

# From Ashes of Scandal to His Embrace (Laurinda)

## Chapter 51

[ 677 words ]

When Laurinda came back to the classroom carrying strawberries and blueberries, she could hear everyone in the hallways talking about Fabian. The moment she walked past, though, their voices dipped almost to a whisper.

She clenched her jaw, feeling more annoyed with every step. She hated it when people tried to tie her and Fabian together.

Laurinda pushed open the classroom door and stepped inside. The chatter died instantly. A few students in the front row gave her awkward little smiles, then suddenly acted like their homework was the most fascinating thing in the world.

Shirley spotted her right away and jumped up, taking the fruit from Laurinda's hands. She tugged her back to their seats.

"Just ignore them. They're treating all this like some juicy gossip."

Laurinda frowned. "What's going on? On my way here, everyone was talking about Fabian, and as soon as they saw me, they just... stopped."

She was starting to get genuinely angry. At first, she'd brushed it off, but now it was obvious something was up. People were acting way out of line.

Shirley saw the irritation on Laurinda's face and decided she couldn't keep her in the dark anymore. She pulled her phone from her desk and set it in front of Laurinda.

"Um..... Fabian and Laura went public with their relationship. In their announcement video, Fabian actually mentioned you. He said you wouldn't leave him alone, and he only dated you because he felt pressured. Now he says he's truly in love with Laura and hopes everyone will support them."

Laurinda laughed, but it wasn't because she was amused. She had wanted to give him a chance to save face, but if he was going to dig his own grave, she wasn't about to stop him. If he wanted to play dirty, then he could deal with the fallout.

She sat there for a second, scrolling through a photo of Fabian and Laura kissing in the snow. Suddenly, she didn't feel so mad anymore. In fact, she felt a little bit gleeful.

What an idiot. He had just handed Finn a mess that was impossible to clean up.

With both of these scandals together, Laurinda wasn't sure how Finn would handle it all.

She handed Shirley's phone back. Before Shirley could say anything, Laurinda nudged the strawberries and blueberries toward her.

"These are from my family's estate. Share them with the girls in our dorm."

Then she dug her own phone out of her backpack and got to work. She started uploading every single disgusting message and photo. Fabian had ever sent her, plastering them all over the campus forum and every social media app she could think of. Let everyone see what a real creep looked like.

Suddenly, the principal showed up at the classroom door. The room, already quiet, went dead silent.

The principal cleared his throat, looking a little uncomfortable under everyone's stare. "Laurinda, could you come with me to my office?"

Laurinda was surprised. The last time she'd been called to the principal's office, it was for donating money to build a new school building.

"Principal, I don't have money for another building right now."

He smiled at her. "This isn't about a donation. You'll see when you get there." "Okay."

Laurinda slipped on her puffer jacket and started to follow him out. A few steps later, she paused, doubled back to her seat, and borrowed Sarley's phone before hurrying after the principal.

As soon as they left, the classroom exploded with noise.

"Do you think the principal found out about what's happening online and called Laurinda in for a talk?"

"I honestly think Laurinda's the

victim here there's no way I believe Fabian. Everyone knows he used to wait outside our classroom every single days He was more dedicated than the school security guards. How did he twist that around and

make it sound like Laurinda was chasing after him?"

"Forget that. Did you see the stuff she just posted? It's sick. Who talks like that?"

On the way to the office, the principal glanced at Laurinda, who looked completely calm. For a moment, he didn't know how to start the conversation. Then, after a pause, he finally spoke.

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## Chapter 52

[ 574 words ]

"Laurinda, you went through something serious off campus. Why didn't you tell the school? We would have done everything we could to keep you safe."

Laurinda turned when she heard the principal's voice. Back in the classroom, she'd already guessed why he wanted to see her. The families had shown up.

She gave a small, amused smile. "It's not that I didn't want to let the school know. The whole thing was just too much. I didn't want to drag the school into it. They're looking at attempted murder charges now. That's way past what a school can handle. It's better to let the police deal with it."

The principal watched her, taking in how calm she seemed. Now he understood why all those influential parents were waiting in his office. Clearly, they had run out of ways to pressure Laurinda.

Laurinda opened the office door. Everyone was sitting in a perfect line, as if they were waiting for judgment. Her eyes landed on Finn. She hadn't expected to see him here. Was he planning to defend them?

