

From Ashes of Scandal to His Embrace (Laurinda)

- Chapter 322

Chapter 322

[633 words]

After she finished eating, Laurinda thought of Seraphina, who had only just arrived yesterday. She glanced at Adolphus, a hint of worry in her voice. "Does Seraphina know we're heading back to Cabinda?"

Adolphus waved it off. "She's fine. Kendrick is with her. He'll make sure she's okay. We don't have to worry."

Laurinda smiled, reassured. "Yeah, Kendrick really does care about her. You can just tell. And Balaam and Regan seem to like her too."

Adolphus nodded. "Balaam and Regan are good people. If Kendrick likes someone, they're on board too."

Later that afternoon, Adolphus and Laurinda showed up at Cabinda Airport with Jasper and Teddy. Once they landed, Adolphus asked Foley to take Teddy and Jasper back to the Flame Training Base, then took Laurinda straight to the police station.

As soon as Laurinda walked into Kinsey's office, she noticed everyone looked tense and frustrated. "What happened?" she asked.

One of the staff sighed. "We can't open the file. Aileen suddenly stopped cooperating and refuses to give us the password."

Laurinda frowned. "Stopped cooperating? Did she see anyone?"

It didn't make sense. Just yesterday, Aileen had been desperate, begging Laurinda to get Aggie and Lawrence out. Now she was stonewalling. Had someone gotten a message to her?

"No, she hasn't met with anyone. No visitors, nothing. She only talked about her investments in the Charles family, not a single word about the Gates Group," Kinsey replied, his brow knit in frustration. He had already started looking into why Aileen's attitude had changed so suddenly. If someone at the detention center was behind it, he wouldn't let it slide.

Laurinda shook her head, still not sure what had caused Aileen to change her mind. Maybe someone had managed to get a message to her, but if Kinsey didn't know, she definitely couldn't jump to conclusions.

For now, the only thing that mattered was getting into that file.

"Let me try," Laurinda said, moving to the computer.

The technician glanced at Kinsey, who nodded. "Go ahead. Let her."

Laurinda sat down, typing out a string of code. She ran a quick test and saw that the password was complicated, but not impossible to crack.

"I'll need a little time," she said.

"Take all the time you need. We'll wait outside," Kinsey replied. He told the staff to stay, then headed out into the hallway with Adolphus.

The two men leaned against the wall. Kinsey pulled out a pack of cigarettes and offered one to Adolphus.

Adolphus shook his head. "I've been cutting back lately."

Kinsey put the pack away, chuckling. "That's good. Laurinda has never liked the smell of smoke. Even when she was a kid, she'd complain whenever her dad lit up." Adolphus smiled, his expression softening. "So you've known her for a long time?" "Since she was about six," Kinsey replied. "My daughter was kidnapped by a gang who wanted revenge on me. Laurinda saw what happened and actually snuck into the car with them."

Adolphus stared, surprised.

"She was really smart about it," Kinsey continued. "Once she realized they weren't in immediate danger, she called her bodyguards, called the police, and sent out their location. The kidnapers barely made it out of Apex before they were caught."

"My daughter was just knocked out for a bit, not hurt at all. If it wasn't for Laurinda, I don't even want to think about what could have happened."

Kinsey's voice grew quieter. "It's

hard, being a cop's kid. There's a lot

of risk. One of my colleagues... his child was taken as taken to A month later,

they brought the kid back, but he was different. Just wasn't the same anymore..."

Adolphus pictured little Laurinda, just six years old, sweet and innocent. It was hard to believe she could have been so brave back then. The thought of something.

happening to her sent a chill through him.

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"She's always been something else," he said quietly. "And she still is."

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Chapter 323

[631 words]

"Yeah, but ever since her parents' accident, she's changed. I've always worried she can't really process her feelings, that something might go wrong. My daughter's tried talking to her so many times, but Laurinda only ever shares the good stuff. She never says when she's struggling."

Adolphus could completely understand why Kinsey was worried. Harrell had

mentioned it too, how Laurinda was impossible to read. She just shut everyone out, especially therapists. Unless she wanted help, nothing would get through. She only ever let people see the parts of herself she chose.

"But honestly, she seems better lately," Kinsey went on, his face softening as he looked at Adolphus. "She told my daughter she met someone who's really good to her, who takes care of her, always puts her first, makes her feel safe. She can finally sleep through the night now. She's doing so much better."

Then Kinsey looked right at Adolphus. "I know she's talking about you. She doesn't have her parents anymore, so let me ask you, as someone older-while you love her, please just treat her well. If you ever wake up one day and realize she's not who you thought, or that spark is gone, or you get tired of her... just don't hurt her. Sit her down and talk to her, okay?"

Adolphus couldn't stand hearing that. Laurinda was the person he'd wished for his whole life. He believed in himself, that he could always love her. He cut Kinsey off.

"That's never going to happen. From the very first time I saw her, I knew she was the only one for me. I believe in love at first sight, and I know I can be loyal to her forever. You don't have to worry about a thing."

Kinsey hadn't expected Adolphus to be so sure. He stared into Adolphus's deep, steady eyes, and with all his years on the job, he could tell Adolphus meant every word.

He nodded and clapped Adolphus on the shoulder. "Alright. I believe you. When you two get married, I'll make sure to give you the biggest wedding gift ever."

Adolphus grinned and nodded back. He was dying to marry Laurinda too, but she was still young. He'd just have to be patient for another year or so.

About an hour later, two staff members came rushing out of the office, barely able to contain their excitement.

"Kinsey, we cracked the password!"

Laurinda sat at the computer, her eyes scanning the list on the screen. She quickly copied it to her phone. Aileen had been right-this list could really help her.

Kinsey and the others hurried back inside. He looked over the names, but none of them rang a bell. He turned to Laurinda, puzzled.

"Any idea who these people are?"

"Let Interpol handle it," Laurinda said, casual as ever. "If they worked with Aileen on all those illegal deals, they're probably up to no good abroad, too. If they get caught, it'll look good for your promotion."

Hearing her tease him, Kinsey gave Laurinda a look and tapped her gently on the forehead.

"You're really trying to get me promoted to the international level, huh?"

Laurinda looked totally serious. "If you want it, I can really help you make it happen."

"I don't want it," Kinsey said flatly, giving her a side-eye. He'd been promoted so fast already, people were watching him too closely. All he wanted now was to keep a low profile for a while. 'FindNovel.net

"No ambition at all. You know what they say? A chef who doesn't want to be a general will never be a good driver."

Laurinda shot him a playful look, got up, and let the two tech guys take her spot. She started explaining the password cracking method in detail, and both of them listened with eyes full of awe.

"Have you ever thought about working with us? You're amazing!"

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Chapter 324

[586 words]

One of the technicians turned to Kinsey, eyes full of hope. Kinsey could only shrug and give a tired smile. "She can't. She's just a senior in high school. She still has college ahead of her. Why would she work here?"

"What? She hasn't even started college? Then how is she so incredible?"

The techs were honestly amazed. They graduated from top schools, but compared to Laurinda's skills, they suddenly felt like amateurs. For a moment, they questioned everything they'd accomplished.

Laurinda just smiled and kept quiet. She figured she should let them hold onto at least a bit of their self-esteem. If they were good enough to work for the police department, they had to be pretty capable already.

Still, people at her level were rare anywhere in the world.

Once the files on the flash drive were taken care of, the techs packed up their gear and left.

Laurinda and Adolphus stayed where they were, lounging on the sofa like they had all the time in the world. Kinsey noticed and raised an eyebrow, giving Laurinda a questioning look. "What now? Is there something else?"

"I want to see Aileen. Can you set that up?"

He knew it. Of course Laurinda would have another impossible request. Kinsey let out a heavy sigh, totally defeated by this girl. "Alright, give me a bit. I'll take you to see her in twenty minutes."

He left the office to make the arrangements.

Laurinda settled in and sent the list to Jack, asking him to dig into who those people were connected to.

Adolphus leaned over to peek at her phone, eyes narrowing when he recognized a familiar name.

About ten minutes later, a female officer walked in. "Laurinda, Kinsey's ready for you. Come with me."

Laurinda handed her bag to Adolphus and followed the officer to the meeting room.

Adolphus didn't come along. He headed in the other direction, off to handle something of his own.

When Laurinda stepped into the meeting room, Aileen was already there, sitting upright. She looked completely different from before. There was a new spark in her eyes, like she finally had hope again.

"You don't look surprised to see me," Laurinda said as she sat down across from her.

Aileen had that old, proud look back on her face Laurinda figured someone must have gotten through to her. After everything Aileen had done to the Charles family, there was no way she'd be this calm otherwise.

"I knew you'd come for me. Nobody else knows the password for the flash drive but me."

Aileen sounded so sure of herself, like she had nothing to worry about. Someone must have passed her a message letting her know she'd be safe. She was getting out of here,

Laurinda was useless to her own.

Their deal was off.

"Oh, you're really that confident?" Laurinda flashed a cool smile. "I came to break it to you, but I already cracked the password. And that self-destruct program you set up? Please. It was nothing to me."

Laurinda's open disdain hit its mark. Aileen glared at her, hatred simmering in her eyes. She thought Laurinda was just as awful as her mother. She wished Laurinda would just disappear, too.

Laurinda ignored the look. She raised an eyebrow, lips curling into a sharp, mocking grin.

"I just wanted to see what kind of news your people sent to boost your ego so fast. Thinking about how you begged me for help... wow, that was pathetic." "Laurinda, you—"

As soon as Aileen realized she'd been rescued, she regretted ever asking Laurinda for anything. That video call was a humiliation she'd never get over.

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Chapter 325

[644 words]

Aileen looked like she was about to lose it again. Laurinda just raised her finger to her lips, giving her a calm, silent warning.

"Relax. I'm not finished yet. The list you gave me? It's already in the hands of Interpol. I wonder if those people you're counting on will have any time to deal with your little problem while they're busy running from the law."

She paused, her gaze steady. "And if they ever find out it was you who leaked that list, do you really think you'll make it out alive?"

Aileen's mouth opened, but Laurinda didn't give her the chance.

"You're celebrating way too early, Aileen. Did you honestly think you'd get a second chance? This is Cabinda. No matter how much power those people have, they can't bend the law here. What you've done would earn you the death penalty ten times over."

She leaned in a little, her voice dropping. "And you really believe they'll be so generous and take care of your kids? You have no idea about that place, do you? There's a human lab they run... can you even imagine what would happen if your children ended up there?"

Aileen's eyes kept getting bigger, her fear obvious. She didn't want to believe Laurinda, but something told her this was the truth.

"Laurinda, why can't you just leave me alone? Why are you doing this to me?"

Aileen shot up from her chair, her whole body shaking. She wanted to go for Laurinda, to wrap her hands around her neck. In her mind, Laurinda had been ruining her life since they were kids. Everything that had gone wrong, every bit of her misery, was Laurinda's fault. She and her children could have had amazing lives, but Laurinda had destroyed all of it.

Laurinda just looked at her, ice-cold. "Even now, you think this is all because of me? You really believe I forced you to do those things?"

