

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

c 301

[ 610 words ]

"That's impressive!"

"I'm even better in person, you know."

Laurinda leaned into Adolphus, her voice teasing, but Adolphus could tell she meant it. He slid his arms around her, pulling her closer.

"Let's keep you out of danger from now on," he said quietly. "If anything risky comes up, let me handle it."

Laurinda looked up at him, catching the seriousness in his eyes. She let out a soft laugh. "So I can trust you to have my back?"

"Not just your back. You can trust me with everything."

Adolphus had just come back from Frostfrod, where he'd struck two big deals with an arms dealer. He was more prepared than ever. Whatever Laurinda needed, he would make sure she felt safe and protected.

"If you keep talking like this, I won't be able to stop myself from relying on you," Laurinda said with a smile.

Adolphus really was the perfect partner. He was always there for her, giving her that sense of security she never knew she craved. She knew her problems were hers to fix, but somehow, when Adolphus spoke, everything felt a little lighter.

She tossed her phone aside and hugged him, resting her head in the curve of his neck. Her voice was muffled but warm. "You're so good to me. I don't even know what I'd do without you."

"You'll never have to find out," Adolphus replied. "You promised you'd look after me. You're not allowed to leave me behind."

The sadness in her chest dissolved at his words, replaced by laughter. She grinned up at him.

"That's right. I keep my promises. You're mine, for life."

"And I'm holding you to that. No take-backs. Come on, I want to show you what I brought back for you. Once you accept my deposit, I'm yours forever."

Adolphus swept her into his arms and carried her upstairs. The others in the house pretended not to notice. By now, they were used to the two of them being inseparable.

In their bedroom, Adolphus stepped into the closet and came back with a box. He set it down in front of Laurinda, his face full of anticipation.

"Go on, open it. Tell me what you think."

Laurinda could already tell this wasn't just any gift. She opened the box and stared, stunned, at three massive diamonds, each one nearly the size of her fist.

Her eyes went wide as she picked up a deep purple diamond, turning it over in her palm.

Diamonds like this were rare enough on their own, but three of different colors? Practically unheard of.

"Isn't this a little much for a deposit?" she asked, unable to hide her amazement. "Not at all. I think I'm worth it. So take them and keep them safe."

Laurinda couldn't stop staring. She nodded, still a little dazed. "You're right. They're worth it. You're worth it. I'll take good care of them."

Adolphus saw the way she was lost in the diamonds and felt a little jealous. He'd brought these back to make her happy, not so she'd forget about him.

He wouldn't have been surprised if she tried to sleep with the diamonds tonight instead of him.

Bending down, Adolphus gently took

her chin and kissed her, his voice

low and a little sulky. "Hey,

remember, I'm supposed to be the main attraction here. Not those rocks."

Laurinda caught the hint of jealousy and dropped the diamond, looping her arms around his neck. Her fingers traced his ear as she leaned in, brushing her lips against his. "Well, since I've accepted your deposit, I guess I should offer myself in return... what do you think?"

Her words sent Adolphus's mind spinning. He barely had time to react before she kissed him again, deeper this time.

Their breaths tangled, clothes slipping away, lost in each other...

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## Chapter 302

[ 610 words ]

Suddenly, Adolphus climbed off Laurinda and grabbed the blanket from the side, wrapping her up without saying a word. He marched straight to the bathroom, not even looking back, his movements quick and decisive.

Laurinda watched him retreat, stunned for a second. Then she just started laughing. That man... they'd gotten this far and he could still stop himself on a dime.

When Adolphus came back from the bathroom, Laurinda was still sitting on the bed, laughing like she didn't have a care in the world.

He walked right up to her and planted a firm kiss on her lips.

"You're going to be the end of me," he grumbled.

Laurinda stopped laughing and shot him a teasing look, her eyebrow quirked in a challenge.

"Don't worry. Even if you break, I'll still want you."

Adolphus just stared at her, not even trying to hide how much she got to him. He pulled her into his arms, took a long breath, and after a while, whispered, "Just wait until you're older. You're really in trouble then."

"We'll see when I'm older," Laurinda shot back, grinning even wider. She couldn't help feeling smug. Now she was sure-Adolphus really did care about her. This wasn't just a physical thing.

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On New Year's Eve morning, Laurinda woke up early. She teamed up with Fidelia Angelica to direct the staff, filling the whole manor with festive decorations.

Adolphus, Harrell, and Josh had just finished putting up banners. When they came back, they found Laurinda telling the staff where to hang lanterns.

Adolphus walked over, wrapped her up in his coat, and took her hands, making sure they were warm before he relaxed.

"It's freezing out here. Don't stand around too long."

"Okay, I'm coming in soon."

Laurinda turned in his arms and looked at what he was wearing. It hit her—there was something strangely familiar about it. That's when she realized what was off about Harden. He was copying Adolphus.

A wave of disgust washed over her. Before, she hadn't figured out what Harden was after. Now it was obvious. He was targeting her.

Harden had started dressing like Adolphus, even trying to mimic his smile. It was honestly creepy.

Adolphus noticed her expression and bent down to look her in the eye, his voice gentle.

"What's wrong? What are you thinking about?"

Laurinda didn't hide anything. She told him about Harden's imitation. Adolphus just laughed.

"No matter how much he tries, he's just a cheap copy. Ignore him. Soon enough, he and The Gates Group will be history."

"The Gates Group is in trouble?" Laurinda's eyes brightened. Was there finally some news?

Baal was taking forever. She'd done so much already, but there hadn't been much progress from his side. If he didn't act soon, she was going to handle it herself.

Adolphus took her hand and started leading her back to the villa, talking as they walked.

"His overseas, company already filed

for bankruptcy. The company here looks fine on the surface, but it's a mess underneath. Both The Gates Group and The Charles Group have been hit by Aileen The latest news

is that Aileen's been exposed for giving investment money to The Charles Group, and all her cash is dirty. The Charles Group is done for this time."

"As for the Gates family, Aileen might deny investing in The Gates Group, but that won't hold up under investigation. Finn is already getting ready to transfer his tech company to try and recover some of his losses."

"He's selling his tech company?"

Laurinda was shocked. Finn had built that company from scratch before he ever got involved with The Gates Group. It was his pride and joy—he'd devoted everything to it.

Now he was actually going to let it go? Laurinda had a feeling there was something bigger going on.

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## Chapter 303

[ 610 words ]

"Yes, the news is out. He's not just selling his tech company, but also a few unfinished projects and the whole technical team, all bundled together."

Laurinda just laughed. Finn's tech team never impressed her. Honestly, she thought some fresh college grads had more talent than those guys.

"I doubt anyone's going to buy his company."

"Exactly. Ever since FarrVector took off, everyone can see the difference between them and The Gates Group. People finally get that The Gates Group is all about appearances, with nothing real behind it. Who'd want to buy something so useless?"

"And those projects he's trying to offload... even a stray dog would walk away. Only a real fool would go for them."

Laurinda could tell from his tone that someone had already fallen for it. She looked at him, surprised.

"Wait... are you telling me Baal is interested?"

Adolphus grinned, snapping his fingers. "Right on. Baal's thinking about buying it, but Finn doesn't want to sell to him. They're at a standoff."

Hearing this, Laurinda lost her cool. She suddenly regretted ever agreeing to work with Baal.

"No way. I have to call him. We're still working on a project together, and if he wants to go down with this, he's not taking me with him."

She hurried into the villa, heading straight for the study.

When Baal picked up Laurinda's call, he sounded surprised. Once he heard why she was calling, he went quiet. He hadn't expected her to find out so quickly.

"Laurinda, let me explain. The real founder of The Gates Group wasn't Finn, it was Abbott. Abbott was my friend, and now that I'm finally able to, I want to take over the company for him."

"He and I searched for a way out together, but he never made it back. He didn't leave much behind. This company is the only thing of his I can keep."

Laurinda just couldn't see things his way. She shot down his plan immediately.

"I can't agree to this. It doesn't matter who started The Gates Group. It's not that tiny company anymore. You can't give Finn a second chance and you can't get involved with The Gates Group at all

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"I've said all I can. If you still insist on buying it, then our partnership stops here. I

hope you remember why you started this in the first place."

Laurinda felt annoyed. She used to think Baal was someone who saw the bigger picture, but now.

seemed like he was still stuck in the past, still haunted by what happened on that cruise ship.

Working with someone like that felt way too risky.