"So... what's going on here?"

The parents bristled at her pretending not to know. It was bad enough she'd been avoiding them, but now she was acting clueless, too.

Before anyone else could speak, Jared's dad, Keith, stood up and tried to give her a gentle, apologetic smile.

"Laurinda, please don't be nervous. We really couldn't find you, so we had to come to the school. We're here to apologize for our sons and to talk about a possible settlement."

"They're young. They acted without thinking and almost made a terrible mistake. We hope you'll give them a chance to make things right," Keith said, sounding as humble as he could.

Over the last couple of days, they'd all figured out just how much trouble their sons were in if Laurinda refused to settle.

Laurinda nodded politely to Keith, then looked at the other parents who hadn't budged from their seats.

"Keith, are you speaking for yourself, or for everyone else here, too? If you're just talking about yourself, I'm willing to discuss a settlement. My lawyer can reach out to you. But if you're representing everyone, I don't see the point. I'm worried that even after settling, someone might still try something."

She glanced at the parents glaring at her, as if hoping she'd just disappear. There was no way they were genuinely looking to make peace if she let them off easy she'd

just have more town the

line.

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Finn had been watching Laurinda for a while now. He realized he'd had her all wrong. He'd only ever heard what Fabian said about her-spoiled, reckless, no sense of boundaries.

But seeing her now, he could tell she was sharp, maybe even brilliant. She was nothing like Laura.

Keith was caught off guard by Laurinda's response. He turned around and asked the others, his patience clearly wearing thin, "So do you want to settle or not? Didn't we already talk about this?"

As soon as he asked, the parents who had never really wanted to pay up started to back out, their voices turning cold.

"We want to settle, but this isn't fair. My son's still in the hospital and she's fine. Why should we pay her?"

"Yeah, we're not paying. This is ridiculous."

One after another, the parents chimed in.

In their minds, their kids were the

real victims. They thought Laurinda

should be the one in trouble, not

both

them. The idea that they were supposed to pay her after what happened felt completely unjust to them.

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## Chapter 53

[ 632 words ]

Things were getting tense, and Jim looked at Finn with growing anxiety, silently begging him to step in and say something.

Finn honestly hadn't planned to get involved. But after hearing the recording Jared had, it was clear Fabian was mixed up in this, and Finn didn't want things to get any messier. That was the only reason he agreed to come. Still, he hadn't expected these parents to suddenly change their stance.

He cleared his throat, trying to break the ice. "Um... can I say something?"

Everyone went quiet immediately, all eyes on him. Finn's reputation spoke for itself, and nobody wanted to cross him.

He rose from his seat, offering a gentle, almost fatherly smile. "Laurinda, would you mind having a quick word with me in private?"

Finn figured that since he and Laurinda had met a few times before, and considering her old relationship with Fabian, she'd at least hear him out.

"No."

She shot him down without a second's hesitation. For Laurinda, Finn had zero leverage.

Her blunt refusal caught Finn off guard. He felt a wave of embarrassment, but he managed to keep his friendly smile in place. "Sorry, maybe I was out of line. It's just, we've known each other for a while. You and Fabian were pretty close back then..."

He was trying to use Fabian as a bridge, but he had no idea that just mentioning Fabian only made Laurinda more annoyed.

She cut in, not even letting him finish. "Finn, you don't have to play the friend card with me. I'm not part of the Austin family anymore, and I have absolutely nothing to do with the Gates family. If you want to talk about marriage arrangements or whatever, you should go find Laura. She's the Austin heiress now."

"But since we're on the topic, let me ask you for a favor. I wish your son and his girlfriend all the best, but please don't drag me into their story."

"My feelings for Fabian have always been obvious. I said no, and I meant no. There's no such thing as me chasing after him. Please ask him to be careful with his words."

Finn's mind went blank for a moment. He fought to keep his frustration in check and asked, confused, "Go public? With who?"

Laurinda realized he hadn't seen the news yet. She handed Finn her phone so he could see for himself.

Finn scrolled through the posts, and his face almost fell apart right there. He never imagined Fabian would actually go public with this,

completely ignoring everything

Flan

had told him.

He wanted to yell at his son, but this wasn't the place. He forced himself to swallow his anger and managed a stiff, apologetic smile at Laurinda instead.

All he wanted now was to wrap things up here and rush home to deal with the mess Fabian had made.

