

From Ashes of Scandal to His Embrace (Laurinda)

Chapter 31

[703 words]

"You're the one who started this whole thing with Jared. If you don't give the Brown family a solution they're happy with today, they won't just let it go. Go to the Austin family now. Ask them to step in and talk to Laurinda. Get her to let this drop."

"You like Laura, right? If the Austins handle this well, I'll let you get engaged to her. Laurinda grew up with them, so she'll give them some respect."

Finn finished speaking and walked away without looking back. He had no plans to get involved. The Gates family was right in the middle of negotiating a big deal with Frostford. They couldn't afford to get dragged down by drama like this.

As soon as Finn left, Fabian rushed to the bathroom. He spat a mouthful of blood into the sink, one of his teeth mixed in. Staring at the bright red swirling down the drain, anger burned in his chest. Finn had never hit him before. He'd never yelled at him like that either. And it was all because of Laurinda.

Right then, Fabian wished he could erase Laurinda from existence.

"Rinse your mouth out." Alice's voice was gentle as she came up behind him and gave his back a soft pat. "Your father has his reasons. The Gates Group is at a turning point and can't afford any bad publicity. Fabian, you're the heir. You've always had more responsibility than most. You can't mess this up, or your father's going to lose trust in you."

She wanted to comfort her son, but she knew she couldn't interfere with how Finn disciplined him. Sometimes people needed to learn the hard way to really grow.

Laurinda sat in the backseat as York drove her to a small local clinic. The second she opened the car door, a strong herbal smell hit her, and she immediately pulled her foot back inside.

"This place doesn't look legit at all. Can we go somewhere else?"

York laughed softly, watching her wrinkle her nose in protest. "The doctor here is a legend. He's retired from a top hospital, and now he only sees five patients a day. I had to spend a fortune to get this appointment at an auction."

He walked around and opened the door for her. "Come on, don't be stubborn. Get out of the car. Your dark circles look even worse today."

Laurinda covered her face with both hands, slumping against the seat. She couldn't believe she had agreed to come. She felt ridiculous.

"Stop dragging your feet. Your slot is from ten to eleven, and it's almost your turn. Just go in for a checkup. If you really can't take the medicine, then don't. No one will force you."

York's low, reassuring voice finally got her to move. She climbed out, shooting him a look full of silent complaint.

"If I can't drink the medicine, you're not allowed to make me."

"Of course. I'll do whatever you want," York replied, smiling fondly at her.

Laurinda rarely acted like a little kid, but when she did, York couldn't help but want to spoil her.

Inside, Laurinda spotted an elderly man with white hair sitting in the front hall. His eyes were bright and alert. His long, silver eyebrows hung at the corners of his eyes, giving him an air of wisdom and authority. The kind of person you just knew was really good at what he did.

"Hello," Laurinda greeted him quietly.

"Hello. Have a seat. Let me see your wrist."

He didn't bother with small talk. Just a quick look at her face and he seemed to know what was going on.

He pressed his fingers to her wrist, frowning a little. Laurinda's body was a mess, to put it mildly.

"How long have you felt this way?"

Laurinda hesitated. "A while now. Maybe five or six years? It's just gotten worse lately."

"So young and already carrying so much. You need to be kinder to

yourself. There's no reason to push yourself so hard. If you can't get past what's holding you back, no medicine in the world will help."

He spoke with his eyes closed, still holding her wrist. "What's so impossible to overcome that you have to make yourself miserable

this? Do you think it's fair to the people who love you, seeing you this way?"

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Chapter 32

[583 words]

Laurinda listened quietly, her head bowed, lost in thought. She'd really believed she was past all that, but now it felt like she'd just been fooling herself.

"I'll try to keep a better attitude," she said after a long pause. Her voice sounded a little bitter, like she was forcing herself to believe it.

He smiled at her, as if to say, That's the way.

"How old are you? Got a boyfriend yet? Honestly, a good romance would probably fix half your problems."