Just then, Adolphus opened the door and walked in, holding a bowl of warm pear and white fungus soup.

"What's wrong? Didn't go well?"

Laurinda took the bowl, took a sip, and set it on her desk.

"It's not just that it didn't go well. There was nothing to talk about. He told me The Gates Group was Abbott's, and he wants to buy it for Abbott's sake."

"It's ridiculous. Abbott is gone, and the company is nothing like it used to be, but Baal can't let go of who founded it."

"It's the same as how he acts towards me. He thinks because my mom saved him, and I'm her daughter, he's responsible for me now."

"I only realized today that he's still living in the shadow of that cruise ship disaster from twenty years ago. I honestly don't know working with him was ever the right call. I'm really starting to think he's forgotten what he set out to do."

She had chosen to work with him because she believed in his hatred for Finn and his drive to bring down The Gates Group.

Now, his actions and his thinking just didn't make sense to her anymore.

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## Chapter 304

[ 718 words ]

Adolphus sat down across from Laurinda and took her hand, his fingers pressing gently into her palm, working over those pressure points like he'd done a hundred times before. The simple touch helped her find her balance again, her breathing slowing until it felt steady.

He waited a beat, then finally spoke.

"Everyone has memories they can't let go of. He's just stuck on his own issues. It really has nothing to do with you, so there's no point letting it get to you."

He gave her hand another comforting squeeze.

"Look at the Austin family. You and your parents already did so much for them. If they couldn't hold onto what you left behind, that's on them. It's not your fault."

"And Baal? That's just business. You're partners, nothing more. If he makes decisions you don't like, don't let it bother you. If you can work together, great. If not, just move on. With the projects you have, you'll always find someone else who wants in. And if nobody's good enough, then we'll just develop it ourselves."

He let out a soft sigh, his voice dropping lower.

"As for the Gates family, their fall is just a matter of time. Don't forget, they're still tied up with Frostfrod. The second Frostfrod pulls their investment, the Gates Group won't last through the day."

The way Adolphus spoke was so gentle, so sure, that Laurinda could feel the tension draining out of her shoulders. He cared about her, and he didn't want anything or anyone to weigh her down with useless worries.

By the time he finished, the restlessness inside her had already faded. She got up, circled the table, and eased herself onto his lap, wrapping her arms around him and resting her head against his chest.

"Every time I take a step forward, there's just more trouble waiting for me. I'm so tired, Adolphus."

He held her tighter, his arms warm and strong around her.

"You've got me. Anything you don't want to deal with, just let me handle it."

She smiled, her face brightening just a little.

"Seriously, why are you so good to me? Oh, wait, that reminds me. Guess what? Earl and Cathleen are together now. They even went public about it on social media."

Her sudden change of subject caught Adolphus off guard. He frowned, trying to keep up, then just laughed helplessly.

"Wait, is this all part of the same story?"

Laurinda shook her head.

"Nope. I'm done talking about all that stressful stuff. Let's gossip for an

one

second. You're Earl's uncle, right?

How does

w does it feel hearing this news?"

She nudged him, clearly wanting him to join in the gossip. Honestly, she was dying to know how Earl and Cathleen ended up together.

"Where did you see that?" he asked.

"On Earl's feed. Didn't you see it?"

Laurinda looked at him, genuinely confused. How could he have missed something like that?

Adolphus pulled out his phone and opened up Earl's page. All he saw was a blank bar where the post should have been.

Laurinda noticed, so she grabbed her own phone, pulled up Earl's profile, and sure enough, the announcement was there, pinned right at the top.

She grinned at Adolphus, shifting her phone so he could see.

"He blocked you from seeing it."

Adolphus just gave a little snort. Blocked? Seriously? Did Earl really think that would bother him?

Without another word, he slid his fingers between Laurinda's, their hands twining together. Resting them on her lap, he snapped a quick picture and posted it to his own feed with a caption: "A sky full of stars could never compare to sharing everyday moments with you. Here's to always having you by my side."

Laurinda watched him, shaking her head with a soft laugh. She opened her own social media and quietly gave his post a like.

Honestly, this man was the biggest hypocrite. He called other people childish, but when it came down to it, he loved doing the same things.

The post blew up almost instantly. Screenshots started popping up everywhere, people sharing it in all their group chats.

Everyone at Raines's birthday party had already guessed Adolphus was seeing someone but since there'd never been any official

announcement, most assumed it was just a fling.

Now, this sudden post made everything clear. Anyone who really knew Adolphus understood what this meant.

All across Cabinda, girls who used to dream about him felt their hearts drop the second they saw that post.

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## Chapter 305

[ 695 words ]

As soon as Adolphus made the post, his inbox flooded with messages. Everyone who saw it was quick to send their congratulations and best wishes.

Sam just happened to be back in the city for a get-together. The moment he showed up, people started asking him about Laurinda. They were all curious, trying to figure out who she was, already planning how to impress the couple the next time they met.

But Sam wasn't in the mood for any of it. Earl and Cathleen had just gone public with their news, and it left him feeling pretty low. When people approached him to ask about Laurinda, he didn't bother hiding his irritation. Seeing this, a few people started speculating, convinced there was more drama going on than met the eye.

It didn't take long for rumors to spread in group chats where Adolphus wasn't present. Suddenly, the story was that Laurinda was seeing two people at once and Sam was left with a broken heart.

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Seraphina sat in her studio, scrolling through Adolphus's post with a gentle, proud smile. She'd told him before that he should make things official. It had always bothered her, thinking Laurinda might feel like a secret. For the longest time, she thought it was Laurinda who wanted to keep quiet—but now, seeing the announcement, she finally relaxed.

With everything out in the open, she wouldn't have to worry about nosy relatives when the New Year rolled around. She could finally tell them, with confidence, that Adolphus had a girlfriend and didn't need their matchmaking advice.

Her assistant appeared in the doorway, carrying a boxed lunch. "Seraphina, Aroma sent over your lunch."

Seraphina stood up quickly, peering hopefully past her assistant. "Where's Kendrick? Did he deliver it?"

"Not today. They sent someone else this time, just a regular delivery."

Seraphina's excitement faded. She stood there, hesitating for a moment, then grabbed her bag and headed out of the office.

Her assistant watched her leave, glanced down at the lunch in her hand, and wondered if the boss was still planning to eat.

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Laurinda hung out with Adolphus in the study for a while, enjoying the quiet, before heading downstairs. She spotted York and Jack in the living room and smiled. She hadn't expected Jack to come along too.

"Jack," she called out, her voice bright.

Jack looked her over, clearly pleased to see her so lively and upbeat. "How have you been feeling lately?"

"I'm great," Laurinda replied. "Did you bring the rest of the guys? I had the butler get both villas ready, so there's plenty of space for everyone at the manor."

"They're all here," Jack said, grinning. "No way they'd miss your New Year's Eve dinner. We should be the ones thanking you for having us."

He laughed, and Laurinda felt the warmth in his words. This was the first time they'd get to spend the holiday together. Back when Laurinda was still with the Austin family, it had been tough just to see her, let alone share a holiday.

"Jack, you're teasing again," Laurinda said, shaking her head with a smile. "We're going to have a lot more New Years together from now on."

She settled onto the sofa across

from them, and the three started

talking about their plans for after the

holiday. They'd be shifting their

focus to Cabinda soon, No one  
expected to stay much longer Apex.

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Adolphus came down the stairs, phone in hand. He walked over to Laurinda and nodded at York and Jack before turning to her. "Jasper and Teddy just arrived" he said. "They're over on the main street. I'm going to pick them up."

Laurinda's eyes lit up. She hadn't expected Jasper to make it back. She stood up, ready to go with him. "I'll come with you."

Adolphus reached for her hand but shook his head. "It's okay. I'll get them myself. You stay here, catch up with York and Jack."

Laurinda did have a few things she wanted to talk about, so she nodded and let him go.

"Alright, hurry back," she said.

"I will," Adolphus promised, grabbing his coat and car keys before heading out.

Laurinda turned to York and Jack, a playful grin spreading across her face. "Come on, you two. Follow me to the study. I have something really cool to show you."

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## Chapter 306

[ 606 words ]

The three of them stepped into the study. Laurinda flipped open her laptop and brought up a map of Stonehaven.

"Check this out. Here's the little present I put together for them."

York and Jack both went quiet as they stared at the map and saw the clusters of red dots. Jack looked especially uneasy, his brow furrowed and his face a shade paler.