"I'll have someone delete the posts, and I'll make sure Fabian clears up the rumors about you."

Laurinda slipped her phone back into her pocket, fixing Finn with a chilly gaze. Her lips curled into a cold smile. "I hope you keep your word, Finn."

The other parents watched Finn, their expressions uneasy. They'd been counting on him to smooth things over, and now it was clear that wasn't going to happen.

Suddenly, the idea that their kids might actually end up in jail started to hit home. They weren't quite so tough anymore.

One of the dads who had been the loudest about refusing a deal edged over to Keith, tugged his sleeve, and whispered, "I'll settle, but five percent of the company's yearly yearly revenues just too much..."

Laurinda glanced at her watch, clearly tired of wasting time. "If you think five percent is too much, maybe you should think about what your sons' futures are worth. Once you've figured that out talk tamy lawyer. I have class now, so I'm leaving."

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[ 557 words ]

Laurinda didn't look back. She just turned around and walked away.

The principal watched her go, thinking about how Malcom had described her. He couldn't help but twitch a smile. Timid and soft? That didn't fit her at all.

Finn finally snapped out of it and said to Keith, "Let's settle with her the way she wants. The kids' futures matter more."

He left too, not bothering to look back. At that moment, he couldn't stand Laurinda. He never expected her to be so stubborn, and now he understood why Aiken had been so desperate to get her out of the Austin family.

How did a girl with no one behind her get this much guts?

Laurinda came down the stairs and instantly spotted Bonnie waiting in the lobby. She hurried over, a bright smile on her face.

"You actually came."

Bonnie looked at Laurinda and said, "I'd barely walked into my office when I heard about what happened. So, did they give in?"

"I think so. I'm a little disappointed they didn't put up more of a fight. Finn even came himself. The Browns must really have something on Fabian, or Finn wouldn't have bothered to show up."

Right as Laurinda finished, Finn and his assistant appeared at the top of the stairs. Finn didn't even glance at Laurinda. He just walked straight past her and out the door.

"What's with him..." Bonnie watched Finn's icy expression. He didn't look like someone who just agreed to a settlement.

"He's pissed because of his useless son. Come on, I need to get back to class."

Laurinda hooked her arm around Bonnie's shoulders, and the two strolled out of the building together.

When Finn got back to the Gates family home, he found out Fabian had already climbed out the window and run off at dawn.

He saw Fabian's official announcement and Laurinda's post, which included proof that shot down everything Fabian had said.

Finn was furious. "Damn it, is she really not afraid I'll kill her?"

He slammed his tablet to the floor. It had been ages since he'd felt this angry.

The butler stood by, silent, hoping to disappear. He was supposed to keep an eye on Fabian, and this was definitely his fault.

"Butler, send some men to find

Fabian and bring him back. If he doesn't want to come, break his legs and drag him from Wade get everything off the internet, especially the stuff Laurinda posted."

The butler hurried out, not daring to waste a second.

Meanwhile, Fabian was with Laura, clueless about the storm coming his way. The two of them were still busy brainstorming how to get Finto accept their relationship.

The lunch bell rang. Shirley watched Laurinda, who, for once, hadn't been napping in class. She looked thrilled, and the rest of their dorm mates gathered around. to  
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"Laurinda, you actually stayed awake! Does that mean you'll have lunch with us?"

Laurinda zipped up her puffy jacket and shook her head. "I already have lunch plans, so I can't join today."

She gave Shirley's head a light pat, waved to the others, and walked out of the classroom.

She'd barely stepped into the hallway when a boy stopped her, holding out a box of chocolates.

"Laurinda, I... I like you. Please, will you go out with me..."

Laurinda blinked at the sudden confession, clearly annoyed. She lifted her chin, looking at the boy who still seemed a bit too young for this kind of thing.

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[ 660 words ]

"Does the school know you're dating already? Did your parents send you here just so you could fall in love? Is this really how you repay your teachers for all their hard work? Wasting time on this mess, you might as well go do a few more math problems."

"What is it, not enough homework? Are your grades just too good? Have you completely lost sight of what you want in life? You came here just to chase after me? Sorry, but I'm not interested. You should really focus on your studies right now."

Laurinda didn't even give the boy a chance to say anything. She just walked right past him and didn't look back, leaving him standing there in the hallway, completely lost.

