might never find her.

Seeing the look on Adolphus's face, Harrell figured he was just as worried. He waved him off. "Come on, I'll handle my mess. You don't need to worry about me."

That made Adolphus chuckle, shaking his head.

"You're overthinking. I'm not worried about you, I'm worried Bonnie might be a bad influence on Laurinda. I should probably have a chat with her, make sure if she's ever upset with me, she just says it instead of running off."

Harrell was dumbfounded. He'd thought Adolphus would at least sympathize, but the guy didn't care about him at all.

He realized, once again, that everyone's struggles are their own.

Back in the room, Laurinda ladled some chicken soup into a bowl, took a sip, and smiled. It was actually pretty good. She turned to Bonnie and nudged her gently encouraging her to try a few spoonfuls,

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Chapter 286

[612 words]

After taking a few obedient sips of chicken soup, Bonnie finally spoke, her voice calm and steady. "Did you hear what Harrell and I were talking about just now?"

"Yeah, I heard." Laurinda tore into her chicken leg in a lazy, relaxed way, eyes half-lidded and clearly not interested.

Bonnie watched her, the tension in her chest slowly loosening.

"You don't have anything you want to ask?"

"Nope. If you want to talk, I'll listen. If you don't, I'm not going to make you. I respect you. Everyone gets their own private life. Just like when I got together with Adolphus, you and York never tried to butt in, right?"

"Love is personal. Only you know what's best for you. If you like Harrell, go for it. If you don't think he's right, just say no. You don't need to make yourself miserable over it."

"Just remember, no matter what happens, York and I are your family. X Organization is your home. That's all you need to know. For everything else, just do what feels right."

Bonnie felt a sting in her nose and had to blink fast. She'd always known it. The family she chose would always have her back, no matter what.

"He's amazing. I just... I don't feel like I deserve him."

Laurinda was startled by Bonnie's words. With Bonnie's background, she could have any guy she wanted. Why would she say something like that?

"What's so special about Harrell that makes you feel you're not good enough?"

Bonnie shook her head. "It's not about his background. It's me. You know what my family is like. I get to be free now only because they don't need me for anything yet. But if the day comes when they do, there's no telling what they might do to Harrell. I can't be selfish and drag him into all that. I don't want to hurt him."

Laurinda went quiet. Most people wouldn't get it, but she did. She'd seen this kind of thing happen way too many times.

On the way home, Adolphus glanced at Laurinda, noticing how quiet she was. He reached over and held her hand.

"Are you feeling okay? You've seemed off since we left the hospital."

Laurinda shook her head, squeezed his hand, and leaned against his shoulder. She wrapped both arms around his, like just being close to him could calm her down.

Seeing she wasn't ready to talk,

Adolphus didn't push. He let her hold on, gave her space to work through her feelings. He knew she'd talk when she was ready.

When they got home, Laurinda was already asleep. Adolphus gently carried her out of the car, with Sam following behind, lugging their bags.

Sam set the suitcase down by the door, not planning to come in. As he turned to leave, Adolphus called out to him.

"Hang on, I've got something for you."

"Okay," Sam said, swapping his shoes for slippers before heading into the living room to sit and wait. He watched as Adolphus got Laurinda settled, then joined him in the study.

The next morning, Laurinda woke sprawled on Adolphus's chest,
listening to the steady beat of

his

heart. She stayed there for a while before finally opening her eyes.

Almost like he could sense her waking, Adolphus opened his eyes too. He leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead.

"You're awake? Did you sleep alright?"

"Yeah. I slept great. Just... I'm starving." Laurinda's stomach felt hollow and a little uneasy.

Adolphus put his arm around her and helped her sit up. He grabbed a jacket from beside the bed and draped it over her shoulders.

"Go get washed up. I'll make us some breakfast. How about tomato and egg noodles?"

"That sounds perfect. Can I have some cold side dishes too? Do we have any?"

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Chapter 287

[649 words]

Laurinda lounged against Adolphus, feeling lazy and a little lost in thought about food. She was starving and couldn't stop thinking about what she wanted to eat next.

"We have groceries. Foley dropped them off this morning. I'll whip up something fresh and light. Go get ready first," Adolphus said.

He nudged Laurinda, trying to get her off him, but she just clung on a little longer. He could see her mood had lifted. The tension he'd been carrying started to fade. As long as she was alright, that was enough.

While Laurinda was having breakfast, the intercom in the foyer lit up. Adolphus walked over and pressed the button, seeing a stranger waiting outside.

Before Adolphus could say anything, the man spoke. "Good morning, sir. I'm here to deliver something for Laurinda."

Hearing her name, Laurinda set down her chopsticks and walked over. She glanced at the screen, her face instantly turning cold, and switched it off without a word.

Adolphus could tell something was up. He watched her with concern. "What's wrong? Do you know that guy?"

"Yeah, I do."

Laurinda didn't feel like explaining. She went back to her seat, grabbed her phone, and called Jack. She asked him to take care of the situation.

Adolphus sat across from her, scooping a bit of salad onto her plate. His voice was gentle. "Don't let people who don't matter ruin your mood. Just eat."

Laurinda took a bite of noodles and lazily looked up at him. "Aren't you even a little curious about who that was?"

"I am. But if you don't want to talk about it, I won't push you. Tell me when you're ready."

Just like that, Adolphus's words made Laurinda feel lighter. She put down her chopsticks, reached across the table to hook her finger under his chin, and leaned in to press a soft kiss to his lips.

She grinned. "Mr. Lane, you've got the whole perfect-housewife vibe going on."

Adolphus let out a quiet laugh, the corners of his mouth lifting. "Then you'd better take care of me. Guys like me, loyal and caring, are a rare find."

She smiled back, her eyes crinkling. "Don't worry, I'm not letting you slip away."

Laurinda meant it. She was determined to get stronger, to make sure no one else got to control her life.

"Good. You promised, you can't leave me behind."

After that, Laurinda actually got busier than ever. Adolphus wanted to bring her along to Frostfrod, but she turned him down. She had her hands full, and on top of that she still liked to stir up a little trouble for Kenny now and then.

With no other choice, Adolphus went by himself.

Time flew. Before Laurinda knew it, it was almost New Year's. On the twenty-eighth, Bonnie was finally, being discharged from the hospital Laurinda went with the butler to bring Bonnie home so she could rest.