"Isn't this a bit much? What if they come after you? We agreed we'd wait until your twentieth birthday before doing anything, remember?"

"I'm done waiting. If they want to fight back, let them. I want them to know messing with me comes with a price."

York kept his eyes on the map, thinking it over before finally asking, "When did you get people inside Stonehaven? Are you sure they didn't get caught?"

Laurinda leaned back in her chair, looking perfectly relaxed.

"Who knows if they noticed or not. The thing is, Stonehaven needs rare earth minerals and the only place they can get them is from Renata. The people Renata sent blended in with the shipment. Same with the micro-explosives."

York's expression shifted to something between disbelief and resignation. He'd been running around Cabinda, while Laurinda had been busy stirring up a storm at home.

Kenny was going to have a meltdown when he found out. York almost felt sorry for the guy.

Jack dragged over a chair and sat down beside Laurinda, tapping at the laptop screen.

"If I'm not mistaken, these two bases belong to the Third Elder and the Fifth Elder, right?"

Laurinda grinned, clearly impressed Jack had figured it out.

"Exactly. They're the ones who bought the minerals, so they get front-row seats to the show."

"And this spot... that's in Baily's backyard. There's no way he wasn't involved in all the crap aimed at me. He wants me to crawl to him for help, to give in. That's why he keeps pushing those fools to go after me."

"Well, if that's what he wants, I'll give him something he'll never forget. He's been dying to get his hands on the Research Institute's latest work. Let's see how he likes seeing it in action."

Laurinda couldn't help herself. She burst out laughing, a real, relieved sound. After all these years of holding back, she finally had a chance to turn the tables. They never gave her a break always looking for new ways to make her surrender.

Jack reached out and gently patted her head, his voice warm and teasing.

"Shouldn't you at least warn Kenny?"

Laurinda's lips curled into a mocking smile.

"Warn him? What, so he can go wait for the fireworks in Baily's backyard and get himself killed?"

"You're still mad at him?"

Jack let out a sigh. They all came from the same place, and there was history there.

He knew Kenny's feelings for Laurinda were complicated, but he really didn't want to see them become enemies.

Laurinda saw right through him, but she knew things with Kenny could never go back to what they were.

"You think I shouldn't blame him? Jack, you know as well as I do, he could've protected our mentor. He just stood by and let them do whatever they wanted, and now our mentor is gone."

"I'll admit, he was good to me once. But ever since he took that seat, he hasn't been himself. He's just become their puppet."

"I get that you'll say he has his reasons, that he's got his own problems. That's why I've never gone after him, why I've always tried to avoid him."

"But now he's the one pushing me. The other day, he sent people to my place out of the blue. Wasn't that just him showing off that he knows everything I'm up to?"

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## Chapter 307

[ 665 words ]

"You don't actually believe he just wanted to give me a gift, do you? Out of all the places he could have sent it, why would he choose Adolphus's house?"

Laurinda's feelings for Kenny were a mess. It was his pushy attitude that forced her to push back. If he couldn't leave things alone, he had no right to complain when she didn't hold back.

Jack had nothing to say to that. This time, he couldn't defend Kenny at all.

He wanted to believe Kenny had his reasons, but honestly, everything Kenny did just seemed to set Laurinda off.

"Anyway, forget what I just said," Laurinda sighed. "Don't let someone irrelevant ruin your mood. Have you figured out what you're going to do with your people in Stonehaven?"

"They're staying," Laurinda replied easily. "It took a lot of effort to get them in, so now that they're there, they should just settle in and keep building. They've got legit identities now. Even if something goes wrong, it won't come back to them. No need to worry."

York and Jack both nodded. They knew Laurinda could handle it. She wasn't even twenty yet and didn't live in Stonehaven, but little things like this were nothing for her.

Laurinda clapped her hands together and shut her laptop.

"Alright, you've seen the gifts I'm giving them. Now, we can look forward to—"

"Wait, what's that?" York interrupted, his eyes landing on a box next to the laptop. Inside were three massive diamonds, each the size of a fist—one purple, one pink, one blue. They sparkled so brightly they almost didn't look real.

"That's the deposit from Adolphus. He basically pledged himself to me," Laurinda said with a grin.

She picked up the box and held it out to York. He took one of the diamonds and turned it over in his hand, staring at it for a long time before he managed to speak.

"Did you see the news? These three diamonds were supposed to be part of that Frostford big shot's private collection. How did Adolphus end up with them?"

Laurinda set the box on the desk and shrugged, laughing softly.

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"Who cares? When someone gives you a gift, do you really question where it came from? Adolphus's background doesn't matter to me. If he really is that powerful guy, doesn't that just make things better for me? I could probably get away with being even more bold."

Her smile was dazzling. She had thought about who Adolphus really was, but after a couple of days stuck on it, she decided not to overthink it.

Everyone has secrets. She hadn't told Adolphus who she really was, either.

Honestly, she hoped Adolphus was the real deal. If he was, she could go all in and not worry about his safety.

She knew one thing for sure she didn't want to be separated from Adolphus for any reason, and she definitely didn't want anything bad to happen to him.

York placed the diamond back in the box and watched Laurinda's bright, genuine smile. He was happy for her. She was right the stronger Adolphus was, the better it was for all of them.

He'd noticed Laurinda was smiling a lot more since she met Adolphus. She seemed truly happy.

"Laurinda! Sis! I'm back!" Jasper's voice echoed from downstairs.

Laurinda glanced at York and Jack.

"Ever since Adolphus showed up, I've stopped worrying that someone might find out about Jasper. He promised me he'd help Jasper grow up, so Jasper wouldn't be my weakness anymore."

"So, tell me—does it really matter who he is?" she asked.

York ruffled her hair and grinned. "Not at all. No matter who he is, if he treats you well, he's one of us. If he hurts you, there's no way we'll let him off the hook."

The three of them left the study just as Jasper bounded up the stairs. Jack scooped Jasper up and tossed him onto his shoulders.

"Hey, little guy! Haven't seen you in a while. You've gotten stronger."

Jasper giggled, sitting on Jack's shoulders and playing with Jack's hair. "Jack, our hair doesn't match anymore."

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[ 657 words ]

York stood next to Jasper and ran his fingers through Jasper's bristly crew cut, grinning a little.

"Don't worry about it. When Jack was your age, his hair was even shorter. You'll grow it out again in no time."

The three of them headed downstairs and spotted Teddy chatting with Adolphus. As soon as Teddy saw Laurinda, his whole face lit up. "Laurinda!"

"Hey. I thought you'd be celebrating New Year's in Cabinda?"

"Nah, not this year. My grandparents are both at the research institute, and my parents didn't come back, either. Jasper was coming home for the holiday, so I decided to tag along."

Laurinda already knew Fraser was caught up in his latest experiment, and Teddy's grandma had been called back to help with the data. She really couldn't help but admire how dedicated all those researchers were.

"If you don't feel like going back, then stay," Laurinda said with a smile. "It's going to be lively here this year. I've already had someone send New Year's gifts over to the research institute, so they'll be able to celebrate too."

York plopped down next to Teddy and slung his arm casually over Teddy's shoulders. The two of them immediately dove into a conversation about college.

Adolphus glanced at Laurinda, got up, and came over to her. He gently pulled her into his arms and lowered his voice. "Everyone back in Cabinda is dying to meet you. How about we make a trip there after the holiday?"

"Sure. Maybe we can go on the third day of the New Year?" she suggested.

"Works for me. I'll ask Egan to sort it out. Sam's not in the best mood lately, so I'll leave him out of it for now..."

Laurinda rolled her eyes at the mention of Sam. Where was he when she was miserable? Now that she was happy, he was putting on this lovesick act. Honestly, what was his problem?

Sam was a decent guy, but when it came to relationships, he really didn't know what he was doing. No wonder Irvin gave him a hard time.

Adolphus couldn't help but laugh at Laurinda's expression. He reached out and gently pinched her cheek.

Then he remembered the offerings the butler had prepared for the memorial. "Are you planning to go visit your parents' graves after lunch?" he asked.

She was a little surprised he knew about that, but nodded. "Yeah, right after we eat. Do you want to come with me?"

"Of course. I'll call and order some flowers."

Adolphus let go of her and stepped aside to phone Foley.

Laurinda called after him, "If Foley and the others haven't gone home yet, invite them over too! It's better with more people."

After lunch, Adolphus and York

gathered Teddy and the rest to help pack up everything they needed for the visit to Laurinda's parents' graves. Bonnie, who was in her wheelchair, didn't want to go upstairs. She insisted on coming along.