Her words kind of rocked his whole world. For a second, he started questioning everything.

A few girls who came out behind Laurinda watched the boy with a mix of sympathy and disbelief. They couldn't figure out what he was thinking—trying to pursue Laurinda took guts. Maybe too much.

He glanced up, saw the girls looking at him, and instantly felt his cheeks burn. Face bright red, he dropped his gaze and hurried off down the hall.

"What are you all doing here? Where's Laurinda?" Bonnie's voice made the girls jump. She came over and saw a cluster of girls peeking around the back door. Bonnie recognized them—they were Laurinda's roommates, and they all seemed pretty close.

"Hi, Ms. Bonnie. Laurinda went to get lunch," Shirley said, grinning. She was already

a big fan of the new English teacher. Bonnie was so pretty that even as a girl, Shirley couldn't help but admire her.

"Lunch? Why didn't you all go with her?"

"She said she already had food, so she didn't eat with us. Have you eaten yet? Want to come with us?"

The other girls chimed in, eager for Bonnie to join them for lunch at the cafeteria.

Bonnie had actually planned to take Laurinda out for lunch—and maybe ask her about Fabian while they ate. But with Laurinda gone and these sweet girls inviting her, it just felt right to go along with them.

When they got to the cafeteria, Bonnie was honestly amazed. The food stalls stretched out along the wall, and there were barely any lines. Grabbing a meal was just so easy.

"This cafeteria is incredible. The food comes out so fast. And look at all these options. I'm seriously impressed."

Shirley couldn't help but beam with pride. "It's all thanks to Laurinda. She donated the money to build the new science building and this cafeteria. All the food stalls are run by parents of students who need financial help, so the food is always really good, and there's never been a single issue."

Bonnie wandered through the cafeteria, listening to Shirley's explanation. It all made sense.

Laurinda was exactly the type to get things done and make life better for everyone around her.

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Back in the infirmary, Laurinda was waiting for her lunch when she suddenly sneezed. She rubbed her nose, feeling like someone must be talking about her somewhere.

Adolphus came out holding a tray. He spotted Laurinda practically buried in her puffer jacket and frowned a little.

"Is it cold in here?"

"It's okay. I think I just got a little chilled walking over. Winter is the worst."

Laurinda really didn't like winter, especially when it snowed. No matter how many layers she wore, she never felt truly warm.

Adolphus set a bowl of steaming chicken congee in front of her. His voice was gentle. "Have some soup first. It'll warm you up before you eat the rest."

Laurinda looked at the beautifully

arranged dishes, took the spoon Adolphus handed her, and glanced up. "Do you ever worry you're spending too much time making everything look this nice?"

"It's not hard at all. I prep everything ahead of time, then cook it right before your class finishes. Now eat while it's hot."

Just then, someone burst in. "I'm back. Wow, it smells amazing in here. I could smell it all the way down the hall."

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## Chapter 56

[ 563 words ]

Irvin charged in, Foley trailing behind him with a stack of food containers. Both of them paused, a little surprised to find Laurinda already there.

Irvin didn't waste a second. He shrugged off his jacket and headed straight for Laurinda. When he caught sight of the food on the table, he threw a dramatic, wounded look over at Adolphus.

"Adolphus, why does she get the special treatment?"

Adolphus glanced at him, clearly unimpressed by Irvin's puppy-dog stare. He turned away, voice cool. "You can start eating in the cafeteria tonight."

"Seriously? Why do I have to eat in the cafeteria? Are you really going to deny me one meal?"

"Because you're too noisy. If you don't like it, you can go eat in the cafeteria right now."

Irvin realized Adolphus wasn't joking. He clamped his mouth shut, shuffled over to Foley, and started helping him unpack the containers, grumbling under his breath as he sat down.

Laurinda sipped her porridge, noticing Irvin throwing longing glances at her food. She couldn't help but smile.

"What's wrong? Want a bite?"

Irvin's eyes lit up. He instantly nodded. No one could resist Adolphus's cooking. Anyone who tasted it knew how amazing it was.

"Nope. It's all mine."

Laurinda raised her eyebrows playfully and scooped up another big spoonful, making an exaggerated show of enjoying it. She was a pro at teasing people.

Irvin just looked at her, shaking his head, half annoyed, half amused. "You're so childish. Here I was, worrying about you, thinking we were good friends."