Aileen's voice trembled. "It shouldn't be like this. If it wasn't for you, nobody would have found out! Why can't you let me go, Laurinda? Why do you have to keep coming after me?"

She never thought she'd done anything wrong. In her mind, Laurinda was the only reason her life had fallen apart.

Laurinda's stare only got colder. "You want to know why? Maybe you should ask yourself what you've actually done."

"I'm not a kid anymore, Aileen. I don't believe for a second that you had nothing to do with what happened to my parents."

She took a steady breath. "You were jealous of my mom, so you went into her room, planning to mess with her makeup, ruin her face. But instead you found her secret. After that, you talked to Finn, learned about those people, and made a deal with them. The day my parents had their accident, you were the one who told those people they'd be taking the mountain road. That's

why it happened."

"You might not have done it yourself, but you were involved in every step. Don't you think you deserve what's happening now?"

Aileen's eyes went wide with shock. She never imagined Laurinda knew about her parents' real identities. Suddenly, it was like everything she thought she understood fell apart. She stared at Laurinda in disbelief.

"So... you let Aiken find out your blood type didn't match the Austins? You set up your own exit from the Austin family?"

Laurinda nodded, completely calm.

"That's right. Turns out you're

smarter than Aiken, but you both figured it out way too late. I planned my departure from the Austin family from the start one step at a time. Otherwise, there's no way could* have taken the group's core projects so easily."

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Aileen heard Laurinda's words and felt all the strength drain out of her. She sank back into her chair, her face pale. She couldn't accept it. Everything they had so carefully plotted had been nothing but a joke to Laurinda. s̄wnovels

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"When... when did you find out about all this?"

"Which part are you talking about? My real identity, or the fact that you exposed my parents?"

"Both! Just stop with the questions and give me a straight answer!" Aileen shouted at Laurinda. Her nerves were shot, panic rising inside her until she felt like she couldn't breathe. She had no idea what else Laurinda knew, and the fear was eating her alive.

All she could picture was Laurinda discovering everything she'd done. There was no way Laurinda would ever let her kids off the hook. Honestly, Laurinda might destroy the entire Gates family.

"I've always known who I am. But as for you leaking my mother's identity, I only found out about that recently. Otherwise, do you really think you'd still be standing here right now?"

Laurinda had spent years digging for the truth about who had exposed her parents. For the longest time, she'd actually believed her parents had slipped up themselves while arranging for her to be sent back to Stonehaven for special training.

But as she kept investigating, she realized her father had used special privileges to get her out, and no one should have known her real identity.

Then, when she turned ten, her secret suddenly came out. And just like that, her parents' lives turned into a mess.

At first, Laurinda suspected Aiken and his wife. But eventually, she figured out the Austin family had died never knowing her parents weren't the original Abbott and Florrie. She crossed them off her list.

Then, just a few days before the New Year, she had this strange dream. She saw Aileen sneaking around outside her parents' bedroom.

She woke up in a cold sweat and started looking into Aileen's past.

Everything lined up a little too perfectly. The day Laurinda's identity was exposed, Aileen opened her underground casino. That was the day Aileen's luck started to turn.

Even though the investigation

showed Aileen never met anyone from Stonehaven directly, Laurinda recognized some of the people Aileen was dealing with. She'd seen their faces in Stonehaven before.

She'd been raised to always watch out for people from Stonehaven and could remember faces better than anyone. It didn't take long before everything clicked into place.

Aileen stared at Laurinda in horror, realizing there was nothing left to say. She shrank back, hugging herself, her whole body tense.

"What... what are you going to do to me? I... I only gave them your parents' schedule, okay? That's all I did! I swear!"

Laurinda stared back, her face completely blank, like she was looking at a stranger. Or worse, like she was staring at a corpse.

"So all these years you kept in touch with Aiken just to get information out of him?"

Aileen didn't even bother to deny it this time. She nodded.

"Yeah. Aiken was the only person who could give me news about your parents. Sure, it wasn't one hundred percent, but it was close enough. Most of the time, he was right."

"Don't try to pin this on me. If you want to blame someone, blame your own parents. They were way too careless. They knew people were after them, but they didn't even try to cover their tracks. They trusted Aiken completely."

"And do you really think Aiken had nothing to do with this? He's not stupid. Of course he knew why I kept asking about his brother's whereabouts."

Aileen was still trying to shift the blame, but Laurinda just let out a cold laugh.

"Come on, Aileen. I'm not an idiot. You think I'll just believe whatever you say? You know Aiken better than anyone if he'd known who my father really was, he would have

worshipped him, begged to be taken under his wing, and prayed every day for his long life. That's just who he is."

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Chapter 327

[611 words]

"You know, Aileen, you're clever. Every move you made was sharp, almost flawless. But you slipped up once, and because of that, the Gates Group lost everything. Laura was your biggest mistake."

The second Laurinda mentioned Laura's name, Aileen's face twisted with fury. She shot out of her chair, slammed her fists on the table, and started yelling. "Don't you even say that name to me! That little witch... she's actually pregnant with Bagot's baby! I was the one who brought her up, and this is how she pays me back?"

Laurinda blinked, not trusting her own ears. Laura and Bagot? When did that even happen?

Two officers pushed Aileen back into her seat. She caught Laurinda's confused look and flashed a nasty smile. "You really think you've got everything in your grasp, Laurinda? Right now, people are plotting against you. Aren't you supposed to be so smart, so impressive? Go investigate for yourself. Let's see if you can fix things before it's too late."

After that, Aileen just collapsed, slumping over like she'd turned to stone.

The doctor checked her over and confirmed she'd passed out from all the stress and exhaustion. Her condition wasn't looking good.

Kinsey came in from the next room. He glanced at Aileen, then walked over and gave Laurinda's shoulder a gentle, silent pat. He knew how shaken she must be, and he also knew that words would only make things worse.

"Kinsey, make sure she stays alive. There's still so much I need to find out, and she's not useless to me yet." Laurinda finally looked away from Aileen, meeting Kinsey's eyes.

She trusted Kinsey. With Aileen here, she knew those people wouldn't dare try anything. Not under his watch.

"I'll do my best. I'll track down whoever's leaking information and let you know when I have something. How long are you staying in Cabinda?" Kinsey asked, his voice full of concern. He knew her too well, knew how stubborn she could be. If she ran into trouble back in Apex, she might not have anyone to cover for her.

"I'm not sure, but I probably won't be gone long. Actually, I'm thinking of moving to Cabinda soon anyway. Apex isn't far, so if you need me, just call." Laurinda caught his worried look and gave him a reassuring smile. "Don't stress over me. I'll try to keep a lower profile. If I need backup, I'll call Tam."

Kinsey grinned at the mention of the old cop. That guy's terrified of your calls. He says every time his phone rings and it's you, he just wants to on away from home.

"Well, he's the only one who actually listens and gets things done for me. No one else is half as reliable."

"I'll make sure to tell him you said that. He just got promoted to deputy chief, and I bet he's already shaking in his boots."

Laurinda laughed, picturing Tam's helpless but loyal face. "He's not escaping. Before I leave Apex, I'll find a way to get him transferred here with you."

She and Kinsey walked out of the meeting room together. Adolphus was waiting in the hall. As soon as Laurinda got close, he slipped his hand to hers and asked quietly, "Are you cold?"

"I'm fine. It's all settled. Let's go home."

"Alright. Back to Lunaria Lakeside or should we head to my parents'?"

"Lunaria Lakeside. I've got a few things I need to handle."

After saying goodbye to Kinsey, Laurinda and Adolphus left the police station.

When they reached Lunaria

Lakeside, they saw Sam looking completely defeated, Egan standing nearby with a smug grin, and Orville still sitting in his car, not moving.

Adolphus narrowed his eyes at Orville and asked, "Is something going on? Do you need to leave?"

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Chapter 328

[643 words]

As soon as Adolphus spoke to him, Orville hopped out of the car and greeted them with a polite smile. "Hey, Adolphus. Laurinda."

Laurinda still remembered Orville, especially that time he'd handed her a gold card. She nodded at him. "Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year to you too, Laurinda. I actually came by to drop off some gifts."

Orville looked a little jittery. He hurried back to his car, grabbed the bags he'd prepared, and brought them over to Laurinda and Adolphus.

Laurinda couldn't figure out why he seemed so nervous, but she didn't ask. Instead, she just smiled and said, "It's freezing out here. Why don't you come upstairs and have some tea?"

Orville looked surprised by the invitation. He glanced over at Adolphus, almost like he was waiting for his approval.

Adolphus just raised an eyebrow. "Why are you looking at me? You're already here, and we're not about to kick you out. Come on in. We can talk inside."

Orville looked both relieved and a little overwhelmed. The whole drive over, he'd worried that Adolphus might be upset and send him away. Now it seemed he'd been stressing over nothing.

Inside, Laurinda took a look at the pile of gifts Orville had brought. It was a lot. She couldn't help but notice he'd brought three of the same pricey bird's nest gift boxes. That seemed a bit much.

"You really didn't have to bring this much," Laurinda said.

Orville shook his head. "It's not too much at all. Just a small gesture from us."

Adolphus picked up on something in his words. He narrowed his eyes and his tone turned a little sharp. "Who's 'us'?"

Orville realized he'd let something slip. He awkwardly tapped his own lips, then gave Adolphus a sheepish smile. "Well, Adolphus, they know they messed up. They're too embarrassed to come apologize to Laurinda themselves, so they asked me to bring these gifts over for them."

Adolphus started to say something, but Laurinda cut him off. "Just leave them. Come in and have some water."

She knew Adolphus always got cold

and protective because of her, but honestly, nothing bad had really happened and she'd already let it go. The others had taken the step to apologize, and since they were going to keep running into each other, there was no need to keep

things awkward.

As she slipped off her coat, Laurinda handed it to Adolphus. "You guys relax. I've got a few things to handle in the study."

Before Adolphus could say anything, Laurinda had already headed off toward her office. She needed to

look into what was going on with et

Laura and Bagot, and she wanted to find out what the people from Stonehaven were up to. Ever since Aileen had mentioned it, she couldn't stop thinking about it.

Adolphus put Laurinda's coat on the rack and turned back to Orville, who was still standing there, clearly unsure of himself. Adolphus didn't bring up the gifts again.

"I heard your family's hotel just opened up a new air route. Now you can fly in fresh seafood from Australia, right?"

That was something Kendrick had told him about, actually hoping Adolphus could help make the connection. Kendrick's private dining club needed some high-end Australian seafood.

Orville's eyes lit up. "Yeah, the first shipment came in at noon today. Adolphus, do you want to take Laurinda out for a seafood feast? I can call ahead and get you a table."

Egan, who'd been quiet up to now, tapped Orville on the shoulder with a grin. "Do you even need to ask? If Adolphus is bringing it up, he's obviously interested. Call the restaurant and save a spot. I'll treat Laurinda to dinner."

Orville jumped in right away. "No way, I can't let you pay. Let me play host. I already told Laurinda back at Apex that if she ever came to Cabinda, I'd take care of everything. Food, fun, you name it. I'll make the call right now."