Laurinda sat on the sofa, munching on some sweet corn, watching Bonnie and Harrell bicker.

Harrell finally looked over at Laurinda with a helpless expression. "Can't you do something about her?"

Laurinda shrugged. "What could I possibly do? You're her boyfriend and she doesn't even listen to you. Why would she listen to me?"

She couldn't help but think Harrell was giving her way too much credit. Why did he think she could handle Bonnie? Once Bonnie got stubborn, no one could stop her.

Bonnie shot Laurinda a look, raising her eyebrows. She already knew Laurinda would always have her back, no matter what. That's just how their friendship worked.

Laurinda narrowed her eyes a bit and said, "Don't get too cocky. If you go out and catch a cold, you'll be the one suffering."

Bonnie hadn't expected that. She hesitated, looking a little pouty. "It doesn't seem that windy outside."

"Maybe not, but that doesn't mean it's not cold. You need to think about your health."

Laurinda's words did the trick.

Bonnie gave in and turned to Harrell.

"You'd better help me upstairs."

get sick during the holiday, it just

be trouble for everyone."

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## Chapter 309

[ 600 words ]

Harrell couldn't hide his happiness when Bonnie finally gave in. He scooped her up and carried her upstairs, grinning from ear to ear.

Not long after, he came back down. He glanced at Laurinda and said a quiet thank you. Laurinda shot him a calm look, a small smile playing on her lips. She liked how much he doted on Bonnie.

"No need to thank me. Just take good care of her. That's all I want," she said.

Right then, Adolphus came in from outside. "Everything's ready. We can head out now."

Laurinda set aside her half-eaten corn, took the puffer jacket Adolphus held out, and slipped her arms into it. He zipped it up for her, then gently took her hand, and together they walked out the door.

Harrell watched them go, a bit jealous. He couldn't help but wonder when Bonnie would ever be that easygoing with him.

In the car, York was driving. Laurinda noticed the lilies and daisies on the front seat and turned to Adolphus.

"Did you get the flowers? How did you know my mom likes lilies and daisies?"

Adolphus smiled. "I saw a photo in your study once. The garden in it was filled with them."

Laurinda's expression softened as old memories bubbled up. "My dad loved lilies. All kinds, every color and scent. I never really understood why. My mom was more into daisies. That's why our yard always had both."

"When I was little, I'd sneak out and pick their flowers. They never got mad. They said it just meant I loved the garden as much as they did."

She looked at him, her smile growing warmer. "They'd love the flowers you brought. They'd definitely be happy about you."

Laurinda found herself staring at him, lost in thought. She was sure of it. The man she loved, her parents would have loved too.

The drive didn't take long. As soon as they parked, Adolphus helped Laurinda out, holding her hand. In his other arm, he carried the bouquet for her parents.

The whole group started up the hill. Jasper and York followed close behind. Jack helped Fidelia along, while Foley and the butler carried the offerings.

Jasper had made this trip with Laurinda before, but it was always just the two of them. They only ever came after dark, afraid of being seen. This was the first time they had so many people with them, and it was broad daylight.

Jasper tugged gently at York's sleeve and looked up at him.

"York, does this mean I don't have to hide that Laurinda's my sister anymore?"

York looked down at him, his usual stern face softening. "That's right. You don't have to hide it anymore. From now on, you can tell everyone Laurinda is your sister."

Up ahead, Laurinda overheard their conversation. She looked up at Adolphus just

as he glanced at her. Their eyes met. They didn't need to say a thing. One shared smile said it all.

At the top of the hill, Laurinda led Adolphus to the largest gravestone. "These are my parents," she said quietly "That's Farr He was York's and my teacher and he's Fidelia's husband. The others back there, they were my parents' friends."

Laurinda knelt in front of her parents' grave and lit the paper offerings. She handed incense to Jasper, who placed it for them then she and Jasper knelt together and bowed their heads.

When they finished, Laurinda stood and reached for Adolphus's hand. He stepped forward, took her hand, and before she could introduce him, he spoke up.

"Hello, I'm Adolphus, Laurinda's boyfriend. I hope you'll give us your blessing. I promise to take care of her and never let anything hurt her."

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## Chapter 310

[ 659 words ]

Before anyone had a chance to react, Adolphus just dropped to his knees. Foley's mouth fell open in shock. Was this really Adolphus? Did he really kneel down that easily?

Laurinda felt awkward watching him, so she reached out and tried to pull him up. But Fidelia stopped her.

"Let him be. Let him bow properly to your parents. It'll put their minds at ease, knowing you've found someone you can trust. They won't have to worry about you anymore."

Laurinda listened and let go of Adolphus's arm. She watched him mumbling quietly as he bowed his head. Out of nowhere, she felt tears prick her eyes. She didn't even know why, she just felt so moved.

Adolphus bowed four times, carefully and respectfully. When he finished saying everything he wanted to tell her parents, he stood up and looked at Laurinda.

"Your parents have given me their blessing to take care of you. That means you're mine now."

Laurinda hadn't expected him to say something like that. Her ears turned pink. She gave him a gentle smack and grumbled, "You really have no shame. You'll say anything."

Adolphus grinned, completely unbothered. "I'm just telling the truth. They could feel how much I care. They really do want me to look after you."

"Fine, fine, I believe you." Laurinda's smile came from the heart. "Guess I'll be counting on you from now on."

His love was so warm and certain, she didn't even have a chance to push it away.

Adolphus crouched down and started burning paper offerings for Laurinda's parents. Laurinda and York and Jack went to pay their respects to the other graves. Fidelia sat by Farr's headstone, talking to him softly.

By the time they finished and headed home, night had already fallen.

When they got back to the manor, the whole place was glowing with light. Lanterns hung in the courtyard, making everything look extra festive.

Fidelia walked over to Laurinda and whispered, "Laurinda, I just saw Farr."

Laurinda thought for a second that Fidelia might be having another episode. She turned, startled, but Fidelia just looked at her calmly, like she could see right through her worry.

"Don't worry, I'm not having a relapse. I just dozed off in the car and I really did see Farr. He told me he was happy to see me getting better. He wanted me to keep going and to carry his faith with me."

"Laurinda, I think I've finally let go of the past. I'm done hurting. It's been so hard on you, and I'm sorry. When you needed me most, you had to face everything on your own and still take care of me."

Fidelia looked at Laurinda with so much tenderness. She reached out, pulled Laurinda into a hug, and held her tight. Tears slowly slid down her cheeks.

Laurinda hugged her back, breathing in that familiar scent, feeling warmth spread through her chest.

Everything finally seemed to be turning out right. For the first time, she felt completely at ease.

"Fidelia, they all want us to live well. Don't put so much pressure on yourself. I know things are only going to get better from here."

During the New Year's Eve dinner, Fidelia shared her plans to go back to school York was surprised for a moment, but he immediately offered to help with the arrangements, saying he couldn't wait to see) back

her

in class.

Laurinda glanced at Adolphus, sitting close by. She reached for his big hand, leaned in, and whispered "Honestly, ever since I met you te feels like everything's been getting better. Adolphus, are you my ducky star?"

Adolphus had had a bit to drink. His eyes were tinged red and his gaze was softer than ever. He leaned over and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead.

His voice was a little rough when he spoke. "I don't know if I'm your lucky star, but know meeting you is the luckiest thing that's ever happened to med Laurinda, thank you for letting me find you. Whatever comes next, just promise you'll hold my hand tight."

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## Chapter 311

[ 644 words ]

"Alright, Mr. Lane. I'm counting on you to show me the ropes and look out for me from now on."

They shared a smile, both knowing there was no need to say anything else.

Adolphus picked up his chopsticks and placed some food in Laurinda's bowl. She ate quietly, all polite and sweet, and he couldn't help but get lost watching her.

After dinner, Laurinda dragged a few of the younger ones into a card game. It didn't take long before groans and dramatic wails started coming from the game room.

The butler, Josh, was perfectly content sitting on the sofa with his tea, occasionally glancing over at the chaos. Finally, someone else was suffering like he always did. Anyone who played cards with Laurinda was doomed. It was like she could read minds, always knowing what card you were about to play.

Bonnie, bored, lounged in her wheelchair and watched Josh smirk. She rolled herself closer.

"Josh, how much secret cash have you stashed away lately? Want to treat yourself a little?"

Josh clutched his pockets protectively and shot Bonnie a look.

