

From Ashes of Scandal to His Embrace (Laurinda)

Chapter 411

[606 words]

Laurinda narrowed her eyes, running the timing through her mind. Judging by how Jasper was healing, he and the other guy must have gotten hurt at about the same time.

She didn't want to get into it with Adolphus in front of everyone, so she just lifted her hand and pointed at the wall. "Go stand over there, Jasper. Thirty minutes."

Laurinda looked so serious that Irvin and Teddy both shuffled back a step. Teddy, especially, felt like he was next in line for trouble.

He braced himself for a scolding, but Laurinda surprised him. "Why are you all just standing around? Sit down."

Teddy blinked at her, caught off guard, and the words slipped out before he could stop them. "Wait, Laurinda, you're not mad at me?"

She shook her head. "Why would I be mad at you? It's not like you were the only one keeping secrets. Jasper's the one getting punished because he was reckless. On the training field, he just got hurt, but if it had been a real fight, he'd be dead." Laurinda understood that Jasper still thought like a kid sometimes, but in a real fight, nobody would cut him any slack. He'd be the enemy's favorite target.

She turned to Adolphus. "Doesn't the Flame Training Camp teach this sort of thing?"

"They do, just not much. The camp mostly focuses on physical training. He'll get proper classes once he moves up to the advanced camp."

"When does he go?"

Laurinda's eyes lit up at the mention of specialized courses. She was more than ready to send Jasper off.

Adolphus sat down next to her with a little laugh. "You're in a hurry. Don't you want him to hang around for a few more days?"

"I don't have time, and honestly, he needs this kind of training sooner rather than later. Otherwise, he's just a moving target."

As soon as Laurinda finished, everyone in the living room exchanged glances. In their hearts, they all felt a little sorry for Jasper, especially York. He'd been with Laurinda the longest, and he knew one thing for sure. You could get away with being a bit weak, but you couldn't afford to be clueless.

Jasper's little secret plan had hit Laurinda right where it hurt.

Adolphus glanced over at Jasper and gave a helpless shrug. There wasn't much he could do.

"How about a week? Let him stay with you for a bit."

"That's too long. Three days. He can get himself together, then it's time for him to go."

Jasper stood facing the wall, his shoulders drooping. He could tell this time he'd really let his sister down.

Adolphus hesitated. "Isn't that a little fast?"

Laurinda's voice was steady. "Maybe I could give him more time, but our enemies won't I don't want him to be thinking about playing bait next time someone finds out who he is."

Adolphus couldn't argue with that. "Alright, I'll handle it."

He walked out, phone in hand. Laurinda's expression softened as she looked over at Irvin. "Congrats, by the way."

Irvin scratched his head, genuinely grateful. "I should be thanking you for setting everything up."

He knew the Main family was powerful, but no one had ever tried to get him into a program like this if it hadn't been for Laurinda he

probably still be sitting in some classroom, confused and doubting himself.

"You got in with your own skills. Oh, and I have something to discuss with you. Come up to the study."

Laurinda stood and headed upstairs, Irvin following.

Teddy watched them go, then turned to York with a look of mock betrayal. "Am I really that invisible?"

York couldn't help but laugh at his expression. "I don't think so."

Teddy sighed. "It sure feels like it.

Laurinda used to love having menet

exist

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Chapter 412

[645 words]

Teddy suddenly felt a chill crawl up his back. When he turned around, he found Adolphus watching him, his gaze steady and unblinking. Teddy rushed to explain.

"Adolphus, that's not what I meant. I just... I just feel like I'm about to lose my position as her sidekick. Makes me a little upset, that's all. There's nothing going on between me and Laurinda. We're totally innocent."

Adolphus looked at Teddy, taking in his nervous rambling and remembering how he always shrank back like a scared chick around Laurinda. In that moment, he decided Teddy wasn't even capable of having any bad intentions.

He nodded. "I trust you."

Before Teddy could fully process what Adolphus meant, Adolphus was already walking away with Jasper, leaving Teddy completely lost.

