

From Ashes of Scandal to His Embrace (Laurinda)

Chapter 41

[566 words]

When Adolphus stopped by the criminal investigation team, he made a point of checking into Jared's case. That's how he found out the families of those involved were all looking for Laurinda.

"Alright, I got it," Laurinda said, surprisingly agreeable for once, which let Adolphus leave without worry.

After he left, York hurried over to Laurinda. He glanced at the chocolate she was holding.

"So he waited here all this time just to bring you chocolate? That's actually pretty sweet."

Laurinda smiled a little. "Yeah, it is. Can you take it back for me? I'm going to find Shirley and the others. I'll text you after dinner."

She didn't wait for York to follow, heading off on her own toward the private room they'd reserved. Just as she reached for the door, someone called her name.

"Laurinda?"

She stopped and turned, eyes narrowing a bit when she saw who it was—a face she knew all too well.

"What do you want?" she asked.

Adelaide clearly hadn't expected Laurinda to be so blunt. She let out a cold laugh.

"Really, Laurinda, what are you even showing off for? Do you still think you're some big shot? The Austins already kicked you out. Still acting all high and mighty? Don't make me laugh. I could crush you with one finger."

Laurinda looked her up and down, then stepped closer, wearing a challenging grin.

"I'm right here. If you can't crush me with one finger, then you must be the daughter of a mistress."

She paused, covering her mouth as if she'd just remembered something. "Oh, silly me. I forgot. That's exactly what you are, isn't it?"

Adelaide's hands tightened on her bag. "Laurinda, are you asking for it?"

The jab had clearly hit a nerve. Adelaide couldn't take it. She raised her handbag, ready to swing, but Laurinda caught her wrist before she got close. With a gentle tug, Laurinda pulled her in and lowered her voice. Content Belongs

"I already warned you not to mess with me. Unless you want your dad's company to go under, I'd back off. Did you forget?"

Adelaide yanked her wrist free and stepped back, fixing her clothes and shooting Laurinda a look filled with contempt.

"You really think you're still the

Austin heiress? Maybe I was scared

before, but not now. You're just

some stray, kicked

out of the family.

Big words won't save you. You..."

She trailed off, noticing the person she was waiting for had arrived. Instantly, her attitude changed. She put on a shy smile.

"I'm letting you off easy today, Laurinda. But this isn't over."

Adelaide strutted off in her heels and approached a man, her voice suddenly gentle. "Graham."

The name sounded familiar to Laurinda, but she couldn't quite place it. She shrugged and turned back to the private room, pushing open the door and stepping inside.

The room came alive as soon as she walked in. Everyone relaxed, eating and chatting, sharing dreams about the future.

"I've made up my mind. I'm applying to a university in Cabinda," Shirley said first, She'd clearly been thinking about it for a while. "I want to go to Cabinda University Someday make enough to support you Laurinda."

"I want to go to Cabinda too," Sophia chimed in. "I'm aiming for Cabinda Communication University. I want to be a host one day."

Sophia's eyes lit up at the thought. She turned to Laurinda, looking excited.

"Laurinda, sign-ups just started for the school's New Year's gala. Want to do a performance? You're amazing at piano and violin. Everyone's hoping you'll play."

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Chapter 42

[649 words]

Laurinda had been to plenty of school galas before. She quirked an eyebrow, not especially interested. She'd already played piano and violin on stage, so there wasn't much else she wanted to do.

"I think I'll skip it this year," she said.

The girls around her looked disappointed. They'd been hoping to see Laurinda perform again, almost as if they were waiting for magic.

"That's really too bad, Laurinda. You don't even know, as soon as sign-ups opened for the New Year's show, someone uploaded your performance from last year to the school website. Every year you do something amazing. It's impossible to forget."

Laurinda looked at her friends' faces, all dreamy and starry-eyed, and tapped her fingers on the table, letting out a soft laugh.