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Chapter 329

[580 words]

Orville started heading off to make the call, but Adolphus poured some water, his voice dropping. "Dinner's on me tonight. Let's invite everyone who's free. It's been ages since we all sat down together."

"Sounds good. I'll ask the hotel to set it up right now."

"Wait, Adolphus, weren't we talking about tomorrow night?" Egan reached out and stopped Orville, glancing at Adolphus. He lowered his voice. "You and Laurinda just got here, and you haven't even told her yet. Maybe it's better if it's just us tonight. Let's skip inviting the whole crowd for now."

Adolphus noticed Egan's hesitation and figured there was something else going on. He nodded. "Alright, just us then."

Egan grinned, patting Orville on the shoulder. "Go on, make the call. A table for ten should be enough."

Orville caught the hint that Egan wanted a private word with Adolphus. He also knew about what had happened last night, so he just nodded and stepped out onto the balcony with his phone.

Adolphus turned to Egan. "So, what happened? Something up?"

Adolphus wasn't one for small talk. He wanted answers.

Egan didn't hold back. He told him exactly what went down at the bar last night.

"After you made things official, everyone was asking Sam for details. He was already in a bad mood, so someone started a rumor that he was upset because of Laurinda. They twisted it, saying Laurinda knew Sam first, used him to get close to you, then dumped him, and that's why Sam was so heartbroken about your announcement."

"Did you find out who started it?" Adolphus's face was stone cold, his voice sharp.

Egan nodded, recognizing the warning sign. "Yeah. It was the youngest Henley kid from South Cabinda. He used to be head over heels for Adah, but now he's hanging around with Candida."

"Candida?" Adolphus let out a cold laugh. He honestly hadn't realized his niece was getting mixed up with people like that.

"He get what he deserved?"

"Edison and Hale already gave him a beating. He ended up in the hospital. By the time Orville got there, they'd already split them up. Candida's still making a scene, threatening to drag the Brown and Douglas families into it. Tonly heard all this from Orville. Otherwise, I wouldn't have dared bring it to you."

Adolphus sat back on the sofa, silent for a moment, then glanced over at Sam.

"Looks like we need to clean house in our circle. Candida's really trying to mess with the Browns and Douglases?"

His tone was cold and heavy. He'd been disappointed in Candida for a while. He never really expected the

Lane family to stick together, but letting Saul spread lies about

Laurinda was something he couldn't ignore.

Egan understood the tension. Adolphus and his third sister had never really gotten along—she always thought he was just a spoiled rich kid-but Adolphus had always treated Candida well.

"Maybe Candida's just confused....." Egan tried to defend her, looking uncomfortable.

Adolphus scoffed. "Confused? She's twenty. Who's left to fool her at this point? I bet she actually believes all this. Saul wouldn't dare stir things up if Candida wasn't backing him, right?"

He rolled his lighter in his fingers and looked over at Sam.

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"You're the one they're talking about. Your name's been dragged through the mud because of this guy's lies. You've got every right to go after the Henleys. And those useless group chats, just shut them down. Keep the ones who matter, kick out the rest. Give them a few nice meals and suddenly they forget who's taking care of them."

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"I've already lined everything up for dealing with the Henley family," Sam said.

"Once the holiday's over, we'll get started. Trust me, you won't have to wait much longer."

Sam had heard about the whole thing yesterday, and he figured Adolphus would be pretty upset. He'd wasted no time, already digging into who was behind the rumors. Anyone involved had been kicked out, no exceptions.

"We're already sorting it out. Everyone who spread those rumors is gone. I also made it clear that there's nothing between me and Laurinda. But since she wants to keep things quiet, I haven't mentioned how much she's helped the company."

Adolphus nodded, looking pleased with how fast Sam was handling everything. He wasn't letting any of the troublemakers off easy, especially Candida.

"Let's talk to Laurinda later," Adolphus said. "Maybe she'd be okay with being listed as a technical consultant?"

Egan, who'd been listening nearby, jumped in with his own idea. "That'd be perfect. If the Bill Group's PR team puts out the announcement, no one will question it."

Sam nodded. "As soon as Laurinda agrees, I'll set it up."

Meanwhile, Laurinda was in her study, tracking people's movements one by one. She still couldn't find anything related to what Aileen had mentioned. It wasn't until she checked on Laura that something stood out—Laura hadn't left the villa on the outskirts of Bagot for a whole week. No movement at all. That was suspicious.

Laurinda leaned back in her chair, letting her hands fall away from the keyboard. Someone needed to check on Laura. She closed her eyes, thinking it over. No one seemed right for the job, until suddenly she thought of the perfect person. She picked up her phone and called Kinsey.

Kinsey was a little surprised to get her call so soon after she'd left. He wondered if something had happened.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I need your help," Laurinda said. "I tracked down Laura's location. Could you have an officer drop by, just to make sure she's still there? Say it's about Baily's report- claim she took off with his stuff. That should be enough to bring her in for questioning if needed."

Kinsey immediately understood what she wanted and how to make it work. "Got it. I'll handle it right now. I'll call you after with the details."

"Thanks, Kinsey."

He just grunted in reply and hung up.

There was a knock at the door. Laurinda set down her phone and called out, "Come in."

Adolphus walked in with a glass of warm water and set it down beside her. He glanced at her computer screen, noticing the long list of tracked movements.

"Who are you looking into?" he asked.

"The Charles family," Laurinda replied. "Everything about their movements looks normal. Except Laura. She hasn't left that villa near Bagot for over a week. That's not normal."

"Laura? How's she mixed up with Bagot?" Adolphus sounded

genuinely surprised. It had been ages since he'd heard her name. The

last he knew, she'd run off with

Baily's money and vanished.

"I'm not sure when they got together, Laurinda said. "I only found out today when sa

She told me Laura's pregnant-with Bagot's child."

Adolphus raised his eyebrows, but quickly recovered, shaking his head with a cold laugh. "The Charles family is such a mess."

Laurinda took a sip of the water he'd brought, a spark lighting up her eyes. "A little mess makes it easier to take them down."

Things were moving fast now. The Charles family's time was almost up.

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Chapter 331

[642 words]

Adolphus watched her, noticing the excitement lighting up her face. He reached out, gently ruffling her hair, and spoke in a soft voice. "Alright, let's not worry about them anymore. Orville booked us a private room. How about seafood for dinner?"

Laurinda was always up for seafood. Just the mention of it made her mood do a complete one-eighty. Whatever irritation Aileen had left behind vanished in an instant.

She stood up, already smiling. "Let's go. It's getting late and I'm starving."

Without another word, Laurinda grabbed Adolphus's hand and pulled him out of the study. She couldn't stop thinking about the meal they were about to have.

When they got to Villa Sera and walked into the lobby, a loud argument caught their attention. It sounded like people were fighting over a private room.

Orville glanced at Adolphus, gave a quick nod, and headed over to handle the situation.

Laurinda didn't care at first. She was about to keep walking when she suddenly froze, catching sight of someone familiar in the crowd. Her whole body tensed and she stopped right where she was.

Adolphus noticed immediately. He turned to her, leaning down a bit so only she could hear. "What's wrong?" His voice was gentle, concerned.

Laurinda let go of his hand and leaned in, whispering by his ear. "I just saw someone I know. I need to go talk to them. You guys go ahead. Don't wait for me. I'll come find you in a bit."

Adolphus saw her expression and realized this wasn't just some casual acquaintance. He nodded without pressing her for details. "Alright. I'll text you the room number. Just ask a waiter to bring you up when you're done."

"Okay," Laurinda replied quietly, then headed straight toward the commotion.

Adolphus watched her for a moment, then left with the two men who'd come with him.

Egan glanced over his shoulder, wanting to ask what Laurinda was up to, but one look at Adolphus's face told him to keep quiet.

Laurinda made her way into the crowd and tapped one of the men on the shoulder. When he turned around and saw it was her, his whole body went stiff. He looked shocked, like he couldn't believe she was standing there. Wasn't she supposed to be in Apex?

Laurinda, unfazed by his reaction, just looked at him coldly. "Come with me."

She didn't bother with any extra words or explanations. Without looking back, she walked out of the lobby.

The man followed, looking troubled

They walked until they nee

but clearly too scared to refuse.

quieter spat behind the hotel

where.

no one could see them.

Before Laurinda could even say anything, the man dropped to one knee and gave her a respectful knight's salute. "Lord."

She stared down at him, her voice icy and calm. "Who sent you to Cabinda?"

"We're here for business," he answered, his tone cautious. "But some things Lord we can't talk about them with you. I hope you can understand."

"Understand? Not a chance. You know what happens to traitors, don't you?"

As she spoke, Laurinda toyed with a small pistol in her hand. Before he could react, she pressed the barrel right against his forehead.

He felt the cold metal and his eyes went wide with panic. He knew what Laurinda was capable of. She was ruthless. If she said she'd kill him, she meant it.

"Lord... this... this is Cabinda. You can't just do whatever you want here."

His voice shook as he spoke, desperate to save himself. He figured maybe Laurinda would hold back in a place like this.

"Afraid?

should'ou're scared, you never

come here. You're right,

this is Cabinda. But that doesn't ragani wan't kill you if feel like it

mean

She leaned in, her voice low and steady. "Ever heard of the Lane family? I'm pretty

sure if I killed you right here, they'd take care of it for me."

Laurinda sounded completely sure of herself. She was good at pulling strings and she knew Adolphus would have her back, no matter what.

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Chapter 332

[579 words]

The man froze, every muscle tense. Before coming to Cabinda, he had done his homework. He knew the Lane family ran this place, and that protecting Laurinda would be effortless for them.

His own identity was a lie, just a cover. If he died here, no one would look into it. No one would care about the fate of a man who didn't even officially exist.

His confidence slipped away. He dropped from one knee to both, surrendering completely. Whatever punishment waited for him back home didn't matter anymore. All he cared about was making it through this moment with Laurinda.

"Baily sent us," he admitted, hoping Laurinda would let him live out of respect for Baily.

She just looked at him, unimpressed. "I already know you work for Baily. What I want to know is why you're here. Was it to rescue Aileen?"

He shook his head. "No. We're here to take the real Lord back to Stonehaven."

The words tumbled out as he shut his eyes. He didn't know if Laurinda would lose it when she heard their real mission. After all, this was a direct threat to her position.

Laurinda caught the phrase "real Lord" and instantly thought of Laura. She arched an eyebrow, her lips curling into a cold smile.

"Laura? So Baily knows about the Austin family's secret? The whole real-versus- fake daughter thing? Do you have Laura now?"

It finally made sense. Laura had disappeared for a week, leaving no trace. Now Laurinda realized Stonehaven's people had already taken her. So that's what Aileen had been hinting at.

Laurinda's reaction was nothing like what the man had expected. Shouldn't she be panicking? If Laura made it back to Stonehaven, Laurinda's whole position could collapse. Didn't that scare her?

He couldn't help but ask, watching her unreadable smile. "Lord, aren't you worried? If the real Lord returns to the Austin family, won't you lose everything?"

Back in Stonehaven, everyone was waiting for Laura's return. They couldn't wait to drag Laurinda down, to see her ruined.

bet

Laurinda just shrugged, her tone cool and steady. "Do you really think I care about Laura's identity? It's not

like she's the only one who be Lord."