Teddy glanced at York, unsure. "Did I just get... looked down on?"

York couldn't hold back his laughter any longer. He clapped Teddy on the shoulder, grinning.

"Don't take it so hard. You weren't just looked down on. He never even thought of you as a threat."

With that, York wandered off to the kitchen to see if there was anything to eat, leaving Teddy alone in the living room, questioning every decision he'd ever made.

Laurinda shared her idea about making a nerve-numbing drug with Irvin. His eyes sparkled with excitement as he listened.

"Wait, Laurinda, are you saying my inventions could actually be produced? But the stuff Adolphus took from me is illegal. We can't use it."

"It's only illegal if you use it to hurt people. If it's for dealing with enemies or for the medical field, it's not. Just sell me the formula. I'll handle the paperwork and figure out how it'll be used. What do you say?"

Irvin's face lit up, but he shook his head. "Deal, but I'm not selling it to you. I'll give it to you. Laurinda, thank you... You're the only one who's ever made me feel like my research means something."

He looked at Laurinda with pure

gratitude. All his life, he'd been told his experiments were useless or even dangerous by everyone around him. Only Laurinda ever looked at his work and saw potential. He was sure now that he'd made the right choice. in trusting her.

"You're amazing, you know. Everything in the world has two sides—there's no absolute right or wrong. Your powders are the same. If you use them the right way, they're valuable."

"If you ever do want to sell me the formulas, I'll have York take you to the biotech lab. You can negotiate directly with the lab director."

Laurinda never planned to take advantage of Irvin. Honest transactions, where both sides got what they wanted, always made for the best partnerships.

Irvin shook his head again. "No, really. I said I'd give them to you, and I meant it. They're just some little gadgets. Nothing worth money."

He was stubborn about it. To him, friendship wasn't something you measured with money. If he started talking prices with Laurinda, it would just make things awkward between them.

Seeing how serious he was,

Laurinda smiled softly. "You're

nineteen now. You should have your

own bank account The Main Family's money gives you security but that doesn't mean they'll always have your back. The money you earn yourself, that's the money you can really use however you want."

"Don't turn me down so quickly. You know I really do see you as a friend. Friends

can do business together."

Laurinda's smile grew as she looked

at Irvin. She wasn't just going to pay him, she was planning to offer a

generous amount. She wanted:

work with him long-term, esponent

with more

once he came up with more ventions. She saw so much

potential in him, it was like he could do anything.

Irvin stared at her smile, a sinking feeling settling in his stomach. He couldn't shake the thought that he'd just boarded a ship he'd never be able to leave. Was Laurinda planning to keep him working for her forever?

"Laurinda, you... you're way too sneaky!"

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Chapter 413

[588 words]

"Me, cunning? Come on, don't make things up. If I were really cunning, I'd have shipped you off to a lab already, squeezed every last bit of value out of you, and made you crank out new research day and night."

She would never admit to being sly. What bad intentions could she possibly have? She just wanted Irvin's work to be used to its fullest. Honestly, what scientist didn't want their inventions to see the light of day? Teaming up with Irvin was a win for both of them.

After some back and forth, Laurinda finally managed to convince Irvin to work together.

Laurinda called York into the study to go over the details. Once York took Irvin to meet the lab director, their initial collaboration would be underway.

Later that night, as they were winding down for bed, Laurinda told Adolphus about her new partnership with Irvin. He didn't seem all that surprised. Instead, he just pulled her into his arms.

"So, did your injury give you this idea?"

"Yeah," Laurinda admitted, relaxing against his chest. "Irvin's powders are seriously impressive. Especially when you're outmatched, they're basically a lifesaver. I really need something like that in case things ever get dicey again."

Adolphus held her a little tighter. He couldn't promise she'd never run into danger again. If she had something to protect herself, that could only be a good thing.

"If you need anything, just let me know. I'll help you however I can."

Laurinda smiled, twisting around in his arms to hug him back. "Thank you for always supporting me, no questions asked."