"You're making it sound way bigger than it is. I'm not that impressive. And right now, things are complicated for me. Even when I try to keep a low profile, people still gossip about me. If I step into the spotlight again, I'll be front and center in the rumor mill. I'd rather just keep things quiet for a while."

She picked up some spicy beef and put it into Shirley's bowl. Shirley took a bite, then shook her head.

"I think you should just do whatever makes you happy, Laurinda. Those people are jealous and don't want to see you shine. You should live your best life and show them

that even without the Austin family, you're still Laurinda—the Laurinda we know. No matter what, you've still got us."

"Yeah, you've got us," another friend chimed in.

"We're always here for you. Our friendship isn't going anywhere."

Everyone started talking at once, eager to show Laurinda just how much she meant to them.

Before, when Laurinda never mentioned the Austin family, nobody dared bring it up. Now that she did, they still didn't ask questions. They just wanted her to know they'd always stand by her, no matter what happened.

Laurinda felt her heart soften. In all three years of high school, these girls had never tried to get close to her for her status, and they never looked down on her after she was forced out of the Austin family. She realized this was what real friendship felt like.

By the end, everyone was getting emotional. If they hadn't been in a restaurant, they might have cracked open some drinks.

Eventually, the dinner ended only because some parents called, asking when they'd be heading home.

Laurinda walked her friends to the door. Shirley grabbed her hand, worry clear on her face.

"Laurinda, come home with me. My mom already fixed up a room for you."

Laurinda smiled gently. "It's really okay. I have a place to stay. You don't have to worry."

She could see Shirley was worried she had nowhere to go, so Laurinda gave her a look that said everything was fine. It felt nice, having someone who cared.

"Alright, see you at school on Monday," Shirley said.

Her car pulled up. She waved goodbye, and Laurinda closed the door for her, making sure she left with peace of mind.

Once all her friends were gone, a tall guy stepped out of the Aeterna restaurant. Laurinda frowned at the sight.

"Where's York?"

"Mr. York said he had something to handle. He asked me to come pick you up."

The man took Laurinda's backpack and headed toward the parking lot, Laurinda following behind.

As they walked past a flower bed,

Laurinda caught a glimpse of

someone sneaking around in the shadows. She glanced over and saw a figure hurrying away with

something heavy slung over their shoulder, maybe a big sack. It was

weird, but she didn't think much of it.

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She slid into the car and checked phone. Her friends were already sending messages in their group chat letting everyone know they'd gotten home safely

Once she was sure they were all alright, Laurinda opened a streaming app on her phone. She remembered from some notes that one of Finn's illegitimate sons usually went live around this time.

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Chapter 43

[641 words]

Laurinda had been searching everywhere for any sign of the Gates family's secret son's live stream, but there was nothing. Then, out of nowhere, a name popped into her mind. Graham.

That was it. The guy Adelaide had dinner with tonight was named Graham. Was he skipping his stream because he was out with Adelaide? Was this some sort of offline fan meet? This was getting interesting. Maybe this so-called illegitimate son was trying to team up with the Baker family for his own gain.

She knew the Baker family had always watched the Gates family like hawks, just waiting for a chance to catch them slipping and stir up trouble. Was this secret son actually aware of his own background and plotting against the Gates family?

The next morning, Laurinda was jolted awake by someone pounding on her door. She'd slept better than she had in ages, thanks to that herbal pillow Adolphus had given her. For once, she actually felt well-rested, like she'd finally caught up on all the sleep she'd been missing.

Annoyed by the noise, she ran her hand through her tangled hair and dragged herself out of bed, then opened the door.

"You better have a damn good reason for waking me up. Otherwise, don't blame me if I stab you," she snapped.

Laurinda was in no mood for visitors. Her glare at York was pure murder.

York glanced at her sleepy face, then checked the time. It was already past ten. He frowned. "Did you stay up all night again?"

"No, I went to bed a little after ten and just knocked out. Slept through till now."

York looked genuinely surprised. He couldn't remember the last time Laurinda had slept that well. He glanced at the pillow on her bed, thinking that Adolphus really did know his stuff.