They stepped into the hospital room and saw Harrell helping Bonnie pack up her things.

Harrell didn't waste any time. "Bonnie and I already talked. She's coming to The Black Family's place to recover. She wants to spend New Year's with Fidelia." Laurinda raised a brow at Harrell, then turned to look at Bonnie, who was curled up on the bed trying to disappear.

Spend New Year's with Fidelia? That was a nice excuse. Fidelia was her family too. Laurinda wasn't about to be left out.

She leaned against the bed frame and decided to give Harrell a hard time. "When did you two make that plan? She texted me just an hour ago saying she was coming home with me."

Laurinda pulled out her phone and waved the chat messages in front of Harrell.

Harrell turned to look at Bonnie, his face full of mock betrayal. "So you're just going to ditch me? Planning!?"

sneak off with her while tm signing your discharge papers?"

Bonnie just sat there quietly, not sure what to say. Yesterday, in a moment of weakness, she'd promised Harrell she'd spend the holiday with him.

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Chapter 288

[657 words]

She agreed at first, but then the regret hit hard. That's why she insisted Laurinda come pick her up. Honestly, she just wanted Laurinda to swoop in and rescue her from this whole mess.

Laurinda saw right through it, but of course she had to have her friend's back. She glanced at Harrell, her tone cool. "Why are you acting like this is some tragic love story? Anyone watching would think Bonnie's the one who broke your heart."

"She did break my heart!" Harrell shot back. Right now, 'heartbreaker' felt like the perfect word for Bonnie. This wasn't even the first time she'd turned on him after getting what she wanted.

He couldn't believe he'd fallen so hard for someone so completely ruthless.

Harrell's face twisted into a look of pure misery, like he was being bullied by both Laurinda and Bonnie at the same time. He actually looked like he might cry any second.

Laurinda rolled her eyes at him, walked to the sofa, and flopped down. She grabbed a banana from the table, peeled it, and took a bite.

"Adolphus called last night," she said between mouthfuls. "Kendrick isn't coming home for New Year's with Balaam and Regan this year. He's supposed to get back to Apex before the holiday, so Adolphus asked him to look after them for a while. We figured we'd just invite them, and Fidelia too, to my place for the celebration."

"So let's stop fighting over Bonnie. If you're not heading home, just come celebrate with us."

Bonnie hadn't seen that coming. Laurinda, inviting Harrell? What happened to her little victory just now? Bonnie shot Laurinda a look, eyebrows raised in disbelief.

Harrell was about to say yes when he caught Bonnie signaling Laurinda with her eyes. He quickly reached out and covered Bonnie's eyes with his hand, not giving Laurinda any chance to take it back.

"I'm in!" His voice was firm and bright, totally different from the whiny mess he'd been a second ago.

Bonnie gave him an annoyed shove,

batting his hand away. He bent down, his voice suddenly soft and

gentle. "Don't move around so

much you just st

getting

better. No heavy lifting, no getting worked up. Your health comes first."

"You are such a jerk." Bonnie sounded exasperated. She'd tried to push Harrell away so many times, but every time she tried, she just ended up tangled in the warmth he wrapped around her. Escaping him felt impossible.

"Call me whatever you want. As long as you don't leave me, I don't care." Harrell had no fight left in him now just endless patience. After she'd disappeared, after he'd found out how close he'd come to losing her forever all he wanted was to hold her close. He knew she still felt something for him, even if she

refused to admit it.

Laurinda watched from the sofa and rolled her eyes. Bonnie was actually being gentle with Harrell. Usually,

Ket

Bonnie was all calm and decisive

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never one to drag things out. If she was caught up like this, it meant she couldn't let go. Otherwise, no matter how many tricks Harrell tried, she'd have cut him loose a long time ago.

Once Bonnie had calmed down, Harrell and his driver started moving her stuff.

Laurinda stood up and walked over, fishing a lollipop out of her pocket and handing it to Bonnie.

"Ever thought about giving him a real chance?" Laurinda asked. She didn't want Bonnie to be so torn up about it, but she couldn't bring herself to give advice either. What if Bonnie regretted it later?

Bonnie unwrapped the lollipop and popped it in her mouth, her eyes fixed on Laurinda as she thought it over.

"Do you really think I could?"

"If you want to, you can. I mean, come on, X Organization can totally protect your guy. Who cares how powerful your family is? It's not like those weapons you're holding are just for show. Worst case, we blow them up!"

A dangerous little smile flickered at the corner of Laurinda's mouth as she said it.

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Chapter 289

[606 words]

Bonnie felt her chest tighten. She squeezed Laurinda's hand and pulled her to sit beside her on the bed, dropping her voice to a whisper.

"What happened? Are they bothering you again?"

"No, nothing like that. I just found out who was behind your accident. Kenny sent someone over with a so-called gift. He called it a peace offering, but really, it was just a clear provocation. He wanted me to know he's keeping tabs on me."

"I've already planned a special surprise for them. I'm inviting them to watch fireworks with us on New Year's Eve."

Bonnie's eyes were full of worry as she looked at Laurinda. She didn't want Laurinda to mess up her plans because of this. Without realizing it, she squeezed Laurinda's hand even tighter.

"Laurinda, maybe you should hold off. We can take our time with this. Your plan is too important to risk..."

"I'm not messing anything up. I'm not going to take their lives. I just want a little payback. For my parents, for Farr, for my mentor, and for you."

Laurinda's eyes grew red at the corners. She'd thought she could handle all of this calmly, that she could wait until she turned twenty and then hit them with something big.

But now she realized that waiting just made those people bolder. So she'd take a little revenge early.

She also wanted to remind them that she was still 005, the one who could lose control at any moment.

Once everything was packed, Harrell carried Bonnie out to the car. Arrow, Bonnie's private doctor, was coming with them too.

The butler glanced at the car, stuffed to the brim, and then turned to Laurinda.

"Don't worry, Laurinda. There's another car on the way."

"Alright. You take them home first. I'll wait here. I might be back a little late. I need to drop something off at the lab for Irvin. He's heading back to the capital this afternoon."

Yesterday, Laurinda had gotten New Year's gifts from Edna and Cathleen. She'd prepared a gift in return and wanted Irvin to take it back for her. It was only fair.