Seeing her so sweet, Adolphus's heart melted. He hugged her even closer.

"As long as you're okay, that's all I care about. The rest doesn't matter."

He rested his head in the curve of her neck, breathing in her familiar scent. Just holding her like this, it felt like he had the whole world.

They lay together for a while, wrapped up in each other, when Laurinda suddenly remembered Jasper. She pushed herself up on his chest, poking Adolphus with her

chin.

"So, how's everything going with Jasper?"

"He'll head back to Cabinda in three days, then he'll be ready to go. He's already one of the most talented

on

people his age. Don't be too hard on him, alright? It's normal for someone that smart to have a few tricks up his sleeve."

Laurinda sat up, her face turning serious as she looked at him.

"He's definitely smart, but risking his life just to show off how clever he is? That's just plain stupid. I want him to understand that nothing matters more than his own safety. If he doesn't get a taste of consequences now he'll just get cockier next time. And then he's the one who'll pay for

it."

Just thinking about Jasper getting into trouble for being too clever made her angry.

She hated that kind of reckless, know-it-all attitude the most.

Adolphus sat up too, holding her face gently in his hands and touching his forehead to hers. "Hey don't get mad. He promised he wouldn't do it again. I'll make sure

someone sets him straight be'll

learn his lesson."

Early the next morning, Laurinda came downstairs and spotted Jasper sitting perfectly straight in the living room, a book in his hands.

She walked over, glanced at what he was reading, and asked, "Where'd you get that?"

"Adolphus gave it to me."

Laurinda was surprised at how fast Adolphus had moved, already getting him started on the theory.

She sat down next to Jasper, took the book from him, and flipped through a few pages before looking at him curiously. "Can you even understand this?"

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[599 words]

Jasper nodded with confidence. "Yeah, I get it."

"If you understand, take your time reading. If you hit something you don't get, just ask. There's nothing embarrassing about not knowing. What's dangerous is pretending you do. You're still young and haven't seen much of the world. I'm not expecting you to handle everything by yourself yet. I just want to know you can look after yourself. Do you get what I mean?"

Laurinda never dreamed of relying on anyone else. All she wanted was for the people she cared about to be safe and sound.

She'd thought about it a lot last night. Adolphus was right. For his age, Jasper was already incredible. He was growing and learning every day, and she needed to give him the space to do that.

"Alright, you can look at the book later. Let's go to the stables. I haven't seen Kent in forever."

Jasper's whole face lit up at that. He'd been wanting to see the horse his sister gave him. He missed out on it last time and couldn't wait.

As soon as the stables came up, everyone wanted in. Even Renata and York joined the group.

Laurinda raised her eyebrow at Renata, who had basically disappeared the past few days. "Well, look who finally decided to show up."

Renata laughed and rubbed her nose, a little embarrassed. She remembered exactly why she'd been MIA. "I wasn't dodging you, I promise. I've just been swamped. I'll fill you in later."

Laurinda didn't know what Renata had been up to, but she trusted her. "Well, if you were busy before, today's your day to chill. The stables aren't the only thing there. There's a whole resort on the property. If you like it, you can stay a couple nights."

Renata's eyes sparkled, but she looked a little bummed. "Too bad Bonnie's not here. It would be so much more fun if we could all hang out."

"There'll be other chances. Come on, let's go."

Laurinda got into Arrow's car, Adolphus sliding in next to her, Foley taking the passenger seat up front.

The school's principal was on top of things. The new medic was already set up, and Foley had made it back to the estate first thing that morning.

Jasper, Irvin, and Teddy piled into the butler's car.

Irvin had barely sat down before pulling a tiny bottle from his pocket and handing it to Jasper.

Jasper took it, his eyes going big with excitement. Irvin always had the coolest stuff. It even made him remember the time they'd pulled that prank on Adah.

"What's this, Irvin?"

"It's a healing ointment. My parents are testing it in their lab. You'll need stuff like this at Flame Training Camp. It's dangerous out there, so be careful."