"Bonnie, don't even try. You know my allowance barely covers anything. Saving up is hard enough. Besides, Laurinda wouldn't even care about my pocket change."

Bonnie grinned, eyes glinting with mischief. "Come on, Josh, you should know Laurinda by now. She loves money, big or small. How about we..."

"I should check on the dumplings. And see if the fireworks are ready. So much to do tonight."

Josh didn't let Bonnie finish. He put down his teacup, jumped to his feet, and hurried out of the room.

Bonnie burst out laughing at his hasty escape, but the sudden movement made her wince and pull at her wound.

Harrell walked out of the game room just then, catching the pained look on her face. He hurried over, concern all over his features.

"What's wrong? Are you hurting?"

"No, I just laughed too hard and pulled my injury a little. Can you take me upstairs to rest? Sitting here this long has worn me out."

Bonnie reached out her hand to him. Harrell's heart softened at her gesture, and he carefully scooped her up, carrying her upstairs.

He bent down to lay her gently on

the bed. Bonnie leaned up and kissed the corner of his lips, catching him off guard for a split second before he melted into her touch and took the lead.

In the living room, the TV was counting down to midnight. Laurinda came out of the game room, holding Adolphus's hand, and led him outside.

"I asked Josh to set up a ton of fireworks. Let's go watch."

When the final bell chimed, fireworks exploded across the sky above the estate. Laurinda nestled against Adolphus, gazing up at the dazzling colors. She wondered if Stonehaven was buzzing with excitement too.

Kenny was in his study, buried in paperwork, when a series of explosions shook the night. He bolted out, not even stopping for a coat, and rushed outside. From the courtyard, he could see the sky

above the Austin Family estate blazing with fire.

"Who did this? Find out, now!"

Kenny shouted, completely losing his composure. The moment he heard the blasts, he already had a suspect in mind.

Still, he couldn't quite believe it. Was she really that crazy? Would she really dare to set her sights on the Austin Family?

Laurinda sat on the sofa, watching the video of Kenny's meltdown, the corners of her lips turning up. Her eyes sparkled with delight.

Jack and York got word of the explosion at Stonehaven at the same time. They both looked over at the sofa, the icy look in their eyes fading as they smiled, all warmth and affection.

All that mattered to them was that Laurinda was happy. As long as she was smiling, nothing else mattered.

Kenny was busy all night. By the time the fires in all three locations were finally put out at dawn, no one had even started counting the casualties.

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## Chapter 312

[ 603 words ]

The Third and Fifth Elders walked in right behind Isaac, the Austin family patriarch, crowding into Kenny's office. The second the door shut, they started demanding

answers.

"Kenny, all three of our families just went through a disaster. Don't you think you owe us an explanation?"

Kenny let out a slow sigh and rubbed his temples, already feeling a headache come on. He looked up and met Baily's glare, then let a crooked smile slip across his face.

"Baily, come on. You know exactly what caused that explosion at your place. Are you really here asking me for an explanation?"

He shifted his eyes to the two elders standing behind Baily, his smile turning a little more playful, eyebrow raised.

"And you two, do you really need me to remind you what you've been up to?"

Kenny actually found himself laughing in disbelief. He hadn't even bothered them about their mess, and now they were all here, acting like he owed them something. Did they seriously expect him to cover their losses? Did he look like he was born yesterday?

The two elders, called out in front of everyone, just lowered their heads and kept quiet. They figured that if they showed up with Baily, Kenny would at least give them some respect. Instead, he didn't even spare Baily a second thought.

"I want you to find out who did this and give us an answer, as soon as possible," Baily demanded, completely ignoring the real reason behind the explosion. His shamelessness was honestly impressive.

Kenny looked at the three of them and started drumming his fingers on the desk, nodding slowly.

"Alright. I can look into it. But first, you'll need to hand over your purchase receipts. And while you're at it, why don't you explain what exactly you needed all those supplies for?"

He turned to Baily, his tone cool.

"Baily, don't say I didn't warn you. Sure, Stonehaven doesn't have a flat-out ban on firearms, but the stash you're keeping in your

backyard it's basically an armo et

You might want to start thinking up a good explanation for that."

Baily's face instantly changed. He knew Stonehaven had rules about how many weapons a family could own, but they'd just assumed they'd be the exception. Now it looked like Kenny was planning to use the law against them. Was he really just going to wash his hands of their problems?

For the first time, the Third Elder saw a side of Kenny he couldn't control. He stepped forward, pushing past Baily, his voice tense.

"I think Laurinda is behind this. No one else would have a reason to move against us. Only that crazy woman would dare..."

"Watch it, Third Elder," Kenny cut in, his voice steely. "Laurinda may not have officially taken the Stonehaven throne, but she's still in charge of the Holy Grail. Have some respect."

Kenny's hands were clenched tightly on his lap. He couldn't stand anyone talking about Laurinda like that. She might not always listen, but to him, she was everything. She was his line in the sand.

"Respect? Kenny, have you still not heard from Cabinda? Laurinda isn't the Lord's daughter at all. Baily's already sent people over there. They're bringing the real heir back."

"You should listen to us, Kenny. When the real Lord returns, you might not even get to keep your seat," the Fifth Elder piped up from behind Baily, barely able to hide his excitement. They'd been dying to get rid of Laurine for ages, but nothing ever seemed to

work. No matter how many people they sent after her, she always managed to slip away.

alive.

That assassination attempt had been their best shot, but even then, she got out

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## Chapter 313

[ 644 words ]

Kenny's smile disappeared in an instant. His gaze turned sharp and dangerous, sending a chill through the room. He looked at the three men, his face unreadable.

"Do you even realize what you're saying? If Laurinda wasn't the Lord's child, don't you think he'd know? What gives you the right to question who she is?"

The Third and Fifth Elders hadn't expected Kenny to turn so cold. They clammed up, eyes wide, both of them taking a nervous step back.

Only Baily stayed put, his eyes fixed on Kenny, sharp and calculating. It was clear he thought he had Kenny all figured out. He gave a slow, deliberate smile.

"I gave you my word, didn't I? I said I'd accept your engagement to Laurinda and I'm not going to break that promise. But our family's bloodline is sacred. Whether that so-called real heiress is truly one of us, that's for us to decide, not you. You don't get a say in it."

Kenny could see right through Baily's smug expression. The message was loud and clear. No matter who that girl was, if the family decided she was an Austin, then she was one, end of story.

Staring at their smug faces, Kenny suddenly felt like last night's explosion had hit the wrong place. He almost wished all three of them had been caught in it instead.

He took a slow breath and nodded.

"You're right, the Austin family's bloodline isn't my business. But only the one who holds the Holy Grail gets to sit on Stonehaven's throne. When it comes down to it, whether Laurinda is really an Austin may not matter that much after all."

Baily's smile faltered. For a second, he looked genuinely stunned. He hadn't expected Kenny to talk back, let alone question the family's claim to the throne. Was Kenny planning to turn against them too? There was no way the throne could go to someone outside the Austins.

"That's exactly what I mean," Kenny said, his voice calm. "Do you really think you can just bring back some random girl and let her take the throne, Baily? You've lived this long and you're still that naive?"

"Anyone from Stonehaven is more qualified than the person you're bringing in. If that's your standard, then every single one of us gets a shot at the throne."

Baily was so thrown by Kenny's words he couldn't even argue. He just gave a cold snort and started to leave, but Kenny stepped in his way.

"Didn't you three come here demanding answers? Then you'll cooperate with the investigation. Start by explaining everything you've been keeping in those warehouses. And don't forget to hand over the cargo lists."

Kenny's tone was all business now. He didn't bother hiding his irritation. He was done pretending to get along with them. It was time they understood he wasn't their lapdog, just because he had this job.

He picked up the phone and called for security. Before the elders could say anything else, several officers in uniform walked in.

The three men were caught off guard. The Third Elder shouted, "Kenny, how could you do this to us?"

"Isn't this what you wanted?" Kenny shot back. "You came to me first thing this morning, demanding I get to the bottom of everything. So I'm just doing what you asked. I'll make sure every detail about the

explosions at your base and your backyard is investigated. You'll get your answers."

He turned to the officers. "Take good care of these gentlemen. Look into everything, no mistakes allowed. If anything gets missed, you'll answer for it with your jobs."

With a wave of his hand, Kenny sent them out, not bothering to hide how much he wanted them gone.

The officers, worried about their own positions, hurried the three elders out of the office.