Laurinda remembered the report about the little bottle of powder. The lab hadn't been able to figure out what was in it, but it definitely had a strong nerve-numbing effect. It was honestly kind of fascinating.

She decided to stop teasing. Pushing her tray toward the middle of the table, she grinned. "Let's share."

She glanced at Adolphus, as if to check if he minded. He didn't say anything, so she added, "You made way too much. There's no way I can finish this alone."

"Fine, eat together. But make sure you finish all the porridge."

"Deal."

Laurinda loved the chicken porridge. By the time she finished, she felt warm and cozy all over.

After lunch, she lounged against the radiator, watching Adolphus work at his computer. Suddenly, she got up and sat down across from him.

Adolphus glanced up, caught off guard by how close she was now. His eyes flickered and his long lashes trembled just a bit.

Laurinda studied his sharp, handsome features and sighed to herself. Honestly, it was a tragedy he wasn't a model.

"Why are you staring at me?" Adolphus asked, sounding a little uneasy.

"Oh." Laurinda snapped back, giving him a soft, easy smile. "I wanted to ask you about Irvin. He doesn't really seem like the brightest guy, but how did he end up with something so impressive? He knew someone was after me and gave me a vial of nerve-numbing stuff."

Adolphus didn't look surprised. He already knew about the vial. After that incident, he'd made sure Foley collected all the other bottles Irvin had, just in case

Tryin got any more.. bright ideas about handing them out.

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Still, when Laurinda called Irvin clueless, Adolphus couldn't help but laugh. Irvin's reputation as a young genius was well known.

"Both his parents are top researchers in biomedicine. He basically grew up in a lab and loves to mess around with things like that. The Main Family took him out of the research institute so he could have normal life."

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## Chapter 57

[ 592 words ]

"Something he was working on in Cabinda got leaked by accident. The Main Family got nervous about the consequences and sent him here. He's honestly really simple, just obsessed with food."

Laurinda gave Adolphus a knowing look, her eyes lighting up with mischief. "So, you're basically here to babysit?"

"Not at all. We ran into each other here by pure chance. After the Main Family found out I was around, they asked me to keep an eye on him. Originally, they planned to ask the Adams family to take care of it."

"That kid looks harmless, but he's actually way too clever for his own good."

Thinking of how Sam had been outsmarted by Irvin, Adolphus couldn't help but laugh. He'd never met anyone with such sneaky tricks up their sleeve.

Better keep Laurinda away from Irvin, just in case she picked up any of his bad habits.

He glanced at Laurinda's rosy cheeks, charmed by how adorable she looked right then. He couldn't resist and reached out, giving her cheek a gentle pinch. The soft, warm feel caught him a little off guard.

Laurinda, surprised, slapped his hand away, half annoyed, half amused. "Cut it out."

"Okay, okay."

Adolphus took her small, cool hand into his own. He frowned a little. The room was so warm, but her hand still felt cold. He found himself wondering what she'd gone through all these years.

Sensing the change in his mood, Laurinda glanced up at him, confused. Was he always this moody?

Just as she was about to say something, Adolphus spoke first.

"You get cold easily. You shouldn't eat too many cold fruits. I'll turn the strawberries and blueberries York brought this morning into jam for you..."

Laurinda nearly exploded at that. She jumped up from her chair, eyes wide. "Hey! Do you even know how sweet and perfect those strawberries and blueberries are? How could you waste them like that? Absolutely not. You have to eat them fresh. No jam!"

Adolphus stared at her, amused by her outrage. In that moment, he saw the little girl she used to be, the one with pigtails who would argue with him for breaking her doll. She was just too cute.

After a pause, he asked, "The strawberries were for me?"

"Obviously? How many could I eat on my own? brought them for you. They're from the Agricultural

Science Research Institute the best Science

kind. You can't just mash them into jam."

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For Laurinda, eating strawberries fresh was non-negotiable. She'd never liked sugary jam, and thought it ruined the fruit.

"Alright, but don't eat too many at once," he said.

"Yeah, yeah, you sound like my dad."

The bell rang for the end of lunch break. Laurinda pulled her hand from his, threw on her puffy jacket, and headed out.

She paused in the doorway, shooting him a warning look. "Don't you dare make jam out of them."

Adolphus stood at the door, watching her go. Her lively, spirited look stayed with him, blending with his memories of the sweet, stubborn Laurinda from their childhood.