Irvin reached over to ruffle Jasper's hair, still not understanding how Laurinda and Adolphus could send

someone as young as Jasper to a place like Flame Training Camp. That place was brutal.

Jasper felt a little let down. He'd been hoping for some of Irvin's weird powders, but no luck. Irvin was always stingy with the really interesting stuff.

Irvin caught Jasper's disappointed look and pinched his cheek, grinning. "They don't even let you bring those kinds of powders into the advanced camp, so don't bother asking. I'm not giving you any."

"Alright, but still, thanks. I'll keep it safe."

Jasper tucked the ointment into his pocket. Suddenly a thought struck him, and he turned to Teddy. "Hey, Teddy, you could probably go to the advanced camp too, right?"

Teddy, who'd been zoning out, snapped to attention and shook his head hard. "Are you kidding? I barely made it through regular training camp, you send me to the advanced one, I won't make it out alive."

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[611 words]

Just thinking about those twenty-some days of training made sweat break out along Teddy's forehead. He knew he'd never forget it, for all the wrong reasons.

Irvin totally got it. He gave Teddy's shoulder a quick pat, nodding. "They're all nuts. No way they can understand what we went through. Honestly, you had it easier than I did. When I joined the camp, Adolphus was the instructor. You have no idea how scary that man was."

While they talked about the training camp, Renata and York were having their own conversation. Renata hadn't been around the last few days because she'd taken a trip to Harrisburg.

"You're telling me Fabian and Grant are working together? There's no way Grant would ever put up with Finn's kid," York said, disbelief clear in his voice.

Renata agreed it sounded impossible, but facts were facts. The whole mess in Harrisburg had started because of Grant and Fabian teaming up.

"No one knows how Fabian managed to win Grant's trust. And get this—Grant actually found someone to treat Fabian's leg injury. Nearly all the money Grant saved up in Harrisburg, he spent it on Fabian."

York just stared, speechless.

Harrisburg.

Grant was lying on his bed, Renata's words still echoing in his mind. He couldn't wrap his head around it—he'd saved that young guy, and it turned out he was Finn's

son.

He'd bought into Fabian's story, thought they'd had a lot in common, thought he was helping somebody who understood him. It felt like a punch in the gut to realize he'd been lied to. He'd almost taken Fabian with him when he tried to escape.

"Grant, the kid says he knows he messed up. He wants to see you," someone said at the door.

Grant sat up and glanced out at the gray sky. "Did he admit to tipping them off about my escape?"

Only a handful of people knew he was planning to get out. Fabian was one of them. He'd told Fabian about his plans because he was worried the guy wouldn't survive on his own after he left. He never imagined Fabian would stab him in the back.

"He denies it. Says he'd never betray you."

Grant let out a sharp, humorless

laugh. If Fabian had said that before, maybe he would've believed him. But now, knowing who he really was,

he didn't believe a word Finn's son was just like his father. All lies.

"Forget it. None of it matters anymore. Break his legs and hand him over. We don't need to protect him now."

"Got it. I'll handle it."

The man left. Grant lay back down, squeezing a ring in his hand.

He wanted out of Z Port more than ever. He needed to settle the score. His anger at Fabian had shifted to Finn now-father and son, both of them deserved what was coming.

Laurinda and her group arrived at the stables, following a staff member straight to Kent's stall.

The moment Kent saw Laurinda, he let out a grumbling little whinny, almost like he was complaining she hadn't come to see him more often.

Laurinda smiled, gently running her fingers through Kent's mane, trying to soothe his obvious disappointment.

"I didn't get a chance to really see

Kent last time. He's gorgeous, isn't he?" Irvin said, standing next to Jasper, clearly impressed. He'd

never seen a horse with such a shiny

coat.

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Laurinda turned and caught Adolphus watching. There was real admiration in his eyes. It was obvious he liked Kent too.

"So, you want to give him a try?" Laurinda asked.

Adolphus raised his eyebrows, a little surprised. "Are you sure?"

"Of course. Go change, and I'll have the staff get Kent ready for you."