"You weren't banging on my door just to get me out of bed, were you?" Laurinda grumbled. She noticed York's gaze lingering on her bed and felt her patience running thin. If he didn't have something important to say, she was going back to sleep.

"Of course not. Something happened with Aiken. Early this morning, news broke that he was caught meeting someone at a hotel. Guess who it was?"

Just hearing Aiken's name made Laurinda grimace. She already knew he was disgusting, so she had zero interest in any gossip about him.

"Can we not talk about that gross old man?"

"Alright, alright, I'll drop it. But aren't you curious who he got caught with? This is a big deal."

Laurinda leaned against the doorframe, her eyes cool as she waited for York to spill. She wasn't taking the bait.

"You're really not even a little curious?" York looked at her like she was from another planet. Most people loved gossip, but Laurinda was clearly not most people.

Laurinda caught the look in his eyes and rolled hers. "Why would I care who that creepy old guy sleeps with? Unless he got caught with Laura?"

"No way. He still needs Laura to reel in Fabian. He'd never let that get out. It was the Baker family's daughter. You know, Adelaide. The one who's always butting heads with you."

As soon as York said "Adelaide," Laurinda Snapped awake. She stared at him, her mouth opening and closing but no words came out. When she finally managed to speak, it was just one word.

"Fuck."

York nodded, looking just as shocked. "Yep. Adelaide. The photos are everywhere. Apparently, the paparazzi barged right into the hotel room and caught them in bed you can see the marks on her clear as day..."

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"That absolute bastard. How could he lay a hand on someone from the Baker family?"

Laurinda was furious. Sure, Adelaide was a pain and always found ways to annoy her, but Laurinda didn't actually dislike her. In fact, she

secretly enjoyed teasing her every time they met. Adelaide might be a little clueless, but she wasn't a bad person.

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Chapter 44

[653 words]

Laurinda drew in a long breath, steadying herself. From the look on York's face, it was clear he'd already pieced together what happened.

She slipped into her room, grabbed a jacket, and went out to the little balcony. Settling into a chair, she glanced at York.

"Okay, tell me everything."

York saw she was ready to listen and made himself comfortable on the couch.

"It was honestly just a big mess. Graham was the one who drugged Adelaide. His plan was to use her to get close to the Baker family, but for some reason, the people who came to pick her up were working for Aiken. Not what he expected at all."

"Graham got her out the back door, then went to grab his stuff and left through the front. When he came out, Adelaide was already gone. He thought she'd woken up and escaped, so he just left, figuring the whole plan had fallen apart."

"He didn't realize Adelaide had actually been taken to the room he'd set up in advance. Reporters showed up, just like he arranged, but the guy in the room ended up being Aiken. The whole thing flipped on him without him even knowing."

York shook his head, clearly unimpressed with Graham's scheme. All that effort, and he still managed to lose control of the situation. If nothing else, Laurinda thought, Adelaide would probably have been safer with Graham than with Aiken.

Laurinda scrolled through the trending topics on her phone, frustration written all over her face. She sat there quietly for a moment, then finally asked, "What happens now? Why hasn't the news been taken down? Isn't the Baker family doing anything about it?"

"It's not that they aren't trying, but this story is huge. It's everywhere, and someone's pushing it behind the scenes. Cleaning it up is almost impossible."

"Adelaide's family already took her home. The head of the Baker family is planning to press charges against Aiken for rape. What comes next... who knows."

Laurinda pictured the Baker family's leader and knew he wasn't the type to let things slide. She just hoped Adelaide wouldn't do anything reckless.

"And Graham? The Baker family didn't go after him?"

York sighed, looking tired. "They definitely checked into how Adelaide got drugged, but to pin everything on Aiken, they left Graham alone. He already skipped the country. Still, I don't think he's out of danger. The Baker family's leader isn't someone you can easily run from."