Laurinda's face softened, the tension easing away.

"I just turned eighteen. Still pretty young."

"Eighteen, huh? Sure, that's not old, but you're definitely old enough for love. Sometimes having the right person by your side does more good than any medicine ever could."

He didn't get to finish before someone called out from the doorway. "Eaton, are you busy? Adolphus is here to see you."

Both Laurinda and Eaton looked over. A familiar figure was heading their way, sunlight shining from behind him.

Laurinda recognized him immediately. She frowned, feeling a little out of it. All night, she hadn't been able to get him out of her head, and now here he was in the flesh. Was she imagining things? Or had he put a tracker on her or something?

She turned away, not interested in talking. Seriously, what were the odds?

Adolphus clearly didn't expect to see Laurinda here either, especially not at the doctor's office.

"What are you doing here, kid? Why don't you and Helena go inside and take a seat? I just have this one patient this morning. We'll catch up after I'm done."

Eaton stood and patted Adolphus on the shoulder. This was his favorite student, though it had been a while since they'd seen each other.

Adolphus helped Eaton sit down, whispering that there was no rush, then looked over at Laurinda. She kept her eyes glued to the floor, refusing to even glance at him.

"So, what brings you to the doctor? Not feeling well?"

He didn't wait for her answer. He rolled up his sleeves, took her wrist in his long, steady fingers before she could pull away.

Laurinda realized what he was doing and tried to move, but Adolphus caught her other arm, gently stopping her escape. His voice was soft and coaxing.

"Hey, just relax."

That one word made her freeze. She stared at him, wide-eyed and confused. What exactly was going on between them? Who gave him the right to talk to her like that?

Eaton and Helena watched from the side, clearly amused, their eyes meeting as if sharing a private joke.

York's face was complicated. He recognized Adolphus as the man who'd taken Laurinda away right in front of him yesterday.

Adolphus held Laurinda's wrist, checking her pulse, his brows drawn together, his face even colder than before.

The whole thing made York more and more uneasy. He finally blurted out, "Wait, is she dying or something? Why do you look so serious?"

Helena, startled by York's sudden question, finally noticed there was another young man in the room. She figured he must have come Laurinda and glanced at Eaton.

Eaton caught the look and smiled, explaining, Laurinda's got a lot on her mind, and it's starting to take a toll on her health. She's a little weak, but it's nothing serious yet. Still if she doesn't take herself, it care of could become a real problem."

"You're low on energy, and you've got an old injury." Adolphus's tone was calm, but there was no doubt in his voice she was still He was sure recovering from something serious. And yesterday...

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Chapter 33

[611 words]

Just thinking about what happened yesterday made Adolphus want to handle those people himself. He took a long breath, trying to calm the mess of feelings swirling inside him. He reminded himself not to scare Laurinda. He hadn't even managed to win her over yet.

"Your injuries might look healed, but you've lost a lot of blood. It's weakened your body and even hurt your foundation. You really need to take care of yourself."

Not giving Laurinda a chance to say no, Adolphus turned to Helena. "Helena, can you get a month's worth of ingredients for medicinal meals? I'll write out the prescription."

He picked up the pen and paper from the table and started jotting down the herbs with a steady, confident hand.

Laurinda glanced up at him, watching the way he wrote. For some reason, she couldn't help but notice how nice his hands looked.

Eaton watched Adolphus, then glanced at Laurinda, who was still watching Adolphus. He looked amused, like he was watching a drama unfold.

When Adolphus handed the prescription to Helena, Eaton spoke up with a teasing smile. "So you're taking over my patient now? Last time I asked you to help someone, you had all kinds of excuses. Now you're all in. Tell me, do you two actually know each other?"

"No," Laurinda said.

"Yes," Adolphus said at the same time.

The second she denied it, Adolphus turned to her with a helpless smile. "We don't know each other? After everything at the Adams family estate, plus at school, you're really going to say that?"