Left alone, Kenny slumped back in his chair, exhaustion washing over him. He closed his eyes and let the silence settle around him.

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## Chapter 314

[ 534 words ]

He was exhausted. Lately, Kenny couldn't help but wonder if he'd gotten everything wrong. Nothing was turning out the way he pictured it. Even Laurinda seemed to be slipping further away from him each day.

That night, he fell into a restless sleep and dreamed he was a kid again, trailing behind a stubborn little tomboy.

"005, you don't have to try so hard, you know? I'll always protect you. When you grow up, I'll take you back with me, just like my dad looks after my mom. My mom's so delicate, she always says girls only need to be pretty, that they don't have to be strong or anything."

"005, are you even listening? You really don't have to get tougher. As long as I'm here, I won't let anyone hurt you."

"005, I'll always look out for you..."

\*\*\*

Laurinda didn't wake up until noon. When she wandered downstairs, the house was quiet except for Adolphus sitting on the couch with a kitten in his lap. She dropped down next to him and leaned against his shoulder.

"Why are you the only one here? Where is everyone?"

"Balaam and Regan took Fidelia to the temple, I think. York and Jack probably haven't woken up yet. Teddy took Jasper out to see the festival, and Foley went to pick up Kendrick."

Laurinda stretched, still half-asleep. She'd dragged herself out of bed just because it was New Year's Day. Adolphus set the kitten aside and pulled her onto his lap.

"The butler said the nursing home called this morning. Baily's gone."

Laurinda froze for a second, but her face quickly settled into a calm, unreadable expression. She didn't look upset at all.

Adolphus knew better. He could tell she was just hiding it. His voice was gentle as he asked, "Do you want to go see him? The nursing home said he left you a note and a key."

Laurinda already knew what Baily had left behind. Aggie had made a fuss for days but never managed to get anything from him.

"No, I don't think he'd want to see me anyway. Just ask the director to hold onto those things. When Aggie and Lawrence are out, they can have them. Baily and I haven't really been connected in a long time."

Adolphus relaxed a little at that. If Laurinda could let it go, maybe it really was for the best.

Just then, the butler walked in, glancing at the two of them and clearing his throat. "Laurinda, Baal is here."

Laurinda and Adolphus exchanged a look. She slipped off his lap.

"Take him to the reception room. I'll be right there."

York came inside just as he heard Baal's name. He straightened up. "I'll go with you."

Laurinda didn't mind the company. She nodded. "Okay, let's go together." Adolphus stayed on the couch. With York by Laurinda's side, he didn't need to be there too. Waiting here was fine.

When Laurinda and York stepped into the reception room, Baal had just sat down but quickly stood up again giving Laurinda a gentle almost fatherly smile.

"Happy New Year. You look like you're doing well."

Laurinda wasn't in the mood for small talk. She smiled politely and nodded.

"Happy New Year to you too, Baal. You don't look so great though. Still worried about the acquisition?"

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## Chapter 315

[ 662 words ]

"No, I've already dropped the idea of acquiring The Gates Group. You were right. Right now, they're at a turning point, and I can't let my own impulses mess up the bigger picture."

"I've also realized something. The Gates Group isn't the same tech company the three of us started together. Things have changed. We can't go back to the way it was."

Laurinda felt a wave of relief. Maybe Baal still had some sense left in him. She didn't need to write him off just yet.

"Glad you're seeing things clearly. So, is that all you came here to talk about?"

Baal shook his head. "Not at all. I got an email this morning, and I couldn't wait to talk to you about it. I happened to be nearby, so I just came over. Here, take a look."

He handed his phone to Laurinda. She scrolled through the email, her brows knitting together. Then she handed the phone to York. York read it in silence, his face growing more serious.

"How confident are you?" York asked, passing the phone back to Baal.

Baal let out a breath. "Honestly, not at all. I'm still pretty new to this industry. There's no way I could handle this project. But I think this is a shot at saving the Gates family. I just want to block them from getting that chance. I don't want Finn to have any opportunity to turn things around."

Laurinda understood right away. She paused to think, her mind drifting to the Brown family and the Douglas family. Both would be a good fit for this project, and Cabinda was a much more promising market than Apex.

"If you want to keep the Gates family from getting ahead, you don't have to force it yourself. No point going after something you're not sure about. I already have someone in mind for this project, but I'm not sure if you'd be willing to hand it over."

Baal nodded, not hesitating for a second. "Of course. This project was never really mine. I just heard about it before everyone else. My only goal is to keep Finn from landing a deal with Northland."

"Alright, then send me the email. I'll forward it to the right person."

Baal sent the email to Laurinda, then stood up. "That's all I wanted to tell you. I've got guests waiting at home, so I can't stay. I'll head out."

"I'll walk you to the door," York said, getting up to follow Baal out.

Laurinda stayed where she was, eyes glued to the partnership proposal glowing on her phone. Her gaze sharpened, a cool edge in her eyes they really were pulling every trick they had to keep Finafloat

She got up and walked back to the living room, but Adolphus was nowhere to be seen.

The butler appeared from the kitchen and caught Laurinda glancing around. He guessed right away who she was looking for.

"Adolphus and Tandy are in the backyard. They went to check out those stones you bought. Last night you mentioned wanting them cut open, so Tandy brought a professional cutter with all the tools."

Laurinda hadn't expected Jack to move so quickly. Her eyes lit up and she headed for the backyard, phone still in hand. From a distance, she could already see a small crowd gathered around her stones.

When Jack spotted her, he waved her over with a grin. "Looks like you got scammed with this one, huh? chipped off a piece, and not even a flashlight could shine through it. Can't just be an ordinary stone, right?"

"Of course not. Hold on, let me show you where you should start cutting."

Laurinda was totally confident in her purchase. She could already picture everyone's shocked faces when they finally saw what was inside.

She asked Jack to wait a second, then pulled Adolphus aside and slipped her phone into his hand.

"There's a Northland project in here. See if you can figure out who's the best fit for it. Just make sure Finn doesn't get it, no matter what."

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## Chapter 316

[ 694 words ]

Adolphus unlocked Laurinda's phone and scrolled through the project documents. "I'm going to make a call," he said. "I'll be back soon."

"Alright, go ahead," Laurinda replied, waving him off. She knew he'd have the perfect person in mind for the job, and she could always count on him to handle things.

Once Adolphus stepped out, Laurinda got to work. She called over the professional stone-cutters and directed them to start opening up the raw stones. The loud buzz of the saw filled the air, and then, suddenly, the noise gave way to gasps and shouts of surprise.

Upstairs, Adolphus was on the phone with Dobbs when the commotion outside caught his attention. He paused, leaning over to look out the window. Down below, a crowd had gathered around Laurinda, blocking his view of whatever was going on.

"Adolphus? Adolphus?" Dobbs called out, noticing the silence. He figured the connection had dropped and called his name a couple more times.

"I'm here, Dobbs. Go ahead," Adolphus replied.

Dobbs hesitated for a moment, a little thrown off by the formality. After all, Adolphus was the same age as his own son, Edison, so it felt odd to be addressed so directly.

Clearing his throat, Dobbs said, "So, about Raines's birthday party... Edison said he didn't want to go because he thought he'd upset you. If you've got a problem with him, you can tell me, and I'll talk to him. But maybe you could let it slide? Let him take you out to dinner or something?"

Adolphus had always preferred to cut to the chase. He wasn't about to let Laurinda be put out, and he saw no reason to drag things out either. Sometimes, just staying away from each other was the easiest solution.

"There's really nothing between us that needs fixing, and it won't change our business," Adolphus said. "It's just a small thing. As long as he learns from it, that's enough. You don't need to get involved."

Dobbs felt a little awkward at the straightforward reply, realizing he might have overstepped. He gave a sheepish chuckle.

"Alright, I'll leave it to you two. And, really, thanks for the heads-up about the project. I'll do everything I can to win it. But there's one more thing. was hoping to ask. I heard your girlfriend works at FarrVecton I was just wondering if-

Adolphus cut him off. He'd already given Edison his chance, and if he didn't want it, there was no second offer.

"FarrVector isn't going to work with your company. If you want details, talk to Edison. Everything else is open for discussion, but when it comes to FarrVector, I really can't help."

"Well, Dobbs, I've given you all the news I have. This opportunity doesn't come around often. If you can lock in that partnership with Northland, the Brown family's going to see a huge leap forward. Focus on that."