Laurinda rubbed her temples, trying to dull the headache that was building. "We're staying out of this. Whatever the Baker family does, it's for Adelaide. We'll keep our distance. As for Graham, he's not our concern anymore. That just leaves Harden."

She got up and went back to her room. There was no way she'd be able to sleep. Sitting at her computer, she logged onto a secret website and put in a request to wipe all photos of Adelaide from the internet. It was the one thing she could still do for her.

At the Gates family house, Finn was raging at Fabian in the study. He was gripping an ashtray so tightly it looked like he wanted to throw it at his son's head.

Just yesterday, he'd agreed to Fabian's engagement to Laura. Now, the Austin family was caught in a scandal that was blowing up everywhere.

"I told you to have Aiken handle Laurinda. Not only did you fail, but now he's made everything ten times worse. What exactly happened? Do you realize the Baker family has been waiting for a chance to take us down? If they find out about you and Laura, they'll make it public and drag the Gates family through the mud."

"The Austin family is falling apart. I don't want the Gates Group to get dragged down with them. You need to break up with Laura."

Finn had already made up his mind. As much as he wanted the Austin family's secret research, he wasn't about to risk the Gates Group for it.

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Chapter 45

[603 words]

Right now was the worst possible moment for any slip-ups. He had put everything on the line to make this deal with Frostford work. There just couldn't be any

mistakes.

"Dad, what Aiken did has nothing to do with Laura. She already told me that Laurinda gave her all the Austin Group shares when she left. As long as she—"

"Stop."

Finn cut him off, staring at Fabian with such disappointment it almost hurt to watch. Was his son really this clueless?

The Austin family was one whole unit. They succeeded together. They fell together. When everything collapsed, nobody got out unharmed. There was no way Aiken's mess wouldn't drag the whole group down.

Getting mixed up with the Austins right now was practically a gift to the Bakers. Baal would definitely use this chance to go after the Gates family. That was just who he was.

Looking at Fabian's stubborn face, Finn couldn't even bring himself to explain anymore. He just picked up the phone and called the butler.

"From today on, Fabian isn't allowed to leave the house for a week. Call the school, get his tutors to come here instead."

Fabian was completely blindsided. He stared at his father, shocked. "Dad, are you seriously putting me on house arrest?"

Finn actually laughed, just a little, but it was the kind of laugh that didn't reach his eyes. He grabbed a cigarette from the pack on his desk, lit it, took a long drag, and exhaled slowly.

"If you weren't my only son, this would be a lot worse than just house arrest. I'd break open your head to see if there's anything inside. Fabian, the day you break up with Laura is the day you get your life back. Until then, stay home."

"The Brown family drama isn't even over yet, and now this with the Austins. Fabian, you never make things easy for me."

Finn ordered the butler to collect all of Fabian's phones and laptops, anything he could use to contact Laura. From now on, he was completely cut off. No more chances for the Austin family to drag them down with them.

Aiken's scandal exploded overnight, and the Baker family was making it worse every chance they got. The Austin Group's stock hit rock bottom

the minute the market

Laura barely had time to get dressed before the company called her in. Bailey came along.

Jeniffer was so freaked out by the news that she just hid at home, too scared to even step outside.

Baily looked at Laura, who just seemed lost, and then at the chaos going on around them. His own face was tight with worry.

He hadn't been involved in the company for ages and honestly

couldn't remember how to stonet

things in a crisis. For a moment, he was completely useless, frozen.

"Don't we have professional managers for this? Where are they?"

The assistant, who looked like he hadn't slept in days, just shook his head.

"Mr. Baily, Aiken fired everyone a week ago. He's been running everything by himself since then."

Baily gaped at him, stunned.

He knew exactly what Aiken could and couldn't handle. That was why he'd chosen Laurinda as heir in the first place.

"Who signed off on this?"

Suddenly, Baily's eyes landed on Laura, his hand going to his chest. Only her signature could have made this happen.

"You agreed to this?"

Laura was still out of it. She knew

Aiken had sent people after

Laurinda, but how did things get

twisted into something with the Baker family? And how did it all leak out?