She looked him straight in the eye. "Here's the truth. The Austin family stands where

it does because I'm Lord. It's not the other way around."

"That's enough. Go ahead and take her. I won't stop you. And don't bother telling Baily you ran into me."

With that, Laurinda turned and

walked away without a glance back.

She was almost amused.

Stonehaven was actually inviting

et'

Laura back, not realizing disaster. seemed to follow her everywhere. Whoever got close to Laura always ended up worse off.

Laurinda felt her goal was finally within reach.

The man stayed kneeling, staring after Laurinda, stunned. Had she really just let him go? No fight, no threats, nothing. It felt unreal.

She wasn't even trying to stop thê.

Laura's return to Stonehaven was supposed to strip Laurinda of

everything, but she acted like it didn't matter at all for a moment, the title of Lord felt worthless.

Someone who had been hiding in the shadows rushed over when Laurinda left and helped the man to his feet.

"She just let you go?" the newcomer whispered.

He nodded, still uneasy, unable to put his feelings into words. Something about this didn't sit right, but he couldn't say exactly what was wrong.

"Let's just get back. Better not keep... Laura waiting."

He couldn't bring himself to call Laura "Lord." In his mind, Laurinda was the real one. Laura just didn't measure up.

A whole week had passed, and Laura hadn't learned a thing.

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Chapter 333

[666 words]

Laurinda followed the directions Adolphus had sent and found the private room. Even before she reached the door, the sound of laughter and conversation drifted out into the hallway.

As soon as she stepped inside, everything went quiet. Laurinda paused in the doorway, feeling a bit out of place, unsure if she had just interrupted something important.

She was about to say something, but everyone stood up at once, greeting her politely. "Laurinda."

Adolphus got up too and walked over, slipping an arm around her waist and giving her a gentle smile.

"Don't worry. These are my oldest friends. We've known each other since we were kids. Come on, let me introduce you."

He introduced everyone around the table. When he got to Edison and Hale, they both looked a little awkward, like they didn't quite know what to do with themselves.

"Laurinda, Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year, Laurinda."

Laurinda smiled. "Happy New Year to you too. And thank you for the gifts you sent through Orville. I really liked them."

Hearing her say that, the tension in the room eased, and both guys finally smiled.

"Glad you liked them."

"That's good to hear."

Laurinda chatted with them for a bit, then Adolphus led her over to the main seat at the table and pulled out a chair for her. He turned to Orville.

"Looks like everyone's here. Let's eat."

Orville nodded. "On it. Food will be out in a minute."

He sent a quick message to the waiter. Soon enough, the table filled up with all kinds of dishes. Everyone started eating and talking, the atmosphere getting warm and easy again.

Adolphus kept an eye on Laurinda, making sure her plate was always full. He joined in the conversation every now and then, but it was clear she was his priority.

By the end of dinner, everyone's idea of Adolphus had completely changed. Nobody was ever going to say he was cold or uninterested in women again.

The way he looked after Laurinda, you'd have to see it to believe it. It was like watching one of those stories where the tough guy falls head over heels and softens up for love. None of them ever thought they'd see Adolphus like this.

After dinner, someone suggested they all go out for some fun, but Adolphus checked the time and shook his head.

"You guys go ahead. I'll pick up the tab, but I'm heading out. It's late and Laurinda needs to get some rest."

Laurinda wasn't interested in partying either. She nodded, agreeing with him. "Have a good time, everyone. We're going to head back."

Adolphus didn't give anyone a chance to change his mind. He stood up, grabbed Laurinda's coat and handed it to her.

Laurinda slipped it on, handed her backpack to Adolphus, and let him take her hand as they walked out together.

Once the door closed behind them, Sam clapped his hands, his voice sounding more serious than usual.

"Alright, let's keep what happened

tonight to ourselves. You might have noticed the group chat's been a lot quieter lately. I kicked some people out. They crossed the line, said things they shouldn't have. You can mess with me all you want but Laurinda is off limits. You've all seen how Adolphus is with her. Don't risk your future by testing how far he'll go."

The room went quiet. Some of them had already sensed something was up, but they hadn't realized it was this serious.

"We're all adults here. We're responsible for what we say and do. I'm only warning you because I see you as brothers."

"I understand. And I never believed those rumors anyway," someone chimed in.

One after another, the group spoke up and promised they'd be careful. At the far end of the table, three guys stayed quiet. They'd already learned their lesson with Adolphus. and almost lost his friendship. There was no way they'd risk that again, especially since Laurinda had been forgiving and hadn't blamed them.

Meanwhile, in the car, Adolphus glanced over at Laurinda, who was lost in thought while staring out the window.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked quietly.

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[602 words]

"I'm just wondering why there are always idiots out there looking for trouble,"

Laurinda said, her voice casual but her eyes distant.

Adolphus frowned, trying to follow her train of thought. "Does this have something to do with that guy you ran into at Villa Sera?"

"Yeah, it does."

Laurinda didn't bother to hide anything from him. She told Adolphus the truth about the man she'd seen in the lobby.

"You know about my parents, right? They're loyal to my grandfather. He heard all those rumors about the 'real' and 'fake' daughters, so he sent people to bring Laura back, hoping she could take my place."

Adolphus's frown deepened. He looked almost stunned. "People actually believe that kind of nonsense?"

"My grandfather does," Laurinda said, almost laughing. "He doesn't care about the real or fake part. He just wants someone who'll do whatever he says, no questions asked. Laura's perfect for that."

She turned her gaze to the scenery outside, letting the silence stretch. Then her phone buzzed. It was Kinsey calling.

She picked up, and Kinsey's voice came through, tense and rushed. "I sent my people to the villa you mentioned, but Laura wasn't there. Instead, they found Aggie and Lawrence..... they're dead. Their bodies were in the basement."

Laurinda's grip on her phone tightened. For a moment, she just stared ahead, too shocked to speak. She never expected Aggie and Lawrence to end up like that.

Without another word, Adolphus spun the car around and headed straight for the police station. They went right to Kinsey's office.

A female officer greeted them, as if she'd expected Laurinda. She handed over a folder. "Kinsey's still in a meeting. Here's the report from the scene. He wanted you to see it first."

Laurinda flipped through the report, her face unreadable. When she finished, she handed it to Adolphus and sat down on a bench, staring into space for a long time.

"Bagot's a monster," she said finally, her voice shaking just a little. "He wasn't even their real father, but he didn't have to go that far. People like him don't deserve to be called human."

Adolphus closed the folder and sat beside her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and pulling her close.

"This probably isn't the first time he's done something like this," he said quietly. "Looks like he's running some kind of organ trafficking business. That's probably why Kinsey called the meeting

agnet

going to get what's coming to him. Even Pearce won't be able to get away with it."

He reached for her hand and squeezed it gently. "Let's go home for now. There's nothing else we can do right now."

Laurinda nodded and stood up. She returned the folder to the officer and said, "Please let Kinsey know 'be in Cabinda for the next few days. If he needs me for anything, he can call."

"Will do. Take care on your way back," the officer replied before heading back to her work.

As Laurinda and Adolphus left the station, she could feel eyes on them. She and Adolphus shared a quick glance, then acted like nothing was wrong, got in the car, and pulled away.

It didn't take long for a car to fall in behind them. Adolphus kept his speed steady, watching the rearview mirror.

Laurinda glanced back, her voice calm. "Let's lead them somewhere quiet."

Adolphus nodded, steering the car out of the city and onto a road heading toward the outskirts.

Laurinda watched as one car became three, then five, all following close behind. She smirked, her tone almost playful. "Looks like a lot of people want us gone tonight."

Adolphus looked over at her, saw the smile creeping across her face, and couldn't help but grin back.

"Are you scared?"

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[538 words]

"Scared? If anyone should be scared, it's them."

Laurinda flashed a confident, almost reckless smile. It had been way too long since her last real fight. With these guys showing up out of nowhere, it was the perfect chance to see if she'd lost her touch.

Adolphus couldn't help but smile too, watching her glow. He loved seeing her like this, wild and unafraid.

"Alright, let's make this interesting."

He drove with one hand, popping open the glove box with the other. Two handguns sat inside.

Laurinda grabbed one, surprised to see it was the latest model. She arched an eyebrow.

"We're really using these in Cabinda?"

"Don't worry about it. Just do your thing. With Locke on our side, even if the numbers doubled, she'd handle it."

Laurinda had to admit, having real backup felt amazing. With support like this, there was no reason to hold back. If these people wanted trouble, she'd make sure none of them walked away.

The car rolled to a stop halfway up a deserted mountain. Laurinda and Adolphus stepped out, cool and collected, eyes sweeping over five neatly parked cars and

more than thirty people climbing out.

Everyone was armed, some with guns.

Two against thirty. It looked hopeless for them, but Laurinda almost found it funny.

The group drew closer, the leader strolling forward, completely unhurried. In his mind, Laurinda and Adolphus were already dead.

He smirked at their relaxed attitude.

"Hand over what you've got. Maybe I'll let you die with your body in one piece."

As soon as he spoke, Laurinda recognized him. So, they were here for her.

"Oh wow, you brought a whole crew. All armed up, too. I'm touched you think we're that dangerous."

Now that she

he knew who they were, Laurinda stood up straight, unzipped her puffy jacket, and tossed it onto the b seat with everyone watching she slid the handgun into her waistband and snapped her baton open, the sound slicing through the air. Effortlessly cool.

She glanced over at Adolphus, who was lighting a cigarette.

"Let's get this over with. It's late, and I want to go home and sleep."

Adolphus took a long drag, nodded, put out his cigarette, and charged straight at the lead guy.

He moved so quickly the man barely registered what was happening before a silver needle pressed into a pressure point on his head. The man collapsed, powerless.

Adolphus stared coldly down at him, his voice like ice.

"Don't move, unless you want to die right here."

Seeing their leader drop, the rest charged, weapons raised.

Laurinda and Adolphus moved as one. Chaos exploded.

Adolphus fought with brutal efficiency, ripping a baseball bat from someone's hands and swinging hard at anyone who came close targeting their weak spots before they even had a chance to fight back.

Laurinda's baton cut through the air with a sharp whistle. Every strike landed with force, tearing through flesh, leaving the men howling or collapsing in pain.

Her eyes were wild, bloodshot, like she'd turned into some avenging spirit.

It was over in minutes. Thirty

now just a heap on the ground, groaning and barely breathing, weapons scattered everywhere. Silence settled heavy and strange.

Adolphus and Laurinda stood by the pile of bodies. Adolphus pulled a wet wipe from his pocket, gently cleaning the blood from Laurinda's hands.

"I'll make a call," he said softly. "Someone will come clean this up."

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Chapter 336

[640 words]

The man lying on the ground saw everything and just shut his eyes, completely defeated. He always knew Laurinda was a force to be reckoned with, but he never imagined the guy at her side would be even scarier. Over thirty elite fighters, all wiped out by just the two of them.

Laurinda gave a quick nod as Adolphus left, then walked over to the man. She crouched down, ripped off his mask, and grabbed his chin, forcing him to look at her.