Adolphus's eyes made Laurinda feel a little guilty. She rubbed her nose and let out an awkward laugh. "Well, if you put it that way, I guess we do. We're just not that close."

She honestly didn't dare keep denying it. Something told her if she did, Adolphus would find plenty of ways to make sure she remembered him. He was just... impossibly assertive.

York, on the other hand, was

completely focused on Laurinda's health and didn't notice the tension He'd thought that once she recovered from her injuries,

everything would be fine. He never realized things were this serious. That was his mistake.

Missing the vibe in the room, York looked at Adolphus and asked, "Doctor, does Laurinda need to take medicine for this? And the medicinal meals, does she have to eat them three times a day?"

Adolphus pulled his attention away from Laurinda and glanced at York, his eyes turning a little colder. He'd noticed yesterday that York and Laurinda had a special connection, but he still hadn't figured out who York really was.

"Twice a day is best, at lunch and dinner. And yes, she'll need some medicine. I'll write a prescription to help her body recover."

"Alright, thank you. I'll make sure she sticks to it," York promised.

Laurinda's face scrunched up, and she shot York an accusing look, clearly unhappy with his betrayal.

York pretended not to notice. When it came to Laurinda's health, he wasn't about to back down.

Adolphus watched them with a

flicker of irritation. He gently squeezed Laurinda's cool fingers and spoke softly. "You need to eat these meats every day. Are you going to stay at the Adams family estate, or do you have somewhere else in mind?"

"Can't I just skip them?" Laurinda looked up at him. The thought of medicinal meals sounded terrible. She really didn't want to eat them at all.

Eaton jumped in at just the right moment. "Those meals are all about

timing and

and/que. Adolphus, you

and Laurinda go to the same school.

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her

don't you just cook for bekat

your place? If someone else does it and messes up the timing, the effect

won't be as good."

"I can do that," Adolphus agreed right away, picking up on what Eaton was really suggesting.

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[597 words]

"From now on, you should come to the clinic for lunch and dinner every day. I'll make sure your meals are ready."

Laurinda opened her mouth to say no, but before she could speak, York jumped in, looking genuinely relieved.

"Thank you, doctor. If you need any specific ingredients, let me know. I can have someone deliver fresh supplies to the clinic every day."

York shot her a grateful look. With someone taking care of Laurinda-and a doctor, no less-he could finally relax.

The group seemed to have made the decision for her. Laurinda realized that refusing would get her nowhere, so she slumped back in her chair, lips pressed into a line. Every so often, she nudged Adolphus's leg with her foot, her silent protest against him meddling in her business.

Adolphus didn't seem annoyed at all. If anything, he looked amused, even a little affectionate, as if he enjoyed her acts of rebellion.

"There are a few things you'll need to avoid with the medicine and meals. No spicy food, nothing raw or cold, and try to stick to warm water. Stay away from greasy stuff too. No seafood, no alcohol..."

"I'll write up a prescription for you. I'll brew the medicine here, and you can pick it up this afternoon. You can have your first dose tonight. If you feel unwell at all, let me know right away."

Laurinda raked her fingers through her hair, trying not to roll her eyes at Adolphus's endless instructions.

"Let's start on Monday," she cut in. "I've got dinner plans with my dorm friends tonight, and I'll be busy tomorrow. It's not a good time for medicine."

Adolphus took the hint and stopped talking. He reached over and brushed a loose strand of hair from her forehead. "Alright. I'll bring your medicine on Monday. Wait here a sec, I'm going to make you a herbal pillow. It'll help you sleep better."

He walked toward the back room, and Laurinda watched him go, puzzled about why he was being so thoughtful. It was honestly a little weird.

Eaton noticed the mixture of confusion and annoyance on her face. With a knowing smile, he moved to the chair next to hers.

"Not too happy with Adolphus, are you?" he teased.