Her first instinct was that someone set Aiken up. Did Laurinda have something to do with it?

But then again, Laurinda had already been kicked out. There was no way she could pull this off anymore.

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Chapter 46

[640 words]

"Are you listening to me? Did you hear what I just said? Was it you who gave Aiken all that power?"

Baily's frustration only grew as he watched Laura shrink into herself, barely meeting his eyes. She hadn't said a word since she walked into the office, and there was nothing about her that suggested she could hold this family together.

Slamming his palm on the table, he barked, "Why are you just sitting there? Did you agree to kick out the managers?"

Laura flinched, finally snapping out of her daze. She looked at Baily, biting her lip, and it took her a long moment before she managed to answer.

"Grandpa, I really don't know much about the company. Aiken told me what to do and I just did it. Every decision was his, not mine."

Baily felt a heavy weight in his chest. Laura was just another disappointment, someone he couldn't rely on. He glanced at his assistant.

"Go get those managers back. Have them come in and take care of things."

"Yes sir, I'll take care of it right away."

The assistant hurried out, a sinking feeling in his stomach. He could already tell the Austin Group was in for a rough time.

With only Baily and Laura left in the room, regret crept in. Maybe he shouldn't have sent Laurinda away. At least Laurinda had a mind of her own. She never listened to him, but she wouldn't have let Aiken do whatever he wanted, either.

Now, with Aiken in trouble, the whole family was left directionless.

Baily looked at Laura, his voice icy. "What are you going to do about Aiken?"

Laura stared down at her hands, nervously picking at her fingernails. She didn't even know what kind of family the Bakers were. How was she supposed to know what to do next? Aiken had brought her to Apex, thrown her into this mess, and told her nothing except to follow his lead.

Seeing how lost she was, Baily let out a long sigh. "You really aren't as capable as Laurinda."

Hearing that, Laura suddenly felt a spark of defiance. She sat up a little straighter, her eyes flashing.

"If I'd grown up with the same education as Laurinda, I'd be better than her. She stole the life that was supposed to be mine."

"Besides, even if she were here, she's just a student. She wouldn't know how to handle this, either."

"Grandpa, I don't think what happened to Aiken was just an accident. I think Laurinda was getting back at us if she could send us to the police, it's not impossible she set Aiken up with some kind of trap."

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"Just think about it. This isn't some random thing. Someone planned it."

Baily cut her off. "That's enough. I don't want to hear it."

He knew perfectly well this had all been set up, but he'd already looked into it. The person who brought the Baker heiress to the hotel worked for Aiken.

If anyone kept digging, all the ugly things Aiken had done would come to light, making the whole mess even harder to deal with.

"I already investigated. Laurinda had nothing to do with it. For now, go see Fabian. If you can convince the Gates family to help, this will be so much easier to fix."

Right now, they had no choice but to lean on the Gates family. They were the only ones who could stand up to the Bakers. If the Bakers backed off, the Austin Group and Aiken might still have a chance. If not... there was nothing left.

Thinking of Fabian, Laura felt her confidence come back. She was sure he'd help her.

She nodded and left the office. If she wanted help, she had to show she was serious. She decided she would go to the Gates family in person.

Meanwhile, at the Baker estate, Baal sat in front of the restored security footage from Aeterna. The video was paused right on the moment Laurinda and Adelaide began to argue.

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Chapter 47

[645 words]

"Laurinda was the only one who got into it with Adelaide that day. After they split up, she never saw Adelaide again."

Baal stared at the screen, his eyes softening as he watched the familiar girl. He interrupted before the man could say more.

"There's no way Laurinda had anything to do with this. Didn't you notice? She was just messing with Adelaide. Even when they argued, Laurinda looked like she couldn't care less. Adelaide was the only one taking it seriously, thinking she was actually holding her ground. She's clueless."

He finished, still watching Laurinda's expression on the screen, and muttered, "She's looking more and more like her mother."