Laurinda patted Kent's head. "I can't take you out for a run today, so I'll let him have some fun with you instead."

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[665 words]

Kent seemed to get what Laurinda was saying. He let out a long, excited neigh and pranced in place, clearly impatient. Laurinda handed his reins to a staff member, then turned to the others with a smile and led them over to see Jasper's new horse. It was a stunning, pure white beauty, its coat shining like silver silk under the sun.

"So? What do you think? Do you like it?" Laurinda asked.

The moment Jasper saw Osborn, he was completely blown away. He'd never seen a horse this gorgeous in his life. For a second, even Kent didn't seem quite as impressive.

"Oh my god, Laurinda, where did you even find this horse? Look at that pedigree..." Irvin stared in disbelief at the nameplate on the stall door. He knew a thing or two about horses, but even at the best stables in Cabinda, he'd never come across a bloodline this pure. He'd only seen something like this in magazines.

Laurinda just shrugged, a little embarrassed by the attention. "You're making it sound like a bigger deal than it is. It's just a birthday present for Jasper. Jasper, go change into riding clothes and let the staff take you for a spin."

Once Jasper went off with one of the attendants, Laurinda turned back to the rest of the group and waved her hand.

"Feel free to try out any of the horses here. If you see one you like, go for a ride."

A few of them immediately perked up and hurried after the staff, leaving only Arrow standing awkwardly by Laurinda's side.

"You're not going to ride?" Laurinda asked, a little surprised.

Arrow smiled and shook her head. "I don't know how. Honestly, horses kind of scare me."

Laurinda hadn't expected that, but she just grinned and slipped her arm through Arrow's. "No big deal. If you're not into horses, why don't you come grab a milk tea with me?"

They left the stables and walked over to a cozy café nearby. Laurinda ordered herself a milk tea and told Arrow to get whatever she wanted: After they placed their orders, they found a table by the window and sat down.

As soon as Laurinda settled into her seat, her phone started buzzing. She glanced at the screen and saw an unknown number. Without hesitation, she declined the call. She already had a pretty good idea who was trying to reach her.

The phone buzzed again. And again. After the third time, Laurinda rolled her eyes and finally just turned her phone off. She hated having her downtime interrupted over and over.

Somewhere else, Baily was losing his temper. When he couldn't get through to Laurinda, he snapped. He raised his hand and slapped Laura hard across the face, knocking her to the floor.

"Useless! Of all the people your friends could mess with, why Laurinda? Now look what you've done. You've been labeled a scammer, you dragged The

Stonehaven University into el

this

mess, and now what are we supposed to do?" Baily was furious. He had planned to use The Stonehaven University as bait to attract important people, and he

never expected things to blow up like this.

Now the university had gone public to deny everything, and the whole disaster had landed right in Laurinda's lap.

There were plenty of things Baily had done that wouldn't survive a closer look. If Laurinda found out, she'd never let the Austin family off easy.

Laura just sat there on the floor, staring at her knees. She thought coming to Stonehaven would be a fresh start, but it felt like she was still stuck living in Laurinda's shadow.

She had only wanted to prove she was worth something, yet Laurinda always managed to ruin it. No matter what she did, she couldn't get away from her.

Baily glared down at her. "You fix this yourself. If you can't, then pack your bags and leave Stonehaven. There's no place here for idiots."

He turned and stormed off, already regretting ever bringing Laura back. If he'd known how useless she'd be, he never would have bothered.

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Chapter 417

[530 words]

Adolphus stepped out in his riding clothes, but Laurinda was nowhere to be seen. He called her, only to hear that her phone was turned off.

His heart skipped a beat, worry twisting in his chest. Without thinking, he quickly dialed Arrow.

Arrow answered right away, but it was Laurinda's voice he heard.

"What's up?"

Arrow had already told Laurinda that Adolphus was calling, so she figured he must be looking for her and took the phone.

The sound of her voice calmed Adolphus instantly. He tried to hide how rattled he felt, his tone gentle as he asked, "Why's your phone off?"