"Okay. Take care. Call if you need anything."

The butler got into the car and drove off with Bonnie and the others, leaving Laurinda standing by the hospital entrance, waiting for her ride.

Just then, she noticed someone walking toward her. She sensed someone getting closer, turned her head, and was caught off guard.

"Harden?"

He wore a black overcoat and a crisp white shirt, looking every bit the business professional. Laurinda had never seen him like this before.

Harden greeted her with a gentle smile.

His expression and outfit felt oddly familiar, but on him, it seemed almost out of place.

It just didn't suit him.

"Long time no see. What brings you here?"

"I'm here to pick up Bonnie from the hospital. You know that, right?"

Laurinda didn't believe for a second that he didn't know about Bonnie's accident. He had to be aware of the Gates family's dirty work.

She studied his outfit, thinking that

Finn must have finally admitted who Harden was Finn needed someone, to take over, especially since they hadn't found Fabian.

"I didn't realize Bonnie was well enough

O go home already. Tharet

I visited her before with some

She's recovering fast."

Laurinda couldn't figure out what Harden was getting at, so she didn't answer. She didn't want to say a single word to him.

Seeing her go quiet, Harden just smiled, stepped a little closer, and went on.

"I'm actually here to see Alice. After

Fabian, disappeared she got After

Sappeared, she get

Then she broke her leg a few

She's here in the hospital too."

Laurinda turned to look at Harden, searching his face for a clue about why he was telling her all this, but she couldn't make out anything unusual.

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- Chapter 290

[609 words]

Harden met Laurinda's cool, distant gaze, and his smile grew even softer.

"Don't overthink it. I'm just making conversation. The Gates family has had a rough time lately. Aileen suddenly turned on Bagot, and now a whole bunch of issues with The Gates Group are coming to light. Finn is running himself ragged trying to keep up..."

He didn't get to finish. A sleek Maybach rolled to a stop right in front of Laurinda. She cut him off, her voice polite but final.

"Sorry, my car's here. I need to go."

Laurinda pulled open the door and slipped inside. The car pulled away quickly, leaving Harden standing there, watching her disappear down the street. A faint, satisfied smile played on his lips.

He'd caught the way Laurinda looked at him. She'd glanced his way more than once. He knew she liked the way he dressed today. Once he officially took on the title of Mr. Gates, she was bound to look at him differently.

And that school doctor wasn't around today. There had to be trouble between them. Soon, Laurinda would be his.

Sitting in the back seat, Laurinda shivered. Harden's gaze might have looked gentle, but it reminded her of a snake-cold and poisonous.

She could already picture what Finn's future would look like if he kept supporting Harden.

A true son of Finn. Every flaw Finn had seemed to have passed right down to his child.

Her phone buzzed. It was a video call from Adolphus. She answered, and his face filled the screen, backed by a wall of bookshelves.

"Did you pick up Bonnie?"

"Yeah, barely. Almost couldn't convince her. I had to invite him to celebrate the New Year at home before he agreed."

Adolphus chuckled. He understood Harrell's stubborn streak. He knew it wouldn't be easy to persuade him this time.

Noticing Laurinda was alone, Adolphus straightened up, his voice unconsciously softening. "Where are you off to now?"

"I'm heading to the lab to meet Irvin. I put together some New Year's gifts for him to take back to Edna. Easier than sending them by mail."

Adolphus nodded, then remembered why he'd called. "Bagot's been arrested."

"I just saw Harden outside the hospital. He told me. The Gates family is caught up in all of it too. But how come there's still no news about their overseas company? Hasn't the Frostfrod team found anything yet?"

"That's not it. Finn hasn't even dealt with the overseas companies since he got back: There might have been a falling out between him and Bagot. don't know the details but I've already asked Sam to keep an eye on it. We should hear something soon."

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Adolphus watched as Laurinda fell quiet, thinking. "Are you planning to make a move?"

"Not for now. Since Aileen can't hold

Since

out any longer, let's just wait and see what happens. Let them fight

among themselves, and we'll be ready to pick up the pieces. No need

to rush. Let's enjoy the New Year. It's

our first one together."

Hearing her say that, Adolphus wished he could just pull her into his arms. He

couldn't wait to get back to Apex.

"Wait for me. I'll be home soon."

"Okay. When you're back, we'll watch the fireworks together."

As soon as Laurinda stepped out of the car at the lab, the news spread instantly. Project leaders scrambled to double-check their data and told everyone to put away anything that didn't belong out in the open.

Irvin left his own lab and immediately noticed the sudden flurry of activity. He stopped one of the project heads he worked with, looking puzzled.

"Aladin, what's going on?"

Aladin looked busy, but still took a second to explain. "Laurinda just got here. You should organize your research notes and data, just in case she wants to review them."

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[643 words]

"You mean Laurinda is here?"

Irvin's eyes lit up. He completely forgot about the experiment data and rushed straight toward the elevators. Something told him Laurinda had come to see him.

Aladin shook his head as he watched Irvin go. He'd never seen anyone get so excited just hearing Laurinda's name. In his mind, Irvin was still too green. He had no idea how intimidating Laurinda could be.

The elevator doors slid open. Laurinda stepped out with the director by her side. The moment Irvin spotted her, he hurried over, his face bright with surprise and hope.

"Laurinda, did you come to see me?"

Laurinda hadn't expected Irvin to be waiting for her, but she didn't interrupt the director's update. She simply waved Irvin over, inviting him to walk with them to the director's office.

Inside, the director placed a stack of files in front of Laurinda. She barely glanced at them and motioned for him to stop.

"Danny, I'm not here for a progress check today. I actually came to see Irvin."

The director hesitated for a second, caught off guard. He'd been so nervous that he'd completely forgotten to ask why Laurinda was visiting. He never thought she was just here to see someone.

"You're not here to inspect the lab?"

"Let's leave all that for after the New Year, alright? You don't want to ruin your holiday with extra stress, do you?"

Danny let out a nervous laugh and quickly scooped up the reports, not giving Laurinda any chance to change her mind.

"Well, if you're here for Irvin, I'll leave you two to it."

"Actually, I do have something else I need your help with. I know the lab has two spots to recommend students for the national competition. If someone wins, they get

a special offer from The Cabinda University, right?"