His assistant glanced over, a little puzzled. Laurinda wasn't even a real member of the Austin family, so how could she look like Winnie? He figured maybe Baal was just stressed after everything that happened to Adelaide.

"Did you get Graham?"

"Not yet. He bought a plane ticket to Northland last night. Our people followed, but they haven't found him."

"Keep searching. I want him found, no matter what. He tried to mess with the Baker family, so we'll handle him ourselves. Don't let the authorities get involved. As for Aiken, just make sure it looks like he's responsible. Don't let out anything else about what he's done. For now, we need to keep things quiet for Adelaide's sake. When things settle down, then we can release the rest."

He wasn't about to give Aiken any room to turn things around.

"How's Adelaide doing?"

"She's not in a good place. Do you want to see her?"

Baal lit a cigarette, his jaw tight. When he first heard about what happened, all he wanted was revenge. But he was head of the Baker family, and with everyone watching, he couldn't just act out. He had to handle this by the book and fight for Adelaide with the law on his side.

"I'll go see her soon. Is the internet still out of control? Can't we get it under wraps?"

"About an hour ago, everything about Adelaide pictures, news, all of it—just vanished online. We don't even know who helped, but it all disappeared in an instant."

The assistant still found it hard to believe. They had already hired the best hackers around and still couldn't fix things. Then right when they felt hopeless, everything vanished, almost like nothing ever happened.

Hearing that, Baal finally relaxed a little. Now he could focus on the Austin family.

"I don't care who did it, as long as it's done. If anyone comes for payment, just give them what they want. Don't argue."

After lunch, Laurinda lounged in a rocking chair, checking The Austin Group's stock on her tablet. She could already picture the chaos tearing through the Austin family right now.

The butler walked in with a bowl of fruit and caught sight of Laurinda looking so at ease. He grinned. "You left the Austin family just in time, Miss Laurinda. Otherwise, you'd be the one cleaning up after that mess."

Laurinda looked up and smiled. "If I'd still been with the Austins, Aiken wouldn't have dared to pull any of this. He wouldn't have been brave enough to go after someone from the Baker family."

Earlier, she'd been too groggy to figure out why Aiken would target Adelaide. Now, awake and thinking clearly, she finally understood who Aiken had really wanted to get his hands on.

The realization turned her stomach. She regretted ever going easy on him. She should have made sure he'd never have the chance to hurt anyone again.

The butler didn't really get what she meant, but he was a pro. Whatever Miss Laurinda said, he just went along with it.

He didn't ask questions, just set the bowl of strawberries in front of her, smiling. Laurinda noticed the big, perfect strawberries. She picked one up, took a bite, and smiled at the taste. She glanced at the butler. "Are these from our own garden?"

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Chapter 48

[612 words]

"Yes, the strawberries and blueberries at home are ripe. We've already sent some to Fidelia and Earl, and the Adams family's delivery is taken care of too. I'll bring theirs over myself in a bit."

The butler knew Laurinda only worried about a few people, and he always made sure to look after each one of them.

"Great. Tomorrow morning, I'll need two portions, one for my roommates and another for a friend. Can you have them ready for me?"

"Of course, I'll handle it. I'll go take care of a few other things now, but just call me if you need anything."

"Okay."

The butler slipped out, leaving Laurinda alone. He understood how much she valued her quiet time.

Laurinda settled into her rocking chair and was starting to drift off when her phone buzzed. It was a message from the head nurse, a photo of Fidelia sitting in the sun and eating strawberries.

Laurinda's face softened as she looked at the photo. Fidelia looked calm and healthy. Seeing her like that made Laurinda smile for real, from deep in her heart.

Fidelia truly was getting better. Laurinda believed that one day, Fidelia would finally be able to leave the sanatorium behind.

Later that evening, Laurinda and York arrived at the Apex esports arena. Their VIP tickets meant they could skip the crowds and head straight in through a private entrance.