Laurinda caught the glint in his eye—he was clearly fishing for gossip. She ignored his question and shot one back at him.

"Is Adolphus always this chatty? With that face, shouldn't he be the cool, silent type? Or does he nag everyone like this?"

Eaton chuckled, running a hand through his brows and giving her a meaningful look.

"I don't think Adolphus has said this much to anyone in the past year combined. Isn't his interest obvious?"

Was it obvious? It was almost too obvious. That was what confused her most.

She didn't believe she was so irresistible that someone would fall for her at first sight. And Adolphus didn't seem like the type who cared about her family's background. She just couldn't make sense of it.

Eaton saw the struggle on her face and grinned. Adolphus had clearly fallen for someone who barely understood romance. This was going to be a long journey for

him.

"Remember what I told you? Be kind

to yourself, you can't figure something out, don't overthink it. Just go with your gut. It's the same

with people you like someone?

spend time with them. If you don't just say so."

"It's the same with Adolphus. If you haven't turned him down, it means you don't dislike him, Since you don't dislike him just let things happen naturally."

Laurinda actually took a moment to think about what he said. Eaton was ready for her to argue, but instead, she nodded.

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Chapter 35

[696 words]

Adolphus walked in just as the last part of the conversation slipped out. He glanced at Laurinda. "Who did you kick out?"

"Take a guess." Laurinda's eyes sparkled with mischief. For a moment, she thought the man in front of her looked even more attractive. If only he didn't have a fiancée...

That thought jolted her, and she snapped herself back to reality. What was she even thinking? Even without a fiancée, she was still a kid. She had no business letting her mind wander like that.

Adolphus didn't bother guessing. Instead, he turned his attention to York, who was sitting nearby enjoying some sunflower seeds.

York caught Adolphus's look and paused, seeds halfway to his mouth. The way Adolphus stared was almost intimidating. He didn't look like a doctor at all.

"Why are you looking at me? I didn't catch what she meant," York said, acting innocent.

There was no way he'd spill the truth. Laurinda was clearly just messing with Adolphus, and if he ruined her fun, she'd make him pay for it. He had already gotten on her bad side once today.

Adolphus seemed to understand exactly what York was thinking, and shot him a look that basically said, You're useless, then let it drop. He passed a small pillow to Laurinda.

"This herbal pillow doesn't smell strong, but it works really well. You can use it under your head or just hold it. Let's add each other on WeChat. If you need anything, message me anytime."

He held out his phone with the add-friend page open. Laurinda didn't hesitate, scanning the code and adding him.

Once they were connected, Laurinda hugged the pillow and stood up. "You should add York too," she told Adolphus. "Any payments for the medicine or cooking ingredients, just talk to him. He'll settle up with you."

Adolphus glanced at York, who was already holding up his phone and waiting. He wanted to say it wasn't necessary, but in the end, he accepted the friend request. York was Laurinda's guy, and you never knew when that might come in handy. Laurinda turned to the old man who'd been quietly sipping tea and eavesdropping. She grinned. "Eaton, how much do I owe you for your consultation?"

"My fee?" Eaton smiled. "Just bring me a couple of good bottles of liquor next time you and Adolphus have dinner at my place."

He said it like it was nothing, but Laurinda could tell he already saw her as one of his own. Sharing a drink with her didn't seem out of line at all.

Laurinda met his calculating gaze and didn't argue. "Alright. You can look forward to it," she said easily.

She checked the time, realized she needed to get going, and left with York.

Once they were in the car, York looked at Laurinda in the rearview mirror. His usual laid-back, snack-munching vibe was gone, replaced by a serious, almost chilly expression.

"Want me to look into that guy's background?"

"No need. I already did. He's the youngest son of the Lane family."

"The Lane family? What are they doing in Apex? Is he just passing through or is there something else going on?"

"I can't say for sure. If I remember right, the police officer with him yesterday is from the criminal investigation unit. He's probably

here on business than

involve us. He's pretty close to Larson, though."