Danny nodded and glanced at Irvin, then back at Laurinda. "You want Irvin to have that opportunity?"

"That's right. I'm not trying to hand him the offer. I just want you to recommend him for the competition."

Laurinda could easily get Irvin a spot at the university if she wanted, but as the heir to the Main family, she hoped he'd stand out on his own. If you have talent, there's no need to hide it. FindNovel.net

"Of course. Irvin really is talented. The competition starts in mid-March. Do you want to sign up for a training class, Irvin? It might help you get familiar with the questions."

Laurinda looked at Irvin, leaving the decision to him.

"Thank you, Director, I'd appreciate it. I've never entered a competition like this before, so I could use some extra prep."

"Alright. You're from Cabinda, aren't you? I'll put you in the Cabinda training class. It'll start after the New Year."

"Thanks, Danny. We have a few other things to do, so we'll get going."

Laurinda stood and headed out with Irvin beside her. He couldn't stop smiling. It was obvious how happy he was.

When they got back to Irvin's lab, he immediately grabbed a big sack filled with New Year's gifts from his classmates for Laurinda.

"Wow, there's so much. What's all this?"

"They're New Year's gifts from

everyone in our class. I'm not sure what's inside, honestly told them I

might not see you for a while, so they made sure nothing inside would spoil."

Laurinda looked at the large sack but didn't open it. She figured she'd take her time going through it at home.

"I got a gift for you too, Laurinda. It's to thank you for helping Cathleen. I really mean it. Thank you for what you did that day. My mom heard about it and got really emotional. She's always blamed herself for Cathleen's personality. By helping Cathleen you helped her too. Sue said if you ever need anything from her or my dad, they'd help you. No questions asked."

Laurinda understood how much that promise meant. She accepted their kindness

with a nod. "Alright. If that day ever comes, I won't hesitate to ask."

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Chapter 292

[659 words]

"I really don't want you to be so polite. With the friendship we have, I actually hope you'll come to us whenever you need something. That's how we get closer, isn't it?"

Irvin was getting better at this. He understood that relationships grew stronger when people shared and helped each other. Being too formal just pushed people apart.

He reached into a drawer and pulled out a small bottle, handing it to Laurinda.

She took it and noticed right away that this wasn't like the things he'd given her before.

"What's this?"

"It's the latest neural medication I've been working on. It can actually repair damaged nerves. I thought it might be useful for you."

Laurinda stared at him, completely stunned. She knew exactly what it meant to repair damaged nerves. Something this advanced... and Irvin just handed it over without a second thought? Did he really trust her that much?

"You're giving me...?"

"It's a New Year's gift. York mentioned you don't just have a lab, but also a bunch of biological products in development. I figured this could come in handy for you."

Laurinda felt a rush of emotion and couldn't even find the right words. She'd poured so much money into her labs every year, and even then, barely saw a few successful products. But Irvin just gave her one of his most important breakthroughs, just like that. The impact of it nearly overwhelmed her.

Seeing her reaction, Irvin laughed softly. "I'm not as selfless as I look. I heard about you and Adolphus. From now on, I'm sticking close to you two. So, does this still feel like too big of a gift?"

"It does. But Irvin, I'm so glad we're friends. Whatever happens in the future, as long as I'm able, I've got your back."

Laurinda patted his shoulder, and she meant every word. She knew Irvin was just giving her an excuse to accept his gift without guilt. The Main family had a long history. Even if they weren't what they used to be, they didn't really need her to protect them.

They spent a little while longer in the lab, looking over some of his other research.

When Laurinda saw it was getting late, she had security help move the gifts downstairs, then left the lab with Irvin.

In the car, Irvin politely turned down her invitation to dinner. So Laurinda just took him straight to the airport, Hewdriver helped him check in the gifts she'd prepared for the Main family and saw him onto his flight.

When Laurinda got home, a sleek black furball darted over and jumped into her arms. She hugged Coco and headed for the living room.

Josh spotted her and immediately beamed. "Laurinda, I've put together the menu for New Year's Eve dinner. Want to check it out?"

Josh was especially happy this year, knowing the house would be full of guests for the holiday. It was finally going to be lively again.

"You handle it, Josh. I wouldn't know what to choose anyway. Thank you for taking care of all these details."

"Is Fidelia's room ready? And

Balaam and Regan are coming too,

right

Let's put their rooms on the

first floor so they don't have to go up

the stairs."

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"Everything's set. Harrell already went to pick up Fidelia, Balaam, and Regan. They should be back soon."

Laurinda nodded, satisfied. Her home was about to be filled with people and

laughter. It finally felt like a real New Year.

"Laurinda, do you know if Jasper will be home for the holidays?"

"I'm not sure. I'll ask Adolphus in a bit. I don't know if they get time off for the New Year over there."

She would have loved to bring

Jasper home too, but she knew how

strict the Flame Training Base was.

It wasn't the kind of place where you could just leave whenever you wanted. She'd have to check.

Just then, her phone rang. It was Kinsey calling. Laurinda nodded at Josh, answered the call, and walked to the living room.

"Kinsey? What's up? Didn't expect you to call."

"Aileen's here. She said she wants to talk to you..."

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[547 words]

Laurinda hadn't expected Aileen to cave so quickly. She didn't hesitate, just agreed to meet her.

"Kinsey, could you set it up for me? I hope she actually has some useful evidence."

"Of course. I'll let you know as soon as I have everything arranged."

Laurinda ended the call and settled back on the sofa, trying to guess what Aileen might bring to the table. Maybe there'd be something surprising, but she wasn't holding her breath.

Josh walked over with a plate of fruit and placed it on the coffee table. He studied Laurinda for a moment.

"Laurinda, are you feeling alright?"

She looked tired, like she hadn't slept well. Josh couldn't help but worry.

"I'm fine, just a bit sleepy all of a sudden. Did you get the New Year's gifts sorted? Has everything been sent to the nursing home?"

"Yeah, it's all taken care of. The staff said Baily's not doing well. Ever since the Charles family took Aggie and Lawrence away, he barely eats anything. It's like he's given up."

Laurinda nodded, not surprised.

"He was hoping Aggie and Lawrence would get him out, right? I heard he already handed Aggie the password to his stash. Apparently, he keeps mumbling about losing everything."

She let out a soft laugh, almost amused.