Without waiting for a reply, Adolphus ended the call, grabbed his coat, and headed downstairs. The excited voices outside had already pulled his attention away.

He stepped out into the garden and spotted Laurinda at the center of the action, standing by a table. On the table were two signs, "Win" and "Lose," and the crowd was buzzing with energy, placing their bets.

"This is the last stone, everyone! Your big chance to turn nothing into something! Place your bets before it's too late!" someone called out.

Adolphus walked over to York, still a little confused by what was happening. He nudged York's shoulder. "What's going on here?"

York had just figured it out himself and grinned. "When they started cutting the stones, everyone thought Laurinda's picks were duds. But then the one that looked the worst turned out to have this incredible imperial green gem inside. Another one had a rare violet ice gem. So now everyone's betting on what the next stone will turn up, and it's become a game."

Adolphus couldn't help but smile as he watched Laurinda laugh and joke with the group, completely in her element. He reached into his pocket, realized he didn't have any cash, and then pulled out a diamond the size of a pigeon egg. Placing it on the table in front of her, he said, "I'm betting on you."

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## Chapter 317

[ 563 words ]

Laurinda picked up the diamond, checked it over, and grinned up at Adolphus. Her eyes sparkled, unable to hide her excitement.

She held up the diamond and called out to the people waiting to place their bets. "Mr. Lane just upped the ante with a diamond. Anyone else want to join in? Last chance before we start. If you miss it, that's it!"

With a diamond on the table, the whole crowd buzzed with energy. If they won, they wouldn't have to worry about money for months.

"I'm in! Count me in! I trust Laurinda on this!" someone shouted.

Laurinda's smile grew even brighter as she looked at their eager faces. They were more confident than she was. She'd chosen the stones carefully, sure, but she couldn't guarantee every one was a winner. It's not like she had superpowers.

"Alright, bets are locked! Winners, take it easy. Losers, better luck next year. Let's get started!"

The cutters finished their work, splitting the stone open. The excited shouts turned into groans as everyone realized the last stone was a dud.

Laurinda eyed the disappointed crowd and narrowed her eyes. Honestly, such sore losers.

She gave them a generous smile. "Winners, go see the butler for your payout. Losers, don't be too sad. Take your money back, and think of it as a New Year's gift from me. Happy New Year, everyone!"

"Thank you, Laurinda! Happy New Year!" the crowd cheered back.

Laurinda waved at everyone, then took Adolphus's hand and led him away, their laughter and cheers ringing out behind them. She could feel how happy they all were.

"Having fun?" Adolphus asked, bending down and lifting her up into his arms.

"Yeah, I really am," Laurinda replied, glowing. "We got so many amazing gems. I made a killing. We should do this again sometime."

She twisted the diamond Adolphus had given her between her fingers, grinning like she'd just won the lotto. The look on her face made Adolphus smile too.

He knew Laurinda had plenty of money already, but seeing her get this excited over something so simple made him love her even more.

"As long as you're happy. I really like that blue ice jade. Will you give it to me?"

"Of course. I'll have it polished and sent to you later. And I was thinking of using the imperial green stone to make something for your mom."

Laurinda had thought about making Tanya a bracelet, but a pendant felt more fitting. She'd sketch out a design tonight and get it made as soon as possible.

"What about something for me?" Adolphus asked.

He liked that she cared about his mom, but he couldn't help feeling a little jealous. He wanted to be the one she thought about most.

Laurinda looked down at him, cupped his face with both hands, and kissed him softly on the lips.

"What do you think?" she teased.

"I really can't guess. Tell me," Adolphus said, eyes narrowing. playfully as he gently bounced her in

his arms. I don't want to guess, I want you to tell me..."

Before Laurinda could answer, a familiar female voice called out from nearby. "Well, well, you two sure know how to have fun..."

Laurinda glanced up and spotted Seraphina and Kendrick standing close by.

She tapped Adolphus's shoulder, letting him know to put her down.

Adolphus shot the pair a look, a little annoyed. He set Laurinda gently on  
you two doing

her feet. What are you two doing

here together? I thought you weren't

even speaking to each other."

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## Chapter 318

[ 579 words ]

Seraphina's face grew warm just thinking about what happened yesterday afternoon. She couldn't help but look away, embarrassed.

Kendrick caught her expression and jumped in before Adolphus could say anything else. "You should start practicing now. Stop calling me Kendrick. It's brother-in-law from now on."

Adolphus could already tell something was going on between them. He snorted. "Brother-in-law? Maybe try that after you actually marry her. She gets bored of anything new in a month. You should worry about not getting dumped first."

"Excuse me, Adolphus, what's that supposed to mean? Do I seem that flaky? Since when do I lose interest in a month?" Seraphina shot back, clearly annoyed at her brother's teasing. Sure, she was a little slow on the uptake when it came to Kendrick's feelings, but that didn't mean she was some heartless player. Now that she'd chosen Kendrick, she wasn't messing around.

Adolphus just smirked and stayed quiet, but Kendrick looked suddenly uneasy. He glanced at Seraphina, doubt flickering in his eyes.

Seraphina noticed and couldn't help but laugh, nudging Kendrick in the stomach. "Seriously, you and Adolphus are impossible. If you don't trust me, why did you chase after me in the first place? And you're the one bringing me food twice a day."

Laurinda leaned against Adolphus, quietly watching the whole scene play out, one person making a fuss, the other trying to smooth things over.

She poked Adolphus in the side and looked up at him with a smile. "Honestly, those two are more entertaining than any New Year's show."

By dinnertime, everyone was home. When Balaam and Regan found out Seraphina and Kendrick were together, their faces lit up with relief and approval.

Angelica and Fidelia whispered to each other, "That Cupid shrine really works. We prayed for Kendrick and boom, good news already."

Kendrick overheard and nodded. "It's true. That shrine actually works."

"Where is this Cupid's shrine? I want to go too," Harrell suddenly piped up. Everyone turned in his direction.

Adolphus finished peeling a shrimp for Laurinda and set it on her plate, then spoke calmly. "You already have Bonnie What are you trying to pray for? Or is there something else going on?"

"Of course not!" Harrell immediately sat up straight, looking almost offended. There was no way he'd ever cheat on Bonnie. He'd loved her since they were kids.

"I just want to pray that Cupid ties our red string tighter, so Bonnie stops acting so hot and cold with me."

Nobody said anything at first, but

Bonnie, sitting right next to him, couldn't help letting out a cold laugh. Did he really not get why she was distant? Complaining to Cupid? That Was rich content

With Bonnie taking the lead, the

others couldn't hold back their

laughter either. Jack patted Harrell on the shoulder, anning You Want

Cupid to help with nie? You'd

have better luck talking to the real boss here. Laurinda's the only one who can get Bonnie to budge."

Harrell's eyes lit up as he looked at Laurinda, but she just waved him off with a smile.

"I always have my girl's back. No matter what, she's right. If you can't get along with her, that's your problem, not hers."

Laurinda just laughed even harder. She'd always spoil her friends, and what happened to everyone else was none of her concern.

Bonnie blew Laurinda a kiss, happy to have found a family that backed her unconditionally. She loved that kind of loyalty.

Seraphina watched their easy closeness with envy. She had plenty of siblings by blood, but only a few who really cared about her.

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[ 610 words ]

After dinner, Adolphus and Seraphina sat together in the tea room.

Adolphus poured a cup of tea and handed it to Seraphina, his voice cool and steady. "Out so early on New Year's Day. Trouble at home again?"

He didn't even bother to make it sound like a question. He had given up on his brothers a long time ago. By now, nothing about their drama surprised him.

Seraphina shook her head. "No fights. With Mom and Dad there, nobody dares to go too far. It's just... my third sister-in-law wanted to set me up with someone. I wasn't in the mood to listen, so I left."

Adolphus let out a quiet laugh. Some people just never give up. Since they couldn't boss him around, now they were trying to meddle in Seraphina's life. He wondered when they'd finally get tired of it.

"Adah didn't cause any scenes, did she?"

"No, things have actually been pretty quiet. But there's a lot of gossip about Len lately. Looks like his ex-wife is the one leaking everything. She didn't just drag Len down, she embarrassed Rea too. All the nasty stuff Rea did back then is making the rounds in Cabinda. It's honestly disgusting."

"Did you hear what's been happening with the Charles family? Their stocks tanked. Len actually dragged Pearce to see Dad, but they didn't even make it past the front door. The butler kicked them out."