Once they found their seats, they started to hear people whispering behind them. "Why is it just you two? Isn't Fabian obsessed with NRNR? Why didn't he show up?"

"Don't even bring it up. We can't reach Fabian at all. We even stopped by his house before we came here, but he wasn't home. All we saw was Laura standing outside the Gates' place. We tried to ask her what happened, but she wouldn't say anything. She just stood there. Maybe they had a fight or something."

Hearing the gossip, Laurinda's eyebrows arched with interest and she couldn't help but smile. Wasn't Fabian always saying Laura was his guiding light? Now that the Austin family hit trouble, he was shutting her out?

As the arena filled up, the background chatter faded into a blur, and Laurinda stopped paying attention.

The match started soon after. Laurinda searched the starting lineup for Harden but was surprised not to see his name.

She leaned over to York and whispered, "Why isn't Harden in zTG's starting lineup? Don't tell me he didn't come."

York shook his head. He wasn't sure what was going on, but he knew for a fact Harden was here with the team.

A guy sitting nearby caught Laurinda's question. He must have thought she was a fan, because he turned around, looking annoyed but eager to share.

"It's the club's fault. Some rich kid on the team plays the same position, so they benched Harden. Happens every time. They only let him play if the team loses the first round."

Laurinda's eyes brightened. She turned to him, curious. "And Harden just goes along with that?"

"What choice does he have? The

whole thing's rigged. If they win, the

other guy gets all the credit. If they

lose Harden gets blamed. It sucks him. The far sighed, clearly upset for Harden.
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"If it's so bad, why doesn't he just switch teams?"

"He can't. They're holding his

contract hostage. The buyout clause is huge. Harden came from nothing, raised by a single parent. Even though he's made some money more lately, most of it's gone to his family. He can't afford the penalty, so he's stuck on this team, wasting away."

Several people nearby sighed at the same time, everyone feeling sorry for Harden.

Laurinda didn't say anything. She wasn't interested in feeling sorry for her rival's son. Actually, this might be just the opening she needed.

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Chapter 49

[629 words]

After sitting through the whole match, Laurinda had to admit it—Harden was seriously impressive. Way better than she'd expected. The guy had killer instincts and raw talent, like he was made for the pro gaming world.

York caught the look in her eyes and lowered his voice. "So, you thinking about signing him?"

Laurinda gave him a look that basically screamed, Are you out of your mind? She said, "Not just anyone is worth my money, you know. Especially not the son of my enemy. Let's just go."

She walked out of the esports center without looking back, totally unaware that someone in the shadows had been watching her the whole time.

Once they were in the car, Laurinda popped a piece of chocolate in her mouth and spoke in that easy, careless way of hers. "Find someone to tip off Finn. Tell him there's a gamer who looks a lot like him. And then, just casually let something slip about Harden's mom and her past."

York glanced at her in the rearview mirror, already picking up on her plan. "Are you sure Finn will actually acknowledge them after what Graham did?"

Laurinda gazed out the window at the glowing city lights. "I doubt Finn knows what Graham's done," she said, her tone cool. "And from what we've heard, the Baker family isn't looking to let that secret out either. They want to keep things quiet for now, avoid any more drama. So the truth stays buried, at least for a while."

"If Finn claims them and the truth eventually comes out, well... that's just his bad luck. If his kids end up with his genes, maybe trouble just runs in the family."

Laurinda had a gut feeling the Bakers would lay all the blame on Aiken. No way they'd let it leak that Graham was the one who started it all.

The more she thought about it, the more she saw an opportunity. What if the Baker family's leader found out Graham was Finn's secret son? That would really shake things up.

Let Finn take Graham back, then leave the Baker family to deal with the fallout. Handing them the knife, so to speak. What happened next was their choice.

York thought it over and nodded. "I'll make sure Finn sees Harden. But what's up with Fabian, anyway?"

York was honestly curious about Fabian and Laura. He was kind of rooting for them to get stuck together-he'd feel bad if Laurinda's plan to throw them together didn't work out.