Baily was a schemer. He knew after everything that happened, there was nothing left for him to gain from her.

"Are you sure it's because of Aggie and Lawrence? Not because of Aiken's death?"

Laurinda never thought Baily had much heart. She always figured he only cared about himself.

"The nursing home hasn't told him about Aiken yet. They're worried he won't be able to handle it."

"That's for the best. Let him spend another lonely New Year. He can see his son after the holidays."

She leaned into the sofa and closed her eyes for a moment. Images from her years with the Austin family flashed through her mind, not a single one of them warm.

She didn't know how long she'd been lost in thought before voices outside pulled her back. Laurinda recognized the sound of Fidelia, Balaam, and Angelica.

She got up and went to greet them.

"Fidelia. Balaam. Angelica."

"Laurinda, your place is huge!"

Angelica took Laurinda's hand, her eyes wide as she looked around. She'd thought she'd seen it all, but she'd never been in a house this grand.

Laurinda just smiled and led her to the sofa.

"Come sit, Angelica."

Then she went to Fidelia, taking her hand. Fidelia looked overwhelmed, her eyes a little watery coming back here felt unreal, like a dream she'd never expected.

"Fidelia, welcome home."

"I'm really back. I can't believe it."

Fidelia hugged Laurinda, her whole body shaking. She'd never thought she'd set foot in this house again.

"Hey, deep breaths. Don't get too worked up."

Laurinda wrapped an arm around her, speaking softly, not wanting Fidelia's emotions to spiral.

Fidelia listened, calming herself down until she stopped trembling. Laurinda led her to sit on the sofa.

Balaam watched Laurinda closely, frowning at how tired she looked. It had only been a few days, but she already seemed exhausted.

"Laurinda, come sit over here. Let

me check your pulse. Adolphus isn't around and suddenly you stop taking care of yourself? Those dark circles are no joke."

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Laurinda touched under her eyes, little embarrassed. She thought she'd been sleeping fine, but she didn't argue. She just sat quietly next to Balaam, letting him fuss over her.

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Chapter 294

[631 words]

Balaam set his fingers gently on Laurinda's wrist, checking her pulse. His face turned more serious with every moment. When he finally let go, his eyes stayed just as stern.

Josh hovered nearby, looking anxious. He clearly thought something was wrong with Laurinda's health.

"Have you been taking the pills Adolphus made for you? On time?" Balaam asked.

"Of course I have. You know how he is, right? He counts every single pill. If I ever skip one, he gets upset," Laurinda replied.

Balaam nodded, satisfied. That definitely sounded like Adolphus.

"If you're taking your medicine, why are you still so worked up? Have you been stressing out again? Is it messing with your sleep? I've told you so many times, you're

still young. You don't need to push yourself so hard. Your health should always come first."

Laurinda couldn't deny it. She lost her confidence for a second because, honestly, she hadn't been sleeping well. Organizing everything for Stonehaven had left her exhausted these last few days.

"I remember what you said, and I really am trying. I feel fine, really. Anyway, it's getting late. Why don't I show you to your rooms? Josh has already got everything set up," she said, eager to change the subject.

She didn't want another lecture from Balaam, and she was even more worried he'd tell Adolphus she wasn't taking care of herself. If Adolphus found out, he'd never let her hear the end of it.

Balaam could see she was dodging, but he didn't push any further. Young people staying up too late was nothing new. Maybe he'd just make her some tonic soup later and let it go.

Josh led the group to their rooms and then out back to the greenhouse, where they could pick some fresh fruit and veggies.

Laurinda slipped away to her study, waiting for Kinsey to set up a video call.

A few minutes later, Kinsey messaged her. Laurinda accepted the call, and Aileen's face appeared on the screen. She looked completely different now—drawn, tired, nothing like the glamorous woman she used to be.

Aileen's eyes flashed with hatred as soon as she saw Laurinda. Even though she needed Laurinda's help to save her kids, she still couldn't bring herself to beg. She'd never forget that Laurinda was the one who'd landed her in this mess.

Laurinda didn't care about the dirty look. She knew things between them had gone way beyond forgiveness. They were enemies now, and Aileen was only reaching out because she had no other choice. It was clear she'd never really give in.

"Laurinda, I have a list. It won't help my case, but it could help you. You've always wanted to know who was behind me, right? If you help me protect Aggie and Lawrence, I'll give you a name."

Laurinda studied Aileen's face. Even now, she still held onto some pride. Laurinda wasn't surprised. Aileen was from the Gates family, after she'd nev

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she never let herself be totally powerless. There had to be some leverage hidden away.

"What happened? Did your people abandon you, or did you just give up?" Laurinda asked, raising an eyebrow.

Aileen hadn't expected her to be so calm. She thought Laurinda would jump at the chance to get that list. Laurinda's cool reaction made her nervous-would she help at all?

"I can tell you anything else you want to know," Aileen said, her voice tight.

She was desperate. She'd already

tried to see Finn when she was at

Apex, but he'd refused, too worried

about getting dragged down with her. She knew then that Finn and the Charles family were inseparable. He'd never risk everything for her children.

"Laurinda, you know I'm not going to beg, but I can still give you what you want."

Laurinda watched her for a moment, her eyes narrowing. She kept her tone even and quiet. "Tell me what you know about my parents' car accident."

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[706 words]

Aileen furrowed her brows, not understanding why Laurinda would bring up the car accident now.

"I really had no idea about what happened to your parents. Aiken mentioned that the accident happened because the brake lines were cut, but I swear I don't know who did it."

Laurinda watched Aileen closely, searching her face for any sign of a lie. In the end, she believed her. There was nothing else she needed to ask.

"You want me to look after Aggie and Lawrence, but we need some boundaries here. I can't spend the rest of my life protecting them, you know? I get that you wouldn't trust me if you had any other option. But I'm not stupid, either. I can't just trust you for no reason."

Aileen was caught off guard. She'd thought her offer was strong enough to make Laurinda agree, but now it seemed Laurinda wasn't all that eager to get involved.

She started to panic a little. "Laurinda, I know you keep your promises. I can give you what you want first. You just need to help Aggie and Lawrence leave the country and give them some money to get started. My aunt can handle the Charles family and make sure they don't go after the kids."