"There were too many annoying calls. I just wanted some peace, so I switched it off."

Adolphus caught her meaning and cleared his throat. "I'm ready now. Want to come over?"

Laurinda had never seen him in riding gear before, and just imagining it made her grin. She didn't hesitate. "Sure, I'll be there in a minute."

She hung up, handed the phone back to Arrow, grabbed her milk tea, and the two of them headed for the riding arena.

The place was packed. As soon as Laurinda walked in, she spotted Adolphus right away, standing out in the crowd.

She was about to walk over when the loudspeakers crackled to life, announcing a surprise equestrian contest with a big prize for first place.

Laurinda glanced at the rules on the big screen, then turned to look for Adolphus.

He was already watching her. From the moment she walked in, his eyes never left her, not even for a second.

Laurinda nudged Arrow to go grab a seat, then made her way toward Adolphus.

The moment he saw her coming, Adolphus rode Kent forward to meet her, stopping right in front of her and hopping down from his horse in one smooth move.

Laurinda took in the sight of him-tall, confident, and looking ridiculously handsome in his riding clothes. She raised her milk tea to his lips.

Adolphus took a generous sip without hesitation, but the sugary taste made him wrinkle his nose.

Laurinda laughed at the look on his face. "What's wrong? Too sweet for you?"

"It's way too sweet."

She grinned, teasing, "Sweeter than me?"

She waited, eyes sparkling, just to see what he'd say.

Adolphus didn't miss a beat. He leaned in and kissed her softly. "Nothing's sweeter than you," he said, his voice warm.

Laurinda loved hearing him say things like that. Smiling, she fixed the collar of his jacket and patted his chest lightly.

"You look different in this outfit, you know. Kind of has a special vibe."

"What kind of vibe?" Adolphus bent a little so they were eye to eye, wantin

to catch every detail other reaction. She'd been laying on the flattery more and more lately.

She giggled. "You look like a real Prince Charming."

He laughed. "That's a pretty lazy compliment."

He squeezed her hand, then pointed at the big screen. "So, do you want the prize?"

Laurinda shook her head. "Not really, but I do want to see you in action. You should sign up for the competition."

She meant it. Adolphus had that perfect, elegant look for h

riding and she honest

couldn't

wait to see him show off content

Seeing how much it meant to her, Adolphus didn't even think twice. "Wait right here.

I'll go sign up."

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Chapter 418

[536 words]

Teddy, Irvin, and a few others were hanging out at the pony paddock when they heard there was a competition happening in the main arena. Excited, they all hurried over to check it out.

The moment they walked in, their eyes landed on Adolphus. He sat tall on Kent, dressed head-to-toe in black riding gear, and every bit of him looked striking. The whole group just stared, completely caught off guard by how impressive he looked. Irvin elbowed Teddy, both of them sharing a glance. Having grown up in Cabinda, they knew all about Adolphus's reputation. Seeing him like this just felt... off, like he didn't quite fit the rumors.

"Adolphus... is just putting on a show," Irvin muttered.

Teddy pulled his gaze away and started searching the crowd for Laurinda. When he finally spotted her, he noticed the look on her face and let out a quiet, sarcastic laugh.

"He's just trying to impress Laurinda," Teddy said, rolling his eyes.

Then he turned to York, scooting closer and lowering his voice. "York, do you have any idea how Adolphus managed to catch Laurinda's attention?"

York smirked, glancing away from Adolphus. "Why don't you take a guess?"

"If I could guess, I wouldn't be asking you," Teddy grumbled.

He'd heard so many stories about Adolphus back in Cabinda, none of them flattering, but somehow girls still fell for him left and right. Teddy just didn't get it.

Jasper, who'd been listening in, put on a thoughtful look. Suddenly, his eyes lit up like he'd figured out a mystery "It's because Adolphus is good-looking. My sister's all about looks. She told me she doesn't like being friends ugly people With Fabian's not good-looking, so she doesn't like him."