York let out a silent breath, feeling a bit more at ease. Pairing that with how Adolphus had acted earlier, York was pretty sure he had it figured out.

"He's totally into you."

Laurinda rolled her eyes, curled up in the back seat, and shut her eyes, pretending not to hear him.

York scratched his nose and decided to keep quiet. He couldn't help but worry. Their little cabbage was in trouble.

At the Austin family home, Laura

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and Aiken headed out early to handle the share transfer paperwork. But the Austin Group's shares had only changed hands less than a month ago so another transfer wasn't allowed yet. They came back empty-handed, and Aiken looked frustrated and tense.

Without the shares in hand, Aiken couldn't shake the uneasy feeling. He kept worrying that something might go wrong—that Laura's real identity would come out, the shares would revert to Laurinda and he

never be able to get them back.

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Chapter 36

[545 words]

Laura noticed how stormy Aiken looked and kept her mouth shut. Around him, she just wanted to blend into the background, hoping his temper wouldn't turn on her.

"Laurinda is definitely doing this on purpose. The way she handed over the shares so easily... I knew something was off. She's just waiting for the right moment to strike back. Laura, you need to get in touch with your mom, right now. Laurinda can't be allowed to find her first, or we're both out of the Austin family for good."

"I've already tried, but I haven't heard anything. Aiken, can you send someone to my grandma's place? Maybe my uncle knows where my mom is."

Laura figured that if they used her uncle as bait, her mom would show up for sure.

Aiken's eyes lit up. He immediately got on the phone to arrange for someone to go to Laura's grandmother's house. He was determined not to let Laurinda get the upper hand.

When they got back to the Austin estate, the first thing they saw was Fabian sitting in the living room, chatting with Baily.

Both Aiken and Laura perked up. For Aiken, Fabian was a connection to the Gates family, and lately, he'd heard the Gates were talking to people from Frostford. Getting on their good side was more important than ever. Laura, meanwhile, saw Fabian as her ticket closer to the Gates too.

"Fabian, what a surprise. I was just telling Laura we should have you over for dinner, but she said you were too busy with tutoring," Aiken said, settling down next to Baily with his most welcoming smile.

Laura hurried over and looped her arm through Fabian's, acting sweet and close.

"Fabian, you're just in time. I'm stuck on a few physics problems... can you help me?"

Fabian gently pulled his arm free and turned his face to the side, trying to hide the bruises. But his injuries were so obvious, there was no way to disguise them. Laura gasped when she saw his face.

"Fabian, what happened to you?"

Baily's face darkened. "It was Laurinda, of course. She couldn't handle Fabian breaking off the engagement, so she found some Lowlifes to set him up. And fine he didn't even ask questions before taking it out on his own son. Look what he did to him."

Baily had already quizzed Fabian about his injuries and was furious about what he'd heard. If Fabian hadn't stopped him, Baily probably would have called Laurinda right then and given her a piece of his mind.

"Aiken, this is your job to handle. Call Laurinda and warn her. She needs to know that if she stirs up trouble again, the Austin family can crush her just like that."

"I will. I'll call her soon," Aiken said right away, but he kept his eyes on Fabian. He was sure there was more to it than what he'd heard. Everyone knew Finn spoiled Fabian. For Finn to snap like this, something big must have happened.

"Fabian, come with me to my study. I have a prescription from a top doctor-should help with those injuries."

Fabian knew he couldn't fool Aiken the way he did Baily, but he was confident he could get Aiken to help solve the problem.

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

Aiken nodded, feeling like they'd just taken a big step closer.

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Chapter 37

[597 words]

The two of them walked into the study together. Aiken really did pull a fancy little bottle of medicine from the drawer and set it down in front of Fabian.

"I picked this up at an auction. It's for bruises and sprains, so put some on. Now, Fabian, would you mind telling me what actually happened?"