Her eyes were bloodshot, that unsettling little smile curling at the corners of her mouth. It made her look downright terrifying. The man couldn't help but remember what she was like when she lost control. He couldn't meet her eyes, his gaze darting everywhere, and his voice shook. "My... my... Lord..."

"Did Baily send you to steal from us?" Laurinda cut straight to the chase.

He didn't even try to deny it. He just closed his eyes and muttered, "Yes."

"So besides you and Spike leading this sorry bunch, anyone else involved?"

Nash's eyes went wide with shock when Laurinda mentioned Spike. He looked at her like he couldn't believe she'd figured out they were both in Cabinda.

Laurinda noticed his reaction and her smile turned a little more playful. She sounded almost relaxed as she spoke. "You mean you didn't know Spike already ran into me? Don't you two talk? He's here to pick up Laura, you're here to steal the relic... and I'm guessing there's someone else dealing with the Charles family, right? Is Baily planning to take over their territory too?"

Nash shook his head. He honestly didn't know what Baily was really up to. He was just following orders. The command to kill Laurinda and grab the relic had come in at the last minute. He'd brought so many people, but still ended up failing.

Laurinda saw he wasn't answering and had no intention of letting him off the hook. "Not talking? Let's see how tough you are, then. Since you came here, don't expect to leave. Remember what you said to me on Mistfall Atoll? I'll make sure you get a decent ending too."

The moment she mentioned Mistfall Atoll, Nash's eyes went wild. He couldn't believe Laurinda had recognized him. When did his disguises stop working? "My-" he started.

"Shhh, enough. I gave you your chance, but you didn't take it. Now it's gone. Laurinda cut him off and before he could say another word, she dislocated his jaw. She had no interest in hearing another sound from him.

She checked her pockets and realized her medicine vials were all still tucked away in her down jacket. Standing up, she headed for the car.

Out of nowhere, a blinding flash of headlights swept over her. Laurinda spun around and saw a car racing straight for her.

The car was going so fast that Adolphus, who was still on the phone, couldn't even react. He just shouted at the top of his lungs, "Laurinda, get out of the way!"

But Laurinda didn't move. She stood there, calm as ever, watching the car barrel toward her. She pulled out her small handgun and fired twice at the driver, then rolled to the side to dodge the oncoming vehicle.

At the same time, Adolphus drew his own gun and shot several times at the tires.

The car lost control immediately, spinning off and flying right over the edge of the cliff.

Adolphus ran to Laurinda, helped her up, and quickly checked her over to make sure she wasn't hurt. When he

her into

saw she was okay, he pulled a tight bug his and voice shaky

urgent. "Are you... are you hurt?"

"I'm fine, just... you're holding me so tight I can barely breathe," Laurinda said, patting his back softly but not pushing him away. She knew he was shaken up. Honestly, she was too.

Catching her breath, Laurinda finally said, "The driver... that was Adah."

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Chapter 337

[587 words]

Adolphus just held Laurinda tighter, as if he hadn't heard a word she said. His mind kept replaying the scene of that car barreling straight at her. He didn't even want to think about what would have happened if it had actually hit her.

They stayed like that for a while, arms wrapped around each other, until his heartbeat finally slowed down. Only then did he let go, his fingers still shaking as he reached for her wrist. His voice was barely above a whisper. "Did it scare you?"

Laurinda squeezed his trembling hand and shook her head. "I'm okay. Really."

A few more pairs of headlights cut through the darkness. Laurinda glanced at the people getting out of the cars and held onto Adolphus's hand. "Foley and the others just arrived."

It wasn't only Foley and Garry-Locke was with them too. He rushed over, worry written all over his face as he stared at Laurinda and Adolphus. His voice came out way too loud. "What happened out here?"

Adolphus frowned. "Lower your voice."

Locke seemed to snap out of it, suddenly realizing how loud he was being. He quickly softened his tone. "Sorry. I just got nervous. Are you both alright? What's going on?"

Adolphus kept his explanation simple. "Those men were probably sent by The Charles Family. Looks like they wanted to take us out." He didn't mention that Laurinda was their main target. After what Laurinda had done to Aileen, it made sense The Charles Family would hold a grudge. He was sure their attackers wouldn't dare admit who sent them.

Locke's jaw clenched. "The Charles Family again. And Len still thinks we should help them out." He stopped talking, not wanting to get into family drama or scare Laurinda away now that Adolphus had finally gotten her to come home.

"So what are you planning to do with these people?" Locke asked.

"I'll handle it," Adolphus replied. "Just make sure nobody looks into those gunshots."

"You fired your gun?" Locke's eyes widened. In Cabinda, everyone knew you didn't use guns unless there was no other choice.

"Adah tried to run Laurinda down. I had to shoot out her tires. The car lost control and went off the cliff."

Locke looked conflicted, thinking it over. "Alright. I'll get someone to search for Adah. No way the authorities aren't going to notice, but we can't let The Charles Family use this to their advantage. We'll say it was a hitman situation and be done with it."

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"Sounds good. Handle it," Adolphus said, letting go of Laurinda's hand and turning to give Foley his instructions.

When the attackers were finally loaded into the cars, Adolphus came back to Laurinda. "That guy... Adah ran him over."

Laurinda glanced toward where Nash's body was. Her face was completely neutral. "He got what was coming to him if he hadn't been lying there, the car might have actually hit me. Take the body back. Feed it to the dogs."

She didn't feel the slightest bit sorry for any of Baily's people. If they'd won tonight, they would have been even more ruthless. This was just how things worked.

Adolphus nodded and told Garry, "Take him back to the wildlife enclosure at the base."

Garry grinned. "On it." He knew that place better than anyone. The animals there wouldn't even leave a bone behind.

Once everything was cleaned up, Adolphus brought Laurinda back to Lunaria Lakeside. Locke spent the rest of the night organizing a search for Adah. Foley and Garry headed back to their base with more than thirty men and five vehicles, ready to deal with the aftermath.

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Chapter 338

[658 words]

Laurinda stretched out on the bed, her hair still damp from the shower. Adolphus came in, carrying a first-aid kit. He sat down next to her and started checking her bruises, his touch gentle but his eyes cold and sharp, focused completely on the marks left on her skin.

She caught his hand, quietly moving the ointment aside, and then wriggled into his arms, nuzzling him like a cat wanting attention. "Didn't you say all those people have been dealt with? Then why do you look so serious?" She let her shirt slip a little, grinning up at him. "Isn't this tempting enough for you? Or is your mind somewhere else?"

Adolphus looked down at her, then pulled the covers up to shield her from the cool air. His voice was soft. "Don't tease." He brushed a gentle kiss on the corner of her mouth, lingering for a moment before speaking again. "Back on Mistfall Atoll... was it them too?"

Laurinda froze for a second, surprised he knew about that, but she just nodded.

"It wasn't just Baily behind that hit. Some of the other families got involved too. There were four groups, actually, but I managed to slip away in the end. Don't worry about me. I'm like a cat with nine lives. They're not getting rid of me that easily."

Adolphus listened, his heart twisting at the thought of everything she'd been through. He ran his fingers gently over the bruises on her shoulder. "You have me now. Let me handle it, okay? This time, leave it to me."

Laurinda watched him, warmth spreading through her chest at how serious he looked. She hugged him tight, not wanting to drag him into her mess, and snuggled closer, her voice soft and playful. "I'm sleepy... Let's just go to bed."

He tucked her in, put the first-aid kit away, then washed his hands before lying down beside her. Pulling her into his arms, he stayed right there until she drifted off.

But Laurinda didn't sleep well. She kept tossing and turning, caught halfway between dreams and waking, her mind restless. Only when the daylight poured through the windows did she finally sink into a deep, peaceful sleep.

She wasn't the only one who spent the night awake. Spike was restless too, and even farther away in Stonehaven, Baily hadn't slept a wink.

Baily had sent Nash and his men to

Cabinda the moment he heard Laurinda was there, but after a whole night with no word from Nash his nerves were shot. He couldn't stop thinking about what might've gone wrong. If Laurinda had figured out what he was up to, would she stop Laura from coming back to Stonehaven? Would she show up herself and tear the place apart all over again?

If Laurinda stirred up trouble in Stonehaven, the Austin family would take a huge hit.

Last time, they'd only survived because her mentor stepped in.

He waited out the endless night, and when morning finally came, he tried calling Nash one more time. The phone was switched off. Baily collapsed back into his chair, staring at nothing, regret rising up inside him. He shouldn't have messed with Laurinda. He had no idea how she might strike back, and he realized he'd underestimated her, again.

A knock broke the silence. He stood up and opened the door, only to see Kenny waiting outside. Baily froze.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

Kenny didn't waste any time. "I need you to explain something. Why did these people go to Cabinda?" He set a list down in front of Baily.

Baily hadn't expected Kenny to catch

on so quickly. He forced himself to stay calm, sinking back into his chair. "Just business. I invested in a company over there, but things aren't going well so I sent them to

handle it. What, is it a crime for someone from Stonehaven to invest in Cabinda?"

Kenny just smiled as if he'd known Baily would say that. "Of course not. But...."

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[646 words]

Kenny slid another list across the table, his voice dripping with amusement.

"Since you've already admitted to making those investments, I'm guessing you can read this list too? These people are wanted by Interpol. They've been running illegal businesses all over the world. Someone reached out to me a while ago, asked me to cooperate, and hand them over."

The very first name was Baily's eldest grandson. Kenny had honestly worried Baily would deny everything, but to his surprise, Baily was facing it head-on. Somewhere along the way, the old man had found some guts.

Baily listened in silence, then picked up the second list. As he read, his expression changed. He shot up from his chair, eyes blazing.

"Kenny, do you really plan to hand them over? If you refuse, no one can touch them. You know that."

"Baily, you've already admitted it. Why keep asking? I can't go against international law. Don't make this harder than it needs to be, and don't leave everyone out there waiting. People are busy."

A slow smile spread across Kenny's face. He didn't have to bite his tongue anymore. It felt good, finally getting a little revenge.

"Kenny! You—"

Baily's face had gone dark with anger. Kenny just chuckled, stood up, and clapped his hands for the people outside.

"Alright, you can come in. Baily's given his consent."

Baily slumped back into his chair, completely at a loss for words. He couldn't argue—if he protected his grandson, he'd go down himself. Kenny had cornered him perfectly.

From outside, Jarrett's angry shouts echoed through the hall. Kenny sat back down across from Baily, his grin only growing brighter.

"Baily, next time you want someone to leave Stonehaven, just follow the proper steps. I can cover for you this once, but next time, I might have to invite you in for a little talk."

Baily's hand shook as he pointed at Kenny, stunned that Kenny would dare threaten him like this. Did Kenny not care about Laurinda anymore?

Kenny caught Baily's finger, his smile fading into something cold and serious.

"You all set this rule, remember? Back then, you wanted to stop talented people from leaving, so you made it law. Now you have to follow your own rules. I'll be checking in from time to time. If this happens again, I won't let it slide."

He let go of Baily's hand, stood up, and walked out of the Austin family house without looking back.