Everyone around them looked at Jasper, unsure what to say. Honestly, Fabian wasn't nearly as stunning as Adolphus, but he was definitely better looking than most guys. Calling him ugly felt a little harsh.

The competition kicked off, and Adolphus took Kent through a series of tough maneuvers Laurinda was surprised at how well kent kept up, but she was even more impressed by Adolphus's skill. It was obvious he was holding back and could've done even more.

When it was over, Adolphus won first place without breaking a sweat. As he rode toward Laurinda, he looked every bit like a victorious general coming home, and the crowd went wild.

Laurinda heard someone whisper nearby. One girl said quietly, "Now I finally get why girls in those old stories would do anything to marry a hero like that."

Adolphus hopped off Kent and handed him over to a staff member. Then he made his way toward Laurinda. Before he could reach her, a group of bold girls stepped in front of him, blocking his path.

"Hey, you're really handsome. Can I get your WeChat?"

Adolphus glanced right past them, his eyes locked on Laurinda. He let out a low laugh and said, "Sorry, my girlfriend's waiting for me."

Before the girls could say anything else, he slipped past them and walked straight over to Laurinda.

He sat down beside her and pressed the gold, horse-shaped pin for first place into her hand. Smiling, he leaned in close and whispered, "This is Kent's medal. As for my prize I want you to give it to me yourself"

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Chapter 419

[658 words]

Laurinda glanced down at the little horse pin Adolphus had slipped into her hand. She heard him hinting for a reward and couldn't help but smile, though she kept quiet.

Adolphus was just starting to think she'd ignore him when she finally spoke. "So, what kind of reward do you want?"

He grinned, his eyes lighting up. "Come on, I'll tell you once we're out of here." He grabbed her hand and led her away from the stables.

Across the field, their friends watched the pair sneak off and just shook their heads. They thought those two were hopeless when it came to teamwork. What was so great about slipping away for a secret date anyway?

As the sky darkened, everyone gathered around a bonfire in the estate's yard, grilling meat and chatting. Adolphus and Laurinda eventually wandered back, looking perfectly content.

Laurinda had barely settled into her seat when Teddy slid over, lowering his voice. "So, what did you two get up to?"

Jasper handed Laurinda a piece of grilled meat and some bread. She took a bite, smiled, and replied, "Why don't you guess?"

Teddy rolled his eyes. "Forget it. If you don't want to say, I'm not guessing."

When Laurinda wouldn't spill, Teddy's curiosity faded. The conversation shifted, and everyone got caught up in roasting food and telling stories, laughing long into the night.

It got late, but nobody left. They all stayed over at the villa.

Laurinda sat at her desk, her laptop open and a rough sketch of a jewelry design beside her. Adolphus walked in carrying a glass of milk. He knelt down, scooping up a stray page from the floor.

"You really shouldn't leave your designs lying around," he told her. "It's not that safe. Someone might pick them up and cause trouble."

Laurinda took the milk and murmured a quiet thank you, her hand moving steadily as she kept sketching. The soft sound of pencil on paper filled the room.

Adolphus watched her, letting out a quiet sigh. Lately, Laurinda had gotten really good at half-listening to him. She barely even looked up when she answered.

Seeing she was still lost in her work, he started picking up the rest of her scattered drafts. He didn't notice that one sheet had slipped under the couch.

They all hung out at the villa for two days. On the third day, Teddy left for school and Jasper went with him. Irvin and York headed off to the bio lab to meet with the dean about the nerve agent project.

Laurinda and Adolphus stuck around, taking their time over Cantonese breakfast in the restaurant.

Adolphus's phone started vibrating on the table. He checked the screen, his expression tightening. He gave Laurinda a quick heads-up, then stepped out to answer the call.

Laurinda watched him go, picked up her own phone to check a new text, then set it aside and went back to her food.

She was just about to call for the waiter when she glanced up and spotted a familiar face. The man saw her, paused in surprise, then walked over.

"Laurinda."

She smiled. "Butler, it's been a while. Are you here on vacation too?"