Fabian took the ointment, thanked Aiken politely, and slipped it into his pocket. He left out the bigger details and just explained the main problem he'd had with Laurinda.

"So you're saying Laurinda hit someone? And then got those people to accuse you instead? I honestly have no idea where she learned to play dirty like that."

Aiken had never thought much of Laurinda. In his eyes, anyone who couldn't think for themselves and just bullied others was never going to stir up real trouble.

"Fabian, just leave it to me. I'll sort this out. She's got nobody left to rely on now, so getting her out of the picture will be easy. I didn't want to go that far before, but if she's asking for it, she can't blame me for letting go of the past."

He paused, glancing at Fabian. The aggression in his face faded, and he tried on a more friendly smile.

"Fabian, have you thought about getting engaged to Laura? We're planning a family party to officially welcome her, and we were hoping to announce your engagement that night. With the Gates family behind her, Laura wouldn't have to worry about being left out anymore."

Aiken looked genuinely concerned. "You know Laura grew up way out in the sticks. She's still not used to life here in Apex, and honestly, every time I see her looking so uncertain, I feel terrible for her."

Fabian could tell Aiken was trying to make a deal. He didn't even have to think about it. If it meant helping Laura, he was all in.

"Don't worry, Aiken. From the day Laura came back, I knew she was the one. We're close and sooner or later, we'll get engaged anyway. If it helps to announce it now and give her some support, I'm more than happy to do it I'm sure my dad will agree too."

Aiken's smile got even bigger. He felt like luck was finally on his side. Aside from a few annoying little things, everything important was going exactly the way he wanted.

"All right. When you get home, talk to your parents about this. Our families can have dinner together soon. As for Laurinda, you don't need to worry. I'll handle her right away."

Right in front of Fabian, Aiken dialed Laurinda's number. The call didn't go through. Both of them were

surprised. Neither had expected Laurinda to cut off all contact with

the Austin family the moment she

left.

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"Don't stress. It's normal for her to be upset after getting kicked out. I'll just send her a message."

Aiken opened up Laurinda's contact and recorded an angry voice message. A big red exclamation mark flashed on the screen.

He slammed his phone down on the desk, breathing hard and cursing under his breath. "She really went all out this time. Does she seriously think I won't be able to find her now?"

He took a deep breath and called someone else. His voice was cold and sharp. "Bring Laurinda to the Austin family warehouse. I need to see her."

When he hung up, Aiken calmed down and looked back at Fabian.

"Fabian, don't get involved in what happens next. I don't want the Gates family getting dragged into any bad rumors. I heard things are pretty important for your family right now so let's both be careful."

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[537 words]

Fabian couldn't believe how thorough Aiken was. He was quick to shower him with compliments.

"Aiken, you really think things through. Honestly, I think you're the right person to lead the Austin family. If you took over the Austin Group, it would only get bigger and better. I'll talk to Laura about it. No outside manager could ever care as much as family does. I can't wait to see how far you'll take the company."

Aiken soaked up the praise. Ever since he'd kicked Laurinda out, he'd fired the entire management team too. Now, with real power in his hands and Fabian buttering him up, he felt like he was floating.

"Aiken, I'll leave Laurinda's situation to you. It's getting late, so I'll go home and wait for your update."

"Alright. I won't keep you for dinner. As soon as I hear anything, I'll let you know."

Aiken walked Fabian to the door. Laura stood quietly by his side, waving goodbye. She wanted to leave with Fabian, to ask what really happened with Laurinda. But Fabian's face was still swollen and he seemed to be avoiding her. Laura understood and didn't push it.

After Fabian left, Laura hesitantly tugged on Aiken's sleeve. "Aiken, what happened to Laurinda?"

"It's nothing. Don't ask about things that aren't your business. Just focus on your etiquette classes. Soon, we'll host an official family event to announce your engagement to Fabian. Try not to act so small-minded. It's embarrassing."