Laurinda let out a short laugh. "What else? Finn came in and split them up. Fabian might be clueless, but Finn isn't. With the Austin family at the center of that huge scandal, the Gates family still went ahead with a marriage alliance, it'd be like... knowing you're about to eat something disgusting and doing it anyway."

"To protect the Gates family's reputation, Finn's never going to let Fabian get involved with Laura

From what everyone's been saying, Fabian's probably under house arrest right now."

She trailed off, a sly smile spreading across her face.

"Where there's pressure, there's going to be pushback. Fabian has a thing for helpless girls, and Laura is just the type to bring out his hero side..."

Laurinda's smile grew as she glanced out at the dim evening sky. "I bet we're getting a big snow tonight..."

The next morning, Laurinda woke up to find the whole estate blanketed in white. She raised an eyebrow, hoping Fabian wouldn't let her down. It would be a crime to waste such perfect timing from the weather.

York had barely pulled up at the school gates when the back door swung open. Laurinda paused, her hand halfway to her bag, and looked up-straight into the face of a ridiculously handsome man.

She couldn't help herself. Biting her lip, Laurinda felt a rush of happiness she couldn't quite hide.

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Chapter 50

[522 words]

Her words came out sharper than intended, but to him, it just sounded like she was being cute.

"Are you okay? Why are you waiting for me at the school gate this early?"

"I was worried you'd disappear. The medicine's ready."

Adolphus took her backpack without a second thought, then reached out his other hand for hers.

Laurinda glanced at his big, strong hand. After a moment of hesitation and a little fidgeting with her sleeves, she slipped her hand, still wrapped up, into his.

Adolphus couldn't help but laugh at the way she did it. Holding her by the sleeve, he helped her out of the car, waved at York who was watching them, and then started walking with her toward the nurse's office.

York watched them leave, then looked at the container of strawberries and blueberries on the passenger seat. He let out a small sigh, parked the car, and followed them into the school.

Laurinda kept sneaking glances at Adolphus as they walked. When she noticed a few snowflakes in his hair, she narrowed her eyes and muttered, "Are you dumb? You could've just texted me to ask when I'd be here. Why stand outside waiting?"

Adolphus turned to her, meeting her gaze. His eyes crinkled with a lazy smile. "I did text you, but you never answered. What was I supposed to do? If the medicine gets cold, it won't work as well."

"So you waited just because of the medicine?"

She sounded a little annoyed, though she couldn't even say why. It just bothered her.

Noticing the shift in her mood, Adolphus decided to tease her. He stopped, turned to face her, bent down so their eyes were level, and gave a quiet laugh.

"Then what do you think I was waiting for?"

Staring into his eyes, Laurinda felt something stir inside her—something she couldn't quite name. She swallowed without meaning to.

Seriously, this guy was almost too charming. She could barely keep it together.

"Oh my god, is this for real?"

"This is way too much. No wonder everyone says Fabian really loves Laura. It totally shows."

Laurinda's thoughts were

interrupted by voices from nearby.

She couldn't help being curious

about what was going on.

"I remember when Fabian was after Laurinda, he was never this serious. Love really is different."

"He was just playing with Laurinda.

She was the only one who didn't get it. I heard Fabian say Laurinda was always the one chasing him and he

never wanted anything to do with go with her

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"She always acted so cold toward him at school, too. No wonder Fabian moved on to Laura right away."

As the gossip faded away, the warmth in Adolphus's eyes disappeared, replaced by something colder.

Laurinda noticed the change and found it interesting. She grinned and asked, "Ever been chased by a dog?"

Adolphus saw her looking more

than upset. He looked a bit

amused the played along and

confused, but

shook his head.

"Nope. Maybe you can tell me what it's like?"

She gave him an exasperated look, rolled her eyes, and walked ahead, not bothering to answer.

Adolphus thought her little act was adorable. He caught up with her and picked up their conversation again.

"Forget the dog thing. Why do you think I was really waiting for you at the gate?"

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