"During New Year's Eve dinner, Dad called Len out in front of everyone. He told him he was cut off from the family and needed to handle his own problems. Len's face was priceless. He drank too much and ended up crying. It was so embarrassing."

Adolphus smiled, just a little. "Back when he divorced Carla for Rea, Locke warned him to think it through. Now that the Charles family is in trouble, they're probably begging him for help. He's worried he'll get dragged down too, so he tried running to Dad for protection."

Seraphina snorted. "He's still so naive. He lost both of Dad's grandsons and thinks Dad would still help him? No way. The moment Dad let Carla change their last names, he was already choosing sides."

She nodded, agreeing with Adolphus. She knew exactly how stubborn her father could be. After everything Len did, the fact that Felix even let them near the house was already more than generous.

Suddenly, Seraphina's eyes lit up.

She scooted around the table to sit beside Adolphus, lowering her voice. "Do you think Dad brought up splitting the family in front of everyone just to warn Len? To show him he'll never be the heir to the Lane family? I heard Len even went to Mom about the bracelet."

"Was that supposed to be a power move for you? Everyone knows Laurinda has the bracelet now."

Adolphus chuckled at her rare flash

of insight He didn't say yes or no He just said, "Len lost any chance at being in charge the moment he

chose Rea over the family. Even if he regrets it now, it's too late

Adolphus stood up. He'd gotten all the information he needed.

he

"Laurinda and I are heading back to Cabinda tomorrow afternoon," told Seraphina "You guys enjoy yourselves here in Apex."

He turned to leave. Seraphina blinked, surprised, and jumped up to chase after him.

"Hey, that's not fair! We just got here and you're already leaving? You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?"

\*\*\*

At the mahjong table, Laurinda played her tiles. She heard the commotion from the living room and glanced at Foley, who was pouring her a glass of water.

"Are Adolphus and Seraphina always this loud?"

"Pretty much. Seraphina's got a lot of energy and Adolphus usually ignores her questions. That's how they end up bickering."

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## Chapter 320

[ 592 words ]

Laurinda gave a quick nod, staying out of the siblings' drama and turning her attention back to her game.

A moment later, she pushed her tiles forward with a grin. "That's it. I win. Self- drawn."

Harrell just stared at his losing hand, a mix of confusion and regret on his face. Now he understood why Bonnie had given him that sympathetic look when he'd said he was going to play against Laurinda.

Laurinda scooped up her winnings with a satisfied smile and stretched her arms over her head. "Foley, you take over. I'm tired."

Before Foley could even react, Laurinda gently pulled him into her seat and headed straight for the stairs, her long legs taking the steps two at a time.

Adolphus came in from outside, glancing around for Laurinda. "Where's Laurinda?"

"She said she was tired, probably went to her room to rest. Maybe you should check on her," someone replied.

Adolphus just hummed in response and walked upstairs. As he reached the second floor, he heard Laurinda's voice coming from Bonnie's room. Not wanting to interrupt, he went straight to Laurinda's study instead.

Once inside, Adolphus opened his laptop. After a few moments, the screen lit up with the face of a blond, blue-eyed man.

"Adolphus, we're in Mistfall Atoll right now. We found something about what you asked. The people who hurt Laurinda aren't local. They followed her when she arrived. Their tracks have been erased, but we're still trying to trace them."

"Keep looking. And don't forget the one who betrayed her," Adolphus replied.

He already had his own theories. The longer he spent with Laurinda, the more certain he was that her past was anything but simple. He suspected these people were tied to her background, maybe even from Stonehaven.

"Have you heard about the explosion in Stonehaven?"

Adolphus remembered the message he'd received earlier that morning. He had wanted to ask Laurinda about it, but he wasn't sure if she'd want to talk.

"There was an explosion, but the news is completely locked down. We can't get inside Stonehaven, so we don't have the details yet."

"Alright. If those people aren't connected to Mistfall Atoll, then don't stir up trouble with the local groups. As for the territory you've secured, develop it. Let's make Mistfall Atoll our base."

While they were making moves in Mistfall Atoll, they realized it was a perfect place to lay down roots. There was no way they were just going to hand over what they'd worked for.

The next morning, Laurinda woke up and noticed that Adolphus wasn't home. She asked one of the housekeepers and learned that he had left before sunrise.

She sat on the couch and sent him a quick message. He replied, saying he was already on his way back.

Adolphus walked in just as Laurinda was eating breakfast. He sat down next to her, and she immediately caught a faint scent of incense hanging around him.

"Where did you go so early? Why do you smell like incense?" she asked, curiosity in her eyes.

Adolphus looked at her, his gaze soft and full of warmth. He leaned in close and whispered, "I visited Cupid's Temple."

Laurinda was caught off guard. She knew Adolphus wasn't the type to believe in fate or higher powers. The last time he'd gone to a temple with her was just to help her sleep better.

"What? Are you serious?" she asked, still a bit stunned.

He nodded, a gentle smile playing on his lips. "know, it's not like me. But ever since I met you, I've started to believe. It means get to be with you forever, I'll believe in anything."

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## Chapter 321

[ 661 words ]

Laurinda almost burst out laughing at what Adolphus said, but underneath the amusement, she felt a wave of warmth. He wasn't just dropping his guard for her, he was doing things she never expected.

"I got this red string from Cupid's Chapel. Will you put it on me?"

Adolphus stretched out his wrist toward her, his eyes shining with hope.

She met his gaze and realized there was no way she could say no. Truthfully, she didn't want to. She took the red string, rolled it between her fingers, and tied it into a neat lover's knot before slipping it onto his wrist.

"What about mine? Are you going to put one on me too?"

Adolphus watched her, his eyes glued to her pale wrist. His smile was wide and a little goofy as he said, "Once you wear my red string, you belong to me. For life."

Laurinda picked up another red string and quickly wove a matching bracelet, placing it into his hand. "You already put down a deposit on me. I've been yours for a while now. I couldn't run even if I wanted to, and honestly, I don't. You're great. I really like you."

Adolphus froze for a second as he tried to put the bracelet on her. It hit him then-it was the first time Laurinda had ever said she liked him. His heart skipped a beat.

"Say it again. Tell me you like me."

"I really like you. I mean, really, really like you."

Laurinda said it again and again, patient as ever. Adolphus finished tying the bracelet on her wrist, then leaned in close, his voice soft in her ear. "I love you."

Love. Laurinda felt her heart thump. That word felt heavy, but her feelings for Adolphus had definitely grown past just "liking" him. Was this what love felt like?

"Looks like I'm falling for you too."

Adolphus hadn't expected her to say it back, not so soon. He knew Laurinda could be guarded with her feelings, so just hearing her say "I like you" was more than enough for him.

But now, hearing her say she loved him, he could barely contain himself. He pulled her into his arms and murmured in her ear, "Laurinda, Cupid's Chapel really works."

Laurinda looked down at the

bracelet on her wrist, propped her

chin in her hand, and grinned. "What do you think would happen if

would

eln

everyone found out you're so superstitious? Would they laugh at you?"

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"Laugh at me? Not a chance. They'd just be jealous. Jealous that I found someone I really care about."

"You're probably right."

York walked in just then, immediately spotting the red strings on their wrists. He took his breakfast from the servant and sat down across from them.

"So, you two got those red strings from Cupid's Chapel too?"

"Too?" Laurinda picked up on the word. She remembered Angelica had gone to the chapel yesterday, but she had no idea who else had gone.

York bit into his sandwich and nodded toward the quiet house. "You notice how quiet it is today? Other than Jasper and the butler who went over to the Adams place, everyone else took off for Cupid's Chapel. Some of them just came back, each with a red string."

Laurinda glanced at her wrist and let out a little sigh. "Our limited edition just became a trending item overnight."

Adolphus laughed. "Ours are different. You made these for us. Theirs are just store-bought strings."

"Exactly. Ours are still one of a kind."

York just raised his eyebrows. He was used to their lovey-dovey back-and-forth. He finished his sandwich in one bite and polished off his milk.

"Jack said he and his crew are heading back this afternoon. Hanging around here is drawing too much attention."

"Alright. We'll head back to Cabinda later today. Aileen's list arrived there, and I need to see Kinsey."

York nodded and turned to Adolphus. "I'll be pretty busy for a few days, so I'm leaving her to you."

Adolphus nodded right back. "Don't

worry. I'm here. She'll be safe." He meant

No matter where they

were, he wouldn't let anything

Were to Laurinda.

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