After she finished speaking, Aileen turned to a nearby police officer and asked for a pen and some paper. She quickly scribbled down a sequence of numbers.

"This is the password for a safety deposit box at Northland International Bank. I trust you'll be able to get it. Please, just help them get away. Will you do it?"

Laurinda stared at the password on the screen, hesitating for just a second before she nodded.

"Alright. Once I get the item, I'll arrange for them to leave the Charles family as soon as possible, sort out their paperwork, and get them out of the country."

For the first time, Aileen felt truly grateful to Laurinda. She had nowhere else to turn. Even if she resented Laurinda, right now, Laurinda was the only person she could rely on.

After the call ended, Laurinda got in touch with her contacts in Northland right away. In less than half an hour, she had the USB drive from the safety deposit box in her hands.

Worried about data leaks and possible viruses, Laurinda told her people not to open it. Instead, she had them mail it directly to the police station in Cabinda, where Aileen was being held.

The person on the phone sounded a little confused. Why just send something so important away like that?

"Laurinda, aren't you worried someone else will see what's inside?"

Laurinda leaned back in her chair, her posture relaxed as she raised an eyebrow, not looking concerned at all.

"What's there to worry about? Aileen

already said it's a list. I'm guessing

it's a list of peop

from Stonehaven

involved in her busmess. Isn't it

normal to hand that over to the
police?"

Laurinda definitely wanted the list, but that didn't mean she had to keep it all to herself. Besides, the whole video call with Aileen had been under police surveillance. Even if she wanted to hide it, there was no way. And with Kinsey in the mix, she needed to help him move up, not slow him down.

After hanging up, Laurinda sent Kinsey a video showing the safe deposit box being opened.

Kinsey finally relaxed when he got her message. He'd been genuinely worried Laurinda would try to keep the evidence for herself, and then he wouldn't be able to help clear her name.

Once I get the package, I'll have our team decrypt it. When the review is finished, I'll send you whatever's inside.

Laurinda read Kinsey's message, a faint smile playing on her lips. In her mind, she joked, Sly old fox.

"Laurinda, dinner's ready!"

Josh knocked gently on the study door, reminding her it was time to eat.

Laurinda answered, picked up her phone, and left the study. She walked downstairs and into the dining room. As soon as she sat down, Angelica set a bowl of chicken soup in front of her.

"This is just for you. It's supposed to help with stress. Try it and see if you like it."

Laurinda leaned in and sniffed the soup. There was no weird smell. She took a sip, and to her surprise, it actually tasted pretty good.

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[618 words]

"This is really good."

"If you like it, have another bowl. The soup's pretty mild, so it won't upset your stomach."

Angelica watched Laurinda eat, her face soft with affection.

"Alright, but you all should eat too. Don't just watch me, it's kind of awkward."

Laurinda glanced around the table, finally noticing Sam sitting there. She nodded at him.

"You're not heading home for the holidays yet?"

"I'm going back tomorrow. There's still a bit I need to wrap up with the FarrVector partnership. I want to finish everything before New Year's, so I can spend time with family without worrying."

The Bill family had old roots in Cabinda, with lots of relatives and business connections. The New Year was always their busiest time.

Laurinda took another sip of soup, smiling as she nodded in understanding.

"If I'd known you were still in Apex, I would've had you take Raines's New Year gift home. I only just had someone send it out this morning."

Sam looked a little embarrassed when he realized Laurinda had gotten a gift for his grandfather. He'd only dropped by to join dinner and brought supplements for Bonnie.

"You're too thoughtful. I'll thank you for my grandpa."

Laurinda waved him off with a smile. "You have no idea how much stuff Raines sent me for the holidays. He kept saying it's my first New Year on my own, so I shouldn't miss out. He even bought me a red down jacket, said it would bring good luck."

Just thinking about Raines sending over all those gifts made Laurinda feel warm inside. He really did treat her like family.

Sam smiled with her. After the last birthday party, his grandpa had even wanted to make Laurinda his goddaughter.

The rest of the family wasn't for it. They thought the age gap was too big. Laurinda was even younger than his youngest grandchild, so it just didn't seem right.

So the old man had to let it go, but anyone could see he still doted on Laurinda like she was his own daughter.

After dinner, Angelica and Fidelia got a four-person mahjong game going. Harrell carried Bonnie off to bed, leaving Sam and Laurinda alone in the living room.

"Did you hear about the Charles family investigation? Bagot's already been arrested. I don't think the Gates family is going to get away either."

"I've heard a bit. Aileen called me this afternoon, She gave me a list that's useful for me and said she take care of the Charles family herself."

Sam looked surprised. He'd heard about all the drama between Laurinda and Aileen.

"She must want something from you, huh?"

"Yeah. She asked me to get Aggie and Lawrence out and send them overseas." "You agreed?"

Sam was even more stunned. After all the trouble Aggie had caused by smearing Laurinda, he couldn't believe Laurinda would still be willing to help.

"I said yes but only if I got the list first. Aileen didn't even hesitate. She gave me the storage Jocker Pasght away. I guess she's really desperate."

"The stuff's already been picked up. I had someone send it to the police, so I probably won't get the list myself for a while."

Sam was completely confused. It seemed like Laurinda had promised to help but she hadn't actually done anything yet. He couldn't figure out whether she really planned to help or not

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Laurinda just smiled at his puzzled face and didn't say anything, letting him work it out on his own.

By the time Sam finally pieced it all together, he looked over at Laurinda, eyes bright with realization, but she was already gone.

Harrell walked over with a cup of tea and looked at Sam in confusion. "Lost in thought?"

"Just trying to figure something out. Harrell, you studied psychology. What kind of person do you think Laurinda is?"

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Chapter 297

[647 words]

Harrell stared at Sam like he'd grown a second head. Did Sam even know who Laurinda was? Laurinda was everything to Adolphus, the person he cared about most, his precious one. Who was Sam to judge her?

"I studied psychology, not fortune telling. How would I know what kind of person she is? Bonnie says she's good, so she must be good," Sam replied, rolling his eyes. He really wasn't in the mood to deal with someone who couldn't think straight because of love.

Harrell didn't care about his attitude. When he saw Sam getting ready to leave, he tugged on his sleeve, lowering his voice. "Hang on, let me show you something on social media."