There was a time when all Kenny wanted was to keep Stonehaven running smoothly, which meant

letting the old guard do as themet

pleased. But that had changed. Now,

he was ready to use his authority to keep them in line. If they finally behaved, maybe Laurinda would come back.

The news about Jarrett's arrest spread fast the other big families couldn't believe Kenny had actually made a move against the Austins. He'd always been the one to follow Baily's orders without question." Now, this sudden change made everyone uneasy. No one knew what Kenny was really planning.

Laurinda had no clue what was happening back in Stonehaven. She woke up slowly, hearing a kid's voice in the living room. When she checked her phone, it was already eleven. She forced herself out of bed and went to wash up.

Opening her bedroom door, she spotted Tanya and Abigail in the living room. There was a young woman sitting next to Abigail, looking about twenty-something, holding

a baby who couldn't have been more than six months old.

Laurinda blinked, confused, not sure why everyone was here.

Tanya noticed her standing there, looking stunned. She got up with a gentle smile and walked over.

"What's wrong? Did we scare you? We heard you and Adolphus were back, so we called him and asked you both to come over for dinner. He said he had some things to

take care of today. We figured you might get bored being home alone, so we decided to come by and keep you company."

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[384 words]

Tanya noticed Laurinda seemed a little out of it, so she asked gently, "Are we bothering you?"

Laurinda smiled, shaking her head. "Not at all. I just woke up, so my brain's still catching up." She helped Tanya over to the sofa, then turned to Abigail with a friendly smile. "Hi, Abigail."

Abigail smiled back, relieved that Laurinda didn't look shaken after everything that happened last night. She'd liked Laurinda from the very first time they met, and now she was eager for her to meet her daughter-in-law. She gave a little wave toward the young woman beside her. "Laurinda, let me introduce you. This is my daughter-in-law, Carla. Carla, this is Laurinda—the girlfriend of Adolphus I've told you about."

Carla's eyes lit up as she looked at Laurinda. Honestly, she was amazed. Anyone who could win over Adolphus had to be something special. And she found Laurinda way more likable than that Adah woman. Carla was always quick to warm up to people, so she didn't hesitate. "Hi, Laurinda. Nice to meet you."

Laurinda grinned. Before she could answer, Carla continued, "By the way, before he left, Adolphus asked me to remind you to eat properly. It's about lunchtime anyway, and I already made a reservation. Why don't we go eat and catch up while we're there?"

Carla's upbringing showed in every word. She had that natural poise you only see in people from big families.

Abigail chimed in, "Carla's right. Why don't we head out for lunch?"

Laurinda nodded. "Sure, just give me a second to change."

Since she'd only just woken up, Laurinda was still in her loungewear. She went to her room and changed into something more suitable, then opened a drawer and pulled out a red envelope Adolphus had prepared a bunch of these for the kids in his family, so she decided to borrow one for now.

When she finished getting dressed, Laurinda came out of the closet and

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tucked the envelope into baby Hanson's blanket.

Carla hesitated, glancing at Abigail, unsure if she should accept the gift.

Tanya noticed and reassured her, "No need to be shy with Laurinda. We're all family now."

The word "family" made Carla smile.

She suddenly realized just how much Felix and Tanya approved of Laurinda, and all those rumors she'd heard finally made sense.

"Thank you, Laurinda, from Hanson and me!"

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[510 words]

She gave a shy little smile.

The four of them headed out, joking and chatting as they went. In the car, Laurinda glanced at her phone. Adolphus had sent a message, letting her know he was handling the people they'd picked up last night and reminding her to eat properly.

She texted back a simple "okay." She trusted him to handle everything, so she didn't plan on stepping in. Adolphus always said she just needed to live her life and let him handle the rest.

Carla brought them to a cozy, upscale restaurant that specialized in Nexus-style home cooking, totally different from Kendrick's place.

"I wasn't sure what kind of food you liked, Laurinda, but I think this place is pretty great, so I went ahead and made a reservation," Carla said.

"I'm easy. Really, anything works for me," Laurinda replied with a soft laugh. She liked Carla's way of doing things, it just felt easy to be around her. Carla was leaving a great impression, and Laurinda could see herself becoming real friends with her.

A server led them to their reserved table. As soon as Laurinda sat down, she spotted someone she recognized. The other woman saw her too, and immediately looked like she'd seen a ghost.

Laurinda stayed where she was, quietly watching as Laura hurried away, her lips curving up in a slight smile. So Laura was scared after all. Was she afraid her secret would come out in front of Laurinda?

She didn't need to worry. Laurinda would let her go to Stonehaven and play at being Lord, just like she wanted. Soon enough, Baily would learn what a real nightmare looked like.

"Laurinda, take a look and see what you want to eat," Carla said, handing her the tablet menu.

Laurinda glanced through it and smiled. "Honestly, everything you picked looks good to me. Let's just go with that."

She handed the tablet back, and Carla went off to talk to the server. Laurinda turned to Tanya and started chatting quietly with her.

Meanwhile, Laura rushed back to her own private room. Gus looked over, frowning with obvious impatience.

He thought Laura was hopeless. After a whole week of training, she still didn't act like someone with real power. Thanything she was getting more temperamental. She walked around like she was already some big deal.

"What's with you?" he asked, his voice sharp.

Laura paused, thrown off by his cold tone. Ever since dinner the night before, he'd been like this, and it made her uneasy.

"It's nothing... When are we leaving?" she asked, her voice small.

She didn't dare mention she'd just seen Laurinda. She was terrified Laurinda would blow her cover.

Laura knew exactly who she wamet

and who her family was. Now that she had a shot at becoming Stonehaven's First Daughter she couldn't let Laurinda ruin it.

Gus looked her up and down, picking up on her nervousness. She only acted like this when something was really wrong.

"Your approval still isn't through.

another week. Did you get
Prop out there? Or did you con
into
know?"

into someone you know?"

His words landed right on target. Laura froze for a split second before forcing herself to act normal.

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Chapter 342

[594 words]

"No... I didn't run into anyone. I'm just not feeling well all of a sudden. I don't want to eat here anymore. Let's just head back, okay?"

Laura grabbed her bag and hurried for the door. Gus followed behind her, moving with a calm that felt almost cold. In his mind, he couldn't help but think Laura just wasn't good enough for this crowd.

He'd been taking her to fancy hotels and upscale restaurants all week, hoping she'd pick up on something new. But instead of growing or learning, she'd just gotten more arrogant. That was it.

Their group stepped out of the private dining room right as Laurinda was coming out of the restroom. This time, it wasn't just Laura who looked rattled. Gus's face went pale too.

He kept his head down as they passed Laurinda, not daring to meet her eyes. Nash hadn't come home last night. Gus was pretty sure he knew why.

The weight of Laurinda's warning felt heavier than ever.

As soon as they got outside, everyone seemed to breathe easier. Laura leaned against the wall, her legs shaky. She'd been terrified Laurinda would call her out in front of everyone.

Gus looked at her with clear annoyance. Suddenly, a thought hit him. Maybe Laurinda wanted Laura to go to Stonehaven on purpose. But why? He couldn't figure it out.

Back at the table, Laurinda was in a great mood. She reached out to take Hanson from Abigail, making him giggle with a few playful bounces.

The others paused, surprised at how natural Laurinda looked holding a baby.

"I had no idea you were so good with kids, Laurinda."

Laurinda gently patted Hanson's back. His chubby little body nestled against her, and it brought back a rush of old memories.

"I have a little brother," she said softly. "He was just over two years old when our parents passed away."

She didn't say more, but everyone understood. Tanya felt her heart ache for Laurinda.

"Locke told me about your brother. He said you did an amazing job raising him."

Abigail smiled. "Seven-year-old Jasper, right? He's already a star at the Flame Training Base. I never knew he was your brother."

Laurinda shook her head. "It's not because of me. Larson and Beatrice did so much for him. He grew up with the Adams family, started learning piano from Lea as a kid. He's gotten really good at it."

"Oh, wait, is he Lea's student? If I remember right, Lea brought him to Felix's birthday once. He played piano for everyone and totally stole the show."

Tanya knew the Larson family and remembered they'd adopted a little boy, but she just realized now that it was Laurinda's brother.

Abigail was thinking back too. Now it made sense the little boy really did look a bit like Laurinda. No wonder she'd always thought he seemed familiar.

"Jasper, right?" Abigail asked.

Laurinda nodded, smiling. She hadn't expected Jasper to have been to the Lane family's house before. Life really was full of strange connections.

"I actually have a picture with him," Carla cut in pulling out her phone and scrolling through her photos.

Her family was full of musician et

and her dad was good friends with Lea. The first time she met Jasper, she'd been so charmed by him She even named her own son lanson

hoping he'd grow up as wonderful as Jasper.

When Carla found the photo, she laughed. "Wow, I never noticed before, but you and your brother really do look alike."

Laurinda looked at the picture of

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little Jasper, her face softening. "He's grown out of those baby cheeks now," she said with a quiet laugh He's even more handsome these days."

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Chapter 343

[579 words]

Tanya sat nearby, nodding along, but her thoughts had already wandered off. With Laurinda and Adolphus's looks, their future kids were bound to be adorable. She couldn't help but start imagining a little grandchild, and the idea made her smile.

Laurinda had no clue what Tanya was daydreaming about. She just kept chatting with Carla, both of them bonding over stories about Jasper. By the time lunch was over, she felt like she'd made a real friend. Their connection had grown so much in just one meal.

Carla gently placed a sleeping Hanson into Abigail's arms, then turned to her mom with a playful grin. "Mom, I want to go shopping with Laurinda. You and Grandma can take Hanson home and get some rest, okay?"

She gave Abigail her very best puppy-dog eyes, and Abigail couldn't help but smile back, full of affection.

“Alright, you girls have fun. Buy whatever you like, it's on me.”

"Thank you, Mom! I promise I'll take good care of Laurinda."

Once Abigail and Tanya were settled in the car and heading home, Carla grabbed Laurinda's arm and couldn't hold back her excitement. "Let's get a facial first, then hit the shops. Honestly, I'm so full I can barely walk right now."

Before Laurinda could get a word in, Carla was already leading the way, confidently weaving through the mall until they arrived at a high-end spa.

The moment they stepped inside, the owner hurried over with a big smile, her whole attitude warm and respectful.

“Laurinda, it's been ages. What treatment are you thinking about today?”

Carla glanced at Laurinda's skin, looking almost jealous. "Your skin is flawless. Seriously, you could just do a simple maintenance treatment. I wish I had skin like yours. What's your secret?"

Laurinda couldn't help but laugh at her obvious envy. "I'll send you a set of my skincare products when I get home."

Laurinda's skincare routine came straight from a biotech lab, and it outperformed even the fanciest brands you could buy.

Even the spa owner, Magda, was clearly curious. She leaned in closer, eyes lighting up. "Would you mind telling me what products you use? I'd love a recommendation."

Laurinda hadn't expected Magda to be interested too. She smiled and shook her head a little. "It's not that I don't want to share, it's just that you can't buy them where. But can send you a set to try."

"Really? That's so generous, I almost feel bad taking it. In that case, treatments for you and Carla are on the house today."