Aiken gave Laura a once-over, squinting with obvious dislike. Growing up outside the family, she just couldn't compare to Laurinda, who'd been pampered her whole life. If Laurinda hadn't been so hard to control, he never would've brought Laura home.

Thinking of Laurinda, Aiken pictured her soft, porcelain skin, looking as smooth as a peeled egg. He didn't even want to imagine how incredible it would feel to touch her.

A twisted smile crept onto his face. His dream was close to coming true. Laurinda would be his soon. Once he had her locked away, no one would be able to stop him from doing

whatever he wanted. Content"

Laurinda sat in her study and shivered, a strange chill running through her. It felt like someone was plotting something against her.

York walked in and saw her dark expression. He figured she must be upset with the company's reports.

"Is something wrong?"

"I just feel like someone's scheming against me."

That thought reminded Laurinda of the small vial Irvin had given her. She reached into her bag, pulled it out, and set it on the table.

"Irvin from the Main family gave me

this. He said it's a kind of nerve agent, hard to detect after it's used.

Take it to the lab and have someone

analyze it. That guy's pretty interesting."

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Laurinda had tried to look into Irvin's background, but his files were encrypted. That only made her more sure he wasn't ordinary.

York had never seen anything like the vial before. He looked genuinely curious as he picked it up carefully.

"Alright, I'll get it to the lab." He

placed a folder in front of Laurinda. "Here's the information on the Gates family's illegitimate sons. They're twins and they each have some Influence. One's a small time online celebrity, the other's a pro gamer. What did you mean about someone plotting against you?"

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Chapter 39

[584 words]

"It's just a feeling, nothing to worry about. I'm having dinner with my roommates tonight, so have someone keep an eye on them. As for me..." Laurinda's voice faded as she smiled mischievously. Waiting around wasn't her thing. She liked to take the initiative, to draw trouble out into the open.

"No way. You're not in great shape, so I don't want you taking risks. I've already talked to Bonnie. She'll be joining your school as a teacher to keep you safe."

York's concern was obvious. He'd always believed Laurinda could handle herself, so he hadn't insisted on extra protection before. But after hearing what Adolphus had said, he wasn't willing to take chances. He couldn't risk losing her again.

"Are you sure this is necessary? The Austin and Gates families aren't exactly scarier than mercenaries or the mafia. I don't think they can really do anything to me."

"I'm serious. I'm not letting you act recklessly again."

York's voice left no room for argument. Laurinda stopped protesting. She understood their worry. If this would ease their minds, she could live with it. It was just one more person looking out for her.

Laurinda glanced down at the files on the Gates family's two illegitimate sons. Both boys in the photos looked a lot like Finn. Honestly, they even resembled him more than Fabian did.

"What do you think? If Finn found out he had more than one son, would he toss Fabian aside?" Laurinda's tone was playful, already picturing Fabian's face if that happened.

Back when Fabian was seven, Finn had a car accident that left him sterile. That was why, in the entire Gates family, Fabian was the only child.

"If there's someone better, who would put their hopes on a deadweight? But I don't think your goal is just to see Fabian abandoned. You want to take down the whole Gates family."

Laurinda caught the look York was giving her and snapped her fingers with a grin.

"Bingo. I'm not just after Fabian. I want Finn and the entire Gates family to fall from their pedestal. Finding his other sons is just so Fabian knows what it feels like to be cast aside. Nothing else is going to change."

As she mentioned Finn, a sharp coldness flashed in Laurinda's eyes. She could accept ruthless business tactics, but involving her parents crossed a line. Blood debts had to be paid.

Just as Laurinda was about to get lost in her thoughts, her phone chimed. It was a message from Adolphus, a photo of a bunch of medicinal herbs.

Laurinda frowned, already dreading what was coming. She picked up her phone and typed quickly.

I have a sweet tooth. I don't want anything bitter.