Sam caught the hint of mischief in Harrell's eyes and sat back down, taking the phone from him. His eyes widened as he scrolled through the post.

"Wait, what? Cathleen and Earl are together?!"

Laurinda, sitting in Bonnie's room, heard Sam's outburst loud and clear. She couldn't help but laugh. She'd just seen the post herself. Someone was definitely going to have their heart broken tonight, and she found it way too funny.

Bonnie glanced at Laurinda, puzzled. Just a moment ago, Laurinda looked so irritated. How had she cheered up so fast?

"What's got you grinning like that? Come on, let me in on the joke."

Laurinda quickly explained the whole messy situation between Sam, Cathleen, and Earl.

Bonnie listened quietly, not saying a word. Laurinda watched her for a moment.

"See? No one's going to wait around forever. If you really care about him, don't let go. Be brave enough to fight for your own happiness, no matter what."

Bonnie took a deep breath, her face suddenly serious. "Alright. For my happiness, I'm willing to take the risk."

She meant every word. In that moment, all her doubts and worries disappeared. Missing out felt scarier than anything else.

Somewhere in a forgotten corner of Harrisburg, Fabian hunched over a piece of stale, dark bread, devouring it like he had eaten in days. He couldn't remember how long he'd been stuck here anymore, but tonight was the first night he actually felt full.

When he first arrived, he'd held onto hope. Maybe he'd get out. But as the days dragged by and he endured things no one should ever have to, reality hit him hard— he might never leave this place alive.

He had regrets. Every time he was about to break, he cursed himself for ever crossing Laurinda and Bonnie. But then he'd remember how Bonnie had ruined him, and the only thing he regretted was not running her over properly when he'd had the chance. If she was gone, at least he wouldn't be suffering alone.

At that moment, a man with a limp passed by, eyeing Fabian and the dirty bag at his feet. His expression was hard to read.

"You new here?"

Fabian flinched at the sound, tense all over. He nodded, then quickly shook his head, not daring to admit he was new. If people found out, he was sure they'd make him suffer more.

The man watched Fabian's nervous reaction and seemed to get what he was thinking. His voice was cold and calm. "Doesn't matter if you pretend you've been here forever. Everyone's the same in this place. There's no new or old."

He looked Fabian up and down, noticing the bruises and the pale skin peeking out from under the grime.

"Who'd you piss off, kid? You don't look like someone who should end up here."

Fabian glanced up at the man's scarred face, then at the two people standing behind him. A plan started to form in his mind.

"I got set up by a woman. Our families were supposed to get married, but she fell for someone else. She made me break off the engagement, and when I refused, she framed me. She drugged me, forced me into something with another guy, and then took a bunch of photos to ruin me."

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Chapter 298

[622 words]

"I wanted to take her down with me, but she used her family's money to get rid of me and sent me here."

As Fabian spoke, tears slid down his cheeks. He looked so pitiful that it tugged at anyone's heart.

The man bent over, studying Fabian's face. With those features, he definitely had the potential to be a kept man. He reached out and helped Fabian to his feet, only then noticing the injury to Fabian's leg.

"Your leg..."

"She broke it. That cruel woman was scared I'd find a way back, so she broke my leg. She wanted to make sure I had no future."

Fabian brushed the man's hand away and dropped back down to the ground, looking completely defeated.

"My leg won't heal. I can't survive in this place. Just let me rot here, it's fine."

The man looked at Fabian and couldn't help but see himself when he'd first arrived. He felt a sharp pang of empathy. Turning to the people behind him, he said, "Carry him to the infirmary. Maybe there's still a chance to help him."

Two men stepped forward, one on each side, lifting Fabian and carrying him toward the infirmary.

The man followed, limping slightly, his expression hard to read.

At the infirmary, hope was already fading. Fabian's leg was in bad shape. The doctor examined him, but the injury was old. The best window for healing had already passed.

The man leaned in and spoke in a low voice, "Can you tell how his leg got broken?"

The doctor glanced at Fabian, frowning. "Looks like someone broke it on purpose. The bone's completely snapped. Whoever did it was ruthless."

The man nodded, believing Fabian's story. He said to the doctor, "Do whatever you can for him. I'll pay for everything. Even if you can't make it perfect, at least help him walk again."

The doctor hesitated, his eyes flicking to Fabian. After a moment, he nodded. "I'll do my best."

The man made sure Fabian was set up for treatment, then limped away.

Fabian's situation brought back memories of the day the man

himself had been sent here. If he ever got the chance to leave, he was

sure of one thing

He'd take Fabian

with him. They'd get revenge together.

Laurinda woke up to the sound of someone calling her name. She sat up suddenly,

her room empty and silent. Sweat clung to her back. Another nightmare.

She stared at the ceiling for a while, trying to calm her pounding heart. After a few minutes, she slid out of bed and went to the bathroom for a hot shower. The ache inside her finally started to ease.

Going back to sleep wasn't an option. She sat down at her computer instead, catching up on work. Suddenly, a tiny red light flashed in the corner of her screen. She clicked it and answered the call.

"Why are you still awake?" The voice in her headphones was masked and distorted.

"I woke up and couldn't get back to sleep. What about you? Still awake too? Do we have a time difference now?"

"Yeah, we're a few hours apart. How've you been? I haven't seen you online this late in a while."

He chuckled softly, the sound oddly eerie in the quiet night. But Laurinda wasn't scared. He'd spent so many sleepless nights talking to her, she was used to it.

"My sleep's been better lately. The few nights I stayed up, you weren't around. The messages I left were all unread."

"I got busy for a while. Just got some free time recently. Are you on winter break?"

"Yep. New Year's coming up, so I'm off. Want to play a game? It's been ages since we played together."

"Not tonight. The internet's spotty where I am. You should try to get some rest. Don't push yourself too hard just because you're young."

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Chapter 299

[697 words]

Laurinda tried not to laugh as the voice changer on the other end of the call nagged at her, sounding just like a fussy mom.

He was always like this, fussing over her, keeping her company late into the night.

There were so many times she'd wanted to meet him in person, but every time she brought it up, he'd turn her down. After a while, she just stopped asking.

"Okay, okay, you're giving me a headache with all this nagging. I'll play a little longer, then go to bed. You go do your thing. I'm hanging up."