The Austin family's old butler looked a little uncomfortable, like he had something to hide.

Since leaving the Austins, he hadn't

worked a day, choosing to enjoy retirement at home. He'd made good money back then and Aileen

had always made sure he was

taken care of. When he left, he took some

antiques too, so he was living pretty

well in his later years.

"Yeah," he said quietly. "I haven't worked since I left the Austin family. Been traveling with my wife and grandson."

He kept his voice low, like he was worried Laurinda might suddenly want payback. If she decided to hold a grudge, he'd be lucky to just lose his comfortable life and not end up in real trouble.

She smiled again. "That's nice. You've earned it. I don't need anything else, so go ahead and enjoy your day."

He bowed his head. "Thank you, Laurinda. Enjoy your meal." Then he hurried off, looking relieved.

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Chapter 420

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The butler hurried away. Laurinda watched him go, a tiny smile playing at the corner of her lips.

By the time Adolphus finished his phone call, Laurinda was already done with breakfast. She sat with her sketchpad, completely absorbed in her drawing.

"Ready to head home?" Adolphus asked, his voice gentle as he took a seat across from her.

Laurinda set her pencil down and looked up. "Did something happen? Aren't you going to eat?"

"I'm not hungry. Something came up. I'll tell you on the way home."

"Alright."

She got up. Adolphus took her backpack, tucked her sketchpad inside, and waited while she slipped on her coat. They left the restaurant together, picked up their luggage, and headed out.

During the ride back, Adolphus told her he needed to go abroad for a while, keeping it brief.

Laurinda frowned a little. "That soon?"

"It's not too rushed. I could leave tomorrow if you want. Should I take you to Cabinda first?"

He knew Laurinda had been planning to go to Cabinda. He figured it'd be better if he took her himself, just to make sure she'd be settled before he left. Honestly, he was still worried about her injuries.

"I'm actually not going to Cabinda for now. Teddy already brought everything I needed when he was here. You go and take care of your stuff. Don't worry about me. The people here will look after me. And Cabinda isn't safe at the moment. Unless there's a real emergency, I'm staying put."

Laurinda could tell he was worried. Kinsey had warned her just a few days ago to stay away from Cabinda until the troublemakers from Bagot's group were finally dealt with. No need to take risks if she didn't have to.

Hearing her say that, Adolphus breathed a little easier. He reached over and pulled her close. "I'll come back as soon as I can."

She nodded. "Just be careful while you're there. And if anything happens, don't forget to call me."

Laurinda wrapped her arms around his waist, burying her face in his chest for a moment.

When they got home, Laurinda started packing Adolphus's things for his trip. Coco, their cat, followed Adolphus everywhere he went, step by step.

Watching the two of them, Laurinda felt a strange sense of comfort, like this was a scene she'd lived through before.

She bent down, scooped Coco into her arms, and sat in a chair nearby, watching Adolphus organize his suitcase.

"Coco really likes you. Back at the Adams family's place, she always wanted to be near you."

Adolphus glanced over, meeting Laurinda's big, bright eyes, and smiled.

"That day she wouldn't leave me alone because I knocked over her catnip jar. The smell got on me, and she just couldn't resist."

Laurinda laughed. "I heard later she was my cat. At first, I thought you were just using her to get my Your

attention have to admit, your

flirting didn't work at all. You actually made me want to stay away from you."

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Adolphus walked over, leaned down, and kissed her softly. He rested his head on her shoulder and gently nibbled her ear before whispering "You have no idea how crushed

was liked you so much from the very start, but you didn't just ignore me, you actually seemed to dislike me. My heart was in pieces."

Laurinda thought about how cold she'd been to him back then. She set Coco down, looped her arms around Adolphus's shoulders, and grinned as she hung onto him.

"I honestly thought you were a total player. Like a peacock showing off for anyone who'd watch."

Adolphus picked her up and set her on the edge of the wardrobe, bracing his hand beside her and leaning in Be honest

so their eyes met

though. You were at least a little

interested in me, weren't you?"

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