She barely hit send before another photo arrived, this time of a table filled with all kinds of candy.

The medicine is bitter, but it's good for you. I've got candy ready for you.

A smile tugged at Laurinda's lips before she could help it. York noticed and felt a wave of warmth, seeing a softer side of her in that moment.

Laurinda didn't notice York watching her. Her eyes stayed glued to a familiar brand of imported chocolate in the photo. Without hesitating, she cropped it using the image editor and sent it right back to Adolphus.

I want this one.

Adolphus answered right away. Address.

I'm having dinner at Aeterna tonight. You can have it delivered there.

Okay.

Seeing how quickly Adolphus responded to her little request, Laurinda suddenly thought Eaton was right. Having someone who cared about your feelings really did matter. was actually a pretty good feeling.

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Chapter 40

[631 words]

Laurinda set her phone aside and went back to digging through the profiles on the Gates Family's two illegitimate sons. When she reached the part about the guy who played pro esports, she glanced over at York.

"If I'm not wrong, didn't Lambert give me a few tickets to some esports event? Can you check with the housekeeper if anything came in the mail?"

York could already tell what she was getting at. He nodded and headed out to find the housekeeper. A few minutes later, he came back holding an express mail envelope.

"I checked. There are seven tickets. Were you thinking of bringing your roommates?"

"No, just the two of us. I'm pretty sure someone's keeping tabs on me these days, so it's safer not to involve them. I'll take them some other time when things settle down."

Laurinda had always been generous with her friends, but she wasn't about to drag them into anything risky. No point making trouble for people who didn't need it.

York nodded, agreeing that playing it safe was the right call.

"So we'll keep two for ourselves and hand the rest off to Inman and the others. I'll tell him to swing by and deliver the vial to the research institute."

"Sounds good. Handle it however you want."

Laurinda turned her attention back to the files. She needed to find a weak spot, a way in that wouldn't tip anyone off. Going in blind would only spook the other side, and she couldn't afford to show her hand yet.

Later, when it was time to meet up with Shirley and the group, Laurinda showed up right on time at the entrance of Aeterna. York had sent people ahead to keep an eye on things, and he confirmed the coast was clear. No one suspicious was lurking around.

Laurinda almost felt disappointed that no one had taken the bait. If those people didn't try something now, they'd miss their chance once she was back at school.

"What a waste. Maybe you should let it slip that I'm eating here tonight," Laurinda said, glancing back at York. Her excitement for the dinner was fading fast.

York looked at her, clearly amused but not sure what to say. Suddenly, he spotted someone in the crowd and his eyes brightened.

"Laurinda, Adolphus is here waiting for you. Why not see what he's up to?"

Laurinda followed his gaze and saw Adolphus at a table, the box of chocolates she'd asked for sitting right by his hand.

She didn't reply to York. Instead, she strolled over to Adolphus and grinned.

"Since when did you start running errands for people?"

Adolphus didn't mind her teasing at all. His smile turned even softer, clearly happy to see her this relaxed.

"I had business nearby, so I figured I'd wait for you. Here, your chocolates."

He stood up and set the box in front of her. Laurinda accepted it without hesitation, like she'd done it a million times.

"Have you eaten? Want to join us?"

It wasn't often Laurinda invited him so willingly, and Adolphus was genuinely pleased, even if he shook his head.

"I can't tonight. Let's grab dinner Monday instead. I've still got work to do, but text me if you need anything."

He had only managed to stop by for a few minutes, and his team at the criminal investigation department was still waiting for him. There was no way he could stick around for dinner.

"All right, get home safe."

Laurinda waved him off without a hint of regret. Adolphus realized suddenly that the invitation was just her being polite and he couldn't help but fawn a little exasperated but mostly amused.

"I'll get out of your hair then. Make sure you get home early after you eat."

He glanced over at York, who was

standing r

a not far away. With

someone like York looking out for her, Adolphus felt a lot more at ease.

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