She wished him goodnight, ended the call, and logged out. Then she got back to what she'd been working on before. By the time she finished, the sky outside was starting to lighten. She was finally feeling sleepy, so she curled up on her bed, hugged Adolphus's pillow, and drifted off almost immediately.

The next time she opened her eyes, she realized someone was lying beside her.

A man in silk pajamas. The top few buttons were undone, showing off his smooth chest and those ridiculously tempting collarbones. Laurinda couldn't help swallowing, her mind wandering for a split second before she forced herself to look up at his face instead.

His eyelashes trembled a little, long and dark like little fans. The hand he'd draped over her waist pulled her closer, tucking her right up against him.

Her cheek pressed to his chest, she could feel his warmth and the steady, powerful beat of his heart. This wasn't a dream. Adolphus was really here.

"When did you get back?" she asked, her voice still a little sleepy.

"About two hours ago." Adolphus opened his eyes and looked down at her, his gaze falling to the dark smudges beneath hers.

"You haven't been sleeping well?"

"I can't sleep when you're gone," Laurinda admitted, not bothering to hide it. She wrapped her arms around his waist. For some reason, just having him here made her feel safe all over again.

It was kind of embarrassing, actually. It hadn't even been that long, and she was already used to having him around. Now she didn't know what to do without him.

Seeing her so honest, Adolphus couldn't bring himself to scold her for not taking care of herself. He took her hand and gently checked her pulse, only relaxing when he was sure she was fine, just a little short on sleep.

"What time did you go to bed last night?" he asked.

"A bit after eleven. I woke up from a dream around two and couldn't fall back asleep.

I think I finally dozed off again after six."

Adolphus checked his phone. It was already one in the afternoon. He sat up, bringing Laurinda with him.

"Come on, let's get something to eat. You can nap again later."

Laurinda didn't argue. She really was hungry. She let Adolphus lead her to the bathroom so she could wash up. After they'd both gotten dressed, they headed downstairs.

On the first floor, Fidelia and Angelica were busy sorting through strawberries and cherries they'd picked from the orchard. Laurinda walked over with a smile.

"Fidelia, Angelica, what are you two up to?"

Fidelia looked up, her whole face lighting up as she smiled at Laurinda. She pointed to the bowl of strawberries.

"Angelica's making strawberry preserves. She can't bear to let any of the orchard fruit go to waste."

Adolphus came up behind Laurinda

and slipped his arms around her

waist, saying quietly, "Let's get you some food first. When you're finished, I'll show you the gif brought for you.

"Yeah, go eat. Your meal schedule is all over the place. Did you stay up late again last night?" Fidelia chimed in, giving Laurinda a concerned look. She could tell taurinda was in pretty good spirits today, so she held back the rest of her usual lecture. She knew young people hated being nagged.

Adolphus led Laurinda to the dining

room. Josh brought over a steaming

bowl of herbal soup that Angelica had made especially for her.

Adolphus served her a bowl of

chicken soup first.

Laurinda took a sip and her eyes practically sparkled. The broth tasted so light and sweet.

"What is it? You really like Regan's chicken soup?" Adolphus asked, noticing the way her eyes shone.

"Mmm, I love it. It tastes so fresh."

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"If you like it, have some more. There's water chestnut in there."

Adolphus had been cooking for Laurinda long enough to learn exactly what she liked. Watching her dig in with so much enthusiasm made him feel oddly proud.

"With you all spoiling me like this, I honestly think I'm getting chubby."

Laurinda laughed as she pinched her cheeks. She had definitely put on a little weight since meeting Adolphus, and her face showed it the most.

"A little weight is good for you. You were way too skinny before. You're five-seven and not even a hundred pounds. You need some real food."

Adolphus couldn't help but smile at her playful gesture. He scooped another bowl of soup for her, still thinking she could use a bit more meat on her bones.

After they finished eating, Balaam handed Adolphus some red paper to write New Year's couplets. Laurinda didn't rush to open her presents. Instead, she stayed close, watching him dip the brush and write each character with a steady hand.

"I never knew you were good at this. Seriously, Adolphus, you can do calligraphy?" Adolphus looked up, meeting her teasing eyes, and grinned. "Want to try?"

"I'm nowhere near your level. I can copy stuff in a workbook, but with a brush? No way."

Laurinda waved him off. After seeing his beautiful writing, there was no way she'd embarrass herself by trying.

"You can copy letters? Maybe next time we need to write invitations, I'll put you in charge."

His voice was a little too suggestive, and Laurinda couldn't help thinking about wedding invitations. Her cheeks turned pink before she could stop herself.

Adolphus caught her blushing and leaned in, his voice low by her ear. "What are you thinking about?"

Laurinda's thoughts were exposed and her face got even hotter. She shoved him away, mumbling, "Ugh, you're so annoying. I'm going to check on the strawberry preserves Julius is making."

She hurried off before Adolphus could say anything else. Harrell strolled over, smirking.

"You two are so sweet it's honestly painful."

Adolphus shot him a sideways look, his earlier grin fading. He arched an eyebrow.

"What, jealous? Didn't you already make it inside the house?"

Harrell gave a wry smile. Things gotten intimate between him

Bonnie but lately he d

couldn't even

steal a kiss. He honestly didnt know what was up with her.

When Harrell didn't answer, Adolphus didn't push. He just switched topics.

"Not going home for the New Year?"

"What for? My dad's got a new wife, a son, daughter. I'd only mess up their happy family vibe I'm good here Bonnie's here too. Even if she doesn't like me, she still needs me, and that's enough."

Thinking about his family still made Harrell's chest feel heavy. If he could help it, he'd never set foot in that house again.

Adolphus put down the brush and patted Harrell's shoulder gently. For once, he actually sounded sincere.

"You'll have your own family soon. Everything you ever wanted, you'll get it, just maybe not in the way you expected."

Harrell stared at him, half convinced he was hallucinating. Since when did Adolphus say things like that?

"Dude, are you trying to jinx me or something?"

"Are you nuts?"

Adolphus rolled his eyes. He tried to be nice for once, and Harrell didn't even believe him. No wonder he was still struggling with Bonnie.

Laurinda was stretched out on the couch, completely focused on her video game: Adolphus washed his hands and sat down next to her watching as she picked off enemies from the rooftop, two snipers at a time, right up until she scored the win. S FindNovel.net

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