Magda had a feeling Laurinda was more than she seemed. She thought, if she could get close to someone like this, maybe she could catch a lucky break.

Carla, though, wasn't the type to take advantage, especially not with business owners. She quickly piped up, "Come on, Magda, you don't have to be so generous. We'll pay for ourselves today. If the skincare works wonders, you can treat

Laurinda next time Now let's get

started. We want the full treatment, please, and we still have shopping to do after."

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Magda understood right away and didn't insist. She set everything up quickly and decided to handle Laurinda's treatment herself.

While Magda was giving Laurinda a

body massage, she noticed the bruises scattered across Laurinda's

skin. She almost wanted to call the police on the spot. Her hands became extra gentle, and she silently cursed whoever had hurt this girl.

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Carla saw the bruises too, but her reaction was much louder. She suddenly sat straight up on the massage table, unable to hold back a cry.

"Laurinda, what happened to you? Who did this?"

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Chapter 344

[606 words]

Laurinda only just remembered the bruise on her arm. She waved it off like it was nothing. "It's from sparring practice. I'm fine, it's already healed."

Carla glanced at her, a little embarrassed for even bringing it up. She laughed awkwardly, honestly surprised. She'd never heard anything about Adolphus being the violent type.

After their beauty treatments, Carla linked arms with Laurinda and dragged her through the mall. She was determined to spoil Laurinda and ended up buying her two new outfits, refusing to take no for an answer.

When they stopped outside the Queen flagship store, Carla let out a dramatic sigh. "What a pity. Queen is members-only and I never managed to snag a membership card. I can't even step inside."

Laurinda just smiled. "Let's go in. Pick anything you like, it's on me."

She pulled a sleek black card from her wallet, grabbed Carla's hand, and led her toward the entrance. The receptionist eyed the card, hesitating for a second. She was about to mention that it wasn't the standard membership card when the store manager came rushing over.

Before anyone could say a word, the manager greeted Laurinda with genuine respect. "Laurinda, you're here."

Carla and the receptionist both froze, staring in surprise. The receptionist especially looked stunned. She'd never seen the manager personally welcome a customer before.

Laurinda turned to the manager. "You're responsible for this branch?"

The manager nodded. "Yes, I didn't expect to see you here, Laurinda." Pansy had been with Henry since the very start of Queen and was one of the few people who really knew who Laurinda was.

"In that case, could you set my friend up with a premium membership card?"

"Of course. Laurinda, if you'd come with me, I'll take care of everything myself."

Carla, still a bit confused, followed Pansy away. The receptionist handed Laurinda's black card back with new respect.

"Miss, would you like a sales associate to show you around? We just got some new arrivals in."

Laurinda nodded, curious to see what the service was really like. "That would be great, thank you."

A salesgirl hurried over, all smiles, and led Laurinda to the display counters, introducing each item in detail.

If Laurinda weren't the designer behind these pieces, she might have actually believed the stories about their inspiration.

Her eyes landed on a pair of rings.

She stopped, taking a closer look Those had just been a

QUICK Sketch

in her notebook. She never expected George would actually turn them into real jewelry.

"Could I see those rings, please?" she asked.

The salesgirl's eyes lit up. "You have great taste. These are designed by Laurinda, our chief designer at Queen. They're a limited edition, only available worldwide."

Laurinda listened to her pitch, quietly impressed. The way the salesgirl talked, it didn't feel pushy at all, just made you want to buy it before someone else did.

The rings were placed carefully in her hands. Laurinda slid one onto her index finger holding it up to catch the light. A simple hammered band with a single pink diamond, subtle but so elegant. It was beautiful.

↳

The more she looked at it, the more she liked it. She had to admit, Henry really knew how to pick gemstones. This one was flawless.

Carla came bouncing back, grinning from ear to ear, her new

membership card in hand. She clung to Laurinda's arm, almost giddy. "Thank you ever thought I'd get one of these in my life."

Laurinda just smiled. The whole store belonged to her, after all. A membership card was nothing.

Carla's gaze fell on the ring. "Wow, that's gorgeous. The pink diamond is stunning, and it looks so good on you."

The salesgirl, hearing Carla's excitement, quickly opened the box to show off the matching men's ring as well.

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Chapter 345

[556 words]

"And look, miss, there's a little secret. When you put the two rings together, they form a heart. It stands for true love."

Laurinda stared at the heart shape. She was pretty sure she hadn't planned for that when she designed the rings. But it matched her feelings perfectly. She could already picture Adolphus's face when he opened the box. He was going to love it.

Just thinking about Adolphus getting the rings made her smile. That man was ridiculously easy to make happy.

"Could you wrap it up for me, please? Oh, and didn't you recently get a new collection of bracelets? Do you have any left in the store?"

"We do, but they're all sold out..." The salesperson looked genuinely apologetic. The new pieces had disappeared the moment they were released.

"Which one did you have in mind?"

Pansy, who was heading over to say hi to Laurinda, overheard the question. She realized that the new bracelet she'd put aside for Laurinda hadn't been shipped yet. It was still in her office, so she could just give it to her now.

"The Magnolia one."

Laurinda glanced at Carla. That bracelet really suited Carla's vibe.

"Alright, give me a second. I've got one in my office." Pansy disappeared, and a staff member led Laurinda and Carla to the VIP lounge for tea. The rings, already boxed, sat neatly next to Laurinda.

"Miss, your rings are ready," the staffer said.

"Thank you." Laurinda passed over her black card. The payment went through quickly, and the card was handed back.

Carla happened to catch a glimpse of the total on the receipt, and her jaw almost dropped. It was like discovering a whole new side to Laurinda. She'd just bought a set of rings that expensive without even pausing to think.

Carla realized she'd completely underestimated her. Wasn't Laurinda still in high school? How could she afford things like this?

Then again, Laurinda was on close terms with the manager of Queen. She clearly wasn't your average student. Carla felt like her own world had suddenly shrunk.

Laurinda noticed Carla was deep in thought and quietly slid a cup of tea over to her, not wanting to interrupt.

She watched the crowds strolling outside the window, lifting her own cup for a sip. The tea was bitter on her tongue. She definitely still preferred milk tea.

Pansy soon came back, holding a delicate box. She handed it to Laurinda. "Here, see if this is the one."

Laurinda opened the box, checked the bracelet inside, and nodded. "This is it."

She looked it over, spotted the designer's autograph, and then turned to Carla, holding the bracelet out. "This is for you."

Carla, who thought she'd seen it all, was genuinely stunned. She knew this was a million dollar bracelet. She shook her head backing away a little. "No, no, I can't accept something like this..."

"It's fine. As long as you like it, that's all that matters."

Laurinda stood up and gently took Carla's wrist, expertly clasping the bracelet for her. She stepped back to admire her work. "Your skin is so fair. This Magnolia bracelet looks amazing on you."

Carla kept staring at the bracelet on her wrist, unable to hide how much she loved it: She glanced up at Laurinda, a little shy but she could tell Laurinda really wanted her to have it. So she accepted it with a smile.

"Thank you for the gift. Really."

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[547 words]

Pansy and Laurinda sat together for a bit before heading off to take care of their

own things. Laurinda and Carla wandered around Queen for a while, checking out a few more shops before stepping outside.

"Carla."

Carla stopped when she heard someone call her name from behind. She turned, and Laurinda looked over too, just in time to see a girl in her early twenties storming toward them, looking absolutely furious.

Carla's head throbbed the moment she recognized Candida. Whenever this spoiled princess was in a bad mood, everyone nearby paid the price. Carla had no idea who had set her off this time.

"Are you shopping alone?" Carla asked, her voice soft and gentle.

"Carla, can you lend me some money? I want to buy something, but I don't have enough."

Carla frowned, caught off guard by the blunt request. "How come you're out of cash?"

Candida let out an annoyed sigh. "Don't even ask. It's Adolphus. He started talking nonsense to my dad, and now my dad's frozen all my cards."

She sounded irritated and impatient. Saul was still in the hospital, and she needed to buy him a decent gift, but her cards were useless. At least she'd bumped into Carla.

Carla glanced at Laurinda, thinking about introducing Candida, but Laurinda just looked bored, so she didn't bother.

"Adolphus never gets involved in other people's business. What did you do to make him go running to Derek?" Carla wasn't planning to lend any money, but her curiosity got the better of her.

"It's all because of that tramp Adolphus started seeing. Who knows what kind of tricks she's pulled on him..."

Before Candida could finish, she suddenly felt a sharp sting on her face. She stared at Laurinda shock, not even sure when Laurinda had come closer. She hadn't even seen her move.

"Are you crazy? How dare you hit me!" Candida shouted, completely outraged. No one had ever dared to lay a finger on her before. Who did this woman think she was?

"You insulted me, so I hit you."

"When did I even insu—" Candida shut up mid-sentence, suddenly realizing the woman she'd just been trash-talking was standing right in front of her.

The shock on her face faded and turned into a sneer as she looked Laurinda up and down. "No wonder you've got Adolphus wrapped around your finger. You really know how to play the game, huh? Sleeping around with some old foreign guy wasn't enough, so you went after Sam, and now—"

Laurinda slapped her again. And again. Four hard smacks in a row. Was this girl insane?

"You shameless thing! I can't believe you hit me again! I swear, I'm going to ruin you!" Candida screamed and lunged at Laurinda.

Laurinda was just about to kick her away when Carla, stuck in the middle, rushed forward and grabbed hold of Candida, trying to stop her.

"Candida, enough! What are you doing? Who taught you to say such awful things?" Carla's face was pale. She could barely stand to

en of

the horrible words coming out Candida's mouth. How could she say something so vicious about another girl?

And this wasn't just any girl—this was her future aunt. Making a scene in a busy mall would be a huge scandal if anyone found out.

Candida shook off Carla's hands and glared at her. "Carla, are you siding with her too?"

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Chapter 347

[652 words]

Candida glared at Carla, her swollen face flushed with anger. She couldn't believe Carla was taking Laurinda's side. After all, she was family. Her voice rose, sharp and accusing.

"Carla, are you seriously defending her? She does things that are completely shameless. Why can't I call her out for it? I'm going to let the whole world know what kind of person she really is. She was engaged, but still messing around with some old guy. You have no idea how disgusting she is!"

Her anger flared even hotter when she thought of Saul lying in a hospital bed. In her mind, Laurinda was the reason for everything. If Laurinda didn't know how to seduce people, nobody would defend her.

Edison and Hale must have been under her spell too, or they never would have hurt Saul like that. And Adolphus? He was so obsessed with Laurinda that he went to Candida's father and got her cards frozen.

Laurinda, on the other hand, was done paying attention to Candida's insults. She'd already gotten her payback and didn't care what Candida shouted anymore. The whole rant was recorded, every single word. She planned to use it in court for defamation.

If the Cain family couldn't teach Candida how to behave, then Laurinda was more than happy to let someone else handle it.

Ignoring the curious glances from people nearby, Laurinda calmly called the police. Officers and mall security showed up quickly. Soon, all three women were taken down to the local station.

Laurinda was straightforward with the police. She admitted to hitting Candida and agreed to a medical exam for the injuries. She even said she'd pay whatever compensation was required.

The officer seemed a little surprised. He wasn't used to people being this cooperative. He offered to mediate, but both Laurinda and Candida refused.

He turned to Laurinda, sounding tired. "You're the one who hit her. Why are you refusing mediation?"

Laurinda leaned back in her chair, glancing at the clock on the wall.

"I know I was wrong to hit her, and I'll take responsibility for that. But she started it by insulting me. I recorded everything she said, and I want to press charges for slander and defamation. I'm not interested in settling."

That caught the officer off guard. He realized he'd underestimated Laurinda, and maybe the whole situation was more complicated than he thought.

"Alright, let's hear the recording."

Laurinda pulled her phone from her pocket and played the audio. The officer listened closely, his expression growing more serious as the insults filled the room. He could see why Laurinda had reacted the way she did.

"You had this the whole time. Why didn't you say something earlier?"

"You never really gave me a chance. You just asked if I admitted what I did."

For a second, the officer didn't know

what to say. He realized Laurinda was sharper than she looked, holding onto this evidence until just the right moment. He quietly transferred the audio to his own device for the record.

"Hang on a second..."

Just as the officer was about to finish the paperwork, the door swung open and a man strode in. Another man in a suit followed, carrying a briefcase, with several more officers trailing behind.

Laurinda turned, watching them approach, waiting for the man in front to speak.

"We're all family here. There's no reason for things to get this ugly, right?"

Derek paused for a heartbeat when he saw Laurinda, surprised by how striking she was. In that instant, he understood why Adolphus, who had always been so distant, had suddenly taken an interest in someone.

"Hello, let me introduce myself. I'm Derek, Candida's father. I'm also Adolphus's brother-in-law. I've heard about what happened. Candida will apologize to you can we plea take care of this at home?"

His tone was warm and polite, making it clear he didn't want things to get any

worse. Derek had rushed over the moment Carla called, worried that Candida would end up getting the short end of the stick.

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Chapter 348

[566 words]

Laurinda glanced at the people trailing behind Derek. Her face stayed perfectly calm, her tone laid-back as she spoke up.

"So, Derek, you brought a lawyer with you. Doesn't really look like you're here to make peace. Good thing I'm not interested in settling either."

Derek hadn't expected her to be so blunt. He let out an awkward cough. Honestly, reconciliation hadn't crossed his mind when he showed up. If anything, he wanted to give Laurinda a hard time. But as soon as he heard she was planning to take Candida to court, with a recording as evidence, he realized his daughter didn't stand a chance. Suddenly, he just wanted to smooth things over, maybe talk Laurinda out of pressing charges.

When Derek stayed quiet, Laurinda's lips curled into a slight, icy smile. Her voice got even colder.

"If I didn't have proof on my side, would you still be talking to me like this? I doubt you'd care about my relationship with Adolphus then. So, tell me, why should I be the one to back down?"

"You..."

Derek was getting pissed off by how stubborn she was. He dropped the nice guy act, pointing his finger straight at her.

"Don't think you can do whatever you want just because Adolphus has your back. You should remember, this is Cabinda."

"And? What's so special about Cabinda? Are you saying the law doesn't matter here? Also... I really can't stand when people point at me."

Before Derek could move his hand away, Laurinda caught his finger and bent it back hard. The sharp crack echoed through the room.

Derek's face went ghostly white. He stared at his now-bent finger in shock.

The police chief who'd come in behind Derek rushed over, glaring at Laurinda. "What do you think you're doing? Do you even know where you are? I could cuff you for assault right now, you know that?"

"Oh? Go ahead, Alonzo."

Adolphus came in, his stride long and confident. He walked straight up to Laurinda, only relaxing when he saw she was okay.

Alonzo and Derek both stepped back as soon as they saw Adolphus. That's when they noticed Kinsey walking in behind him.

Alonzo didn't know Kinsey personally, but he recognized the uniform. Any trace of arrogance disappeared instantly.

"Hello, sir."

Kinsey glanced at Laurinda, who sat there cool as ever. He couldn't help but think This girl just can't keep out Cabinda. Guess I'll

of trouble even in Cab keep out

have to keep climbing the ladder if I want to keep up.

Derek, sweating from the pain in his finger, looked nothing like his usual composed self. "Adolphus, you're just in time. Can you please talk to your girlfriend? How could she do something like this? We're albfamily here why would she sue Candida This could really mess things up for her."

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Adolphus lowered his eyes, unwrapping a lollipop and handing it to Laurinda before finally looking at Derek.

"Derek, I remember telling you this morning to keep Candida in check. What did you say to me? That she's young and doesn't know any better."

"Well, my girlfriend's even younger than Candida. She's at that rebellious age, can't help her temper sometimes so, what can I do? just

have to spoil her. If I don't, I'm the one who pays for it. That's just how

it is."

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"One more thing. Candida's the one who made this mess, not Laurinda. Did Candida think about her reputation when she started throwing insults? Why shouldn't she be held responsible?"

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Chapter 349

[592 words]

Derek couldn't believe how ruthless Adolphus was being. The way he defended his people made Derek's jaw clench in frustration. But there was nothing he could do about it. Adolphus owned half the company, and Derek knew better than to pick a fight he couldn't win.

"Anything else you want to say?" Adolphus asked coolly. "If not, I'm taking her with me. My lawyer will handle everything from here. As for you and Candida's medical bills, I'll cover them all. You won't lose out."

He reached out a hand to Laurinda, but she just glanced at it and stayed put. She'd been humiliated, and there was no way she'd let it slide so easily. If she did, everyone back in Cabinda would think she was an easy target.

Seeing she wasn't moving, Adolphus smiled, his patience tinged with affection. He could tell Laurinda wasn't happy with how he was handling things. He crouched down in front of her, gently taking her hand and speaking in a soft voice. "Let Rollad handle it. He'll take it as far as you want. It's just a defamation case against Candida, right? We can't lose."

At the mention of Rollad, the lawyer standing behind Derek started to feel uneasy. Bringing in one of the top lawyers in the country for something as small as defamation? It was overkill, and honestly, probably unnecessary. The lawyer tugged on Derek's sleeve, trying to signal that maybe it was time to back down. If this really went to court, Candida's reputation would be toast, and there was no way they'd win against someone like Rollad.

Derek didn't even notice his lawyer's warning. He was too stunned. He knew Adolphus cared about his girlfriend, but he never imagined he'd go this far for her.

"Adolphus..." Derek called his name quietly, hoping to pull him back to reality, hoping he wouldn't lose himself so completely over a woman. Things were looking grim for Candida.

Laurinda met Adolphus's deep gaze. She hesitated for a moment, then finally decided to trust him. She stood up.

"Alright, I'll give you this one. Don't let me down," she said.

"I won't. I'll make sure you're treated right," Adolphus promised.

He stood, grabbed Laurinda's bag, and took her hand, striding out of the interrogation room without sparing Derek another look.

After they left, Kinsey turned to the precinct chief who'd just yelled at Laurinda. "If you can't handle cases fairly maybe you shouldn't be wearing that badge This is a place for you to abuse your

power."

Alonzo's knees almost gave out. He didn't know exactly who Kinsey was, but he had a bad feeling about what was coming. He already regretted saying yes to Derek.

Carla and Quentin hurried after

Laurinda and Adolphus as they

walked out. Carla's face was practically glowing with excitement. She'd never seen the usually cold Adolphus act so sweet. When he

usually cold

knelt in front of Laurinda, it was

more romantic than anything she'd ever seen on TV. She almost

squealed right then and there.

Quentin saw his wife's excitement and gave her a fond smile. He squeezed her

hand and whispered, "Try to calm down a bit. Didn't you notice Adolphus and Laurinda aren't exactly in a good mood?"

"Not in a good mood?" Carla looked at him, completely confused. As far as she could tell, Laurinda had it

Cret

made she could do whatever she wanted, and no matter what

happened, someone was always there to fight for her and cheer her up.

Why would she be upset?

"Come on, after something like that, who could be in a good mood?" Quentin replied.

Carla finally got what he meant, but she still shook her head, not really convinced.

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Chapter 350

[583 words]

"Maybe it feels like a hassle to you, but for Adolphus, it's really nothing. Did you see Derek's face back there? If it were anyone else, Derek would've made a huge scene and argued nonstop. But in front of Adolphus, all he could do was force a smile. Honestly, I bet Derek's going to make Candida apologize to Laurinda this time. You have no idea how out of line Candida was."

Carla's anger flared up just remembering the things Candida had said. Laurinda was Adolphus's girlfriend. If Candida cared at all about him, she never would have said those things.

Carla and Quentin left the police station and spotted Adolphus and Laurinda waiting by their car. They hurried over.

"Adolphus, Laurinda."

Adolphus nodded at them. "We've got a dinner tonight. Want to come with us?"

Quentin's eyes widened in surprise. He hadn't expected that at all. Getting invited to one of Adolphus's dinners was a big deal in Cabinda-they were the most exclusive events around and didn't happen often.

"Are you sure it's okay for us to join?"

"Of course. Come on, let's go."

Adolphus climbed into his car and Foley pulled away. Quentin followed in his own car, trailing Adolphus to Villa Sera.

On the way, Laurinda didn't mention anything about Candida. Instead, she turned and asked, "How come you were with Kinsey?"

"They brought in Adah's body and the car. I went to headquarters to help with the evidence."

"Any trouble?" Laurinda's eyes grew cold as she remembered the two shots she'd fired.

"No drama. Pearce didn't want to get dragged in, so he signed everything right away. Locke's handling the rest. There won't be any issues."

Laurinda grew quiet. For a second, she felt a wave of pity for Adah. People like them, cast aside by their families, were worse off than anyone else.

Adolphus noticed she wasn't saying anything and gently squeezed her hand.

"Don't worry about it. She brought it on herself. A those guys from last night were sent to Mistfall Atoll. They're not coming back. As for the Charles family, it won't take much longer. We've got all the evidence we need. Once the James family secures the project, it'll all be over."

Laurinda nodded, then leaned her head on Adolphus's shoulder. After a moment,

she said quietly, "I'm really glad I have you."

"If you know how good I am to you, then stop being upset. The Cain family will definitely apologize. My sister got called away by Mom and the Cams are going to need the Lanes in the future. She won't dare give you trouble anymore."

Laurinda looked up at him, surprised. She rested her chin on his shoulder and asked, "Did you really go tell your mom?"

"She would've found out anyway. Besides, my sister needs Mom to set her straight."

If her daughter turned out like that, she shares some of the blame."

The car pulled up outside Villa Sera. Before Laurinda could open the door herself someone opened it from the outside. Orville greeted her with a bright, friendly smile.

"Welcome, guest of honor!"

Adolphus stepped out and stood by the car, glancing over at the group waiting by

the entrance. He spoke to Orville in a low voice, "That's a bit much."

Orville rubbed his nose and cleared his throat, quickly wiping away his eager smile.

"Laurinda, after you."

Laurinda got out of the car, thanked him, and looked up to see Cathleen smiling at her. Irvin and Earl stood by her side.

When Laurinda spotted Earl, she instinctively searched for Sam. Adolphus came to her and smiled. "Sam's probably inside the private room."

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