He felt lucky. She'd grown up, but she was still his Laurinda.

Laurinda walked down the hallway and immediately spotted Fabian and Laura waiting outside her classroom, surrounded by a bunch of their friends.

Fabian saw her and didn't even wait for her to come over. He strode up, reaching out as if to grab her collar.

Before his hand could touch her, Irvin stepped in and pulled Laurinda behind him.

Irvin already thought of Laurinda as

a friend. He wasn't about to let anyone mess with her, not right in front of him. He still remembered, this was the guy who'd tried to set her up before.

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[ 555 words ]

"What's this? A grown man trying to pick a fight with a girl?"

Irvin shoved Fabian hard, tossing out a teasing grin. No one seemed to notice the quick flick of powder from his fingertips.

Fabian was caught off guard. In his mind, Laurinda was supposed to be friendless, hated by everyone. She wasn't supposed to have anyone in her corner.

"Who even are you? I don't remember seeing you around. Seriously, stay out of this. Move."

Ever since Laurinda exposed his chat logs, Fabian had been plotting ways to make her pay. He never expected her to strike back like this. He knew-better than anyone just

how low he'd stooped for her. Now, with all his messages out in the open, his pride was getting trampled on for everyone to see.

Laurinda, not wanting Fabian to lay a finger on Irvin, pulled him back and stepped forward herself. Her gorgeous eyes sparkled with a taunting smile.

"What, you're allowed to drag me down, but I can't fight back? Didn't your own messages prove what a desperate loser you are? Or were the photos not disgusting enough? Fabian, do you really need me to remind everyone just how gross you were?"

She turned her gaze to Laura, who was standing behind Fabian. Laurinda's smirk deepened, her voice turning cold. "Why? Is the Austin family mess not big enough already? Should I give everyone the real story about you?"

Laura felt a chill run down her spine. Something told her Laurinda knew every last detail. She couldn't look Laurinda in the eyes.

Fabian snapped, unable to watch Laurinda talk down to Laura. "Enough, Laurinda! You're the fake who got kicked out of the Austin family. Laura's the real daughter. You stole her whole life for eighteen years. I'm not letting you bully her."

He raised his hand, ready to slap Laurinda. He swore to himself that he'd make her pay for everything. He couldn't stand the idea of her, the girl who'd been thrown out, acting like she was better than him. She didn't deserve it.

But before he could strike, someone grabbed his wrist midair. Then came a sharp crack and his scream of pain.

Everyone around froze, staring in shock at who'd stepped in.

"Oh my god, did you see that? Our gorgeous teacher is a total legend. She broke his arm like it was nothing."

Irvin's eyes were wide with excitement. He nudged Laurinda, making sure she saw every second of the action.

Fabian stared at his broken arm, stunned. It happened so fast, he hadn't even realized what was going on.

Laurinda brushed Irvin's hand away and looked at Bonnie, whose face was as serious as ever. Before Laurinda could say a word, Bonnie spoke up. "I'll take him back to the Gates family myself. You head back to class."

Bonnie grabbed Fabian by the collar, dragging him away like he was

nothing more than a stray Laura

hurried after them, panic written

across her face.

Fabian's little gang just stood there, frozen, watching him get hauled off. No one dared to move.

"I'm telling you, Laurinda, our teacher is too cool. She should be a bodyguard, not a teacher. Did you see those moves?"

Laurinda gave Irvin a tired glance, rubbing her temples. "Come on, class is starting. Let's go."

She pushed past the crowd blocking

the door and stepped into the classroom. Her classmates all looked up, worry etched on their faces. -

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"Laurinda..."

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[ 648 words ]

"I was freaking out. They were blocking the door, just standing there so we couldn't leave."

Shirley was seriously stressed, her eyes red from worry. The second she heard Fabian was trying to start something with Laurinda, she almost wanted to run out and throw a punch herself.

"It's fine. Let's just go back. We don't want to mess up the class for everyone."

Laurinda gave Shirley a gentle pat and headed back to her seat. She pulled out her phone and sent a quick message to York. After a moment, York texted back.

Bonnie says she's got it under control. Don't stress.

Laurinda stared at York's message for a second, trying to picture how Bonnie would handle it. She couldn't, but she trusted Bonnie to figure things out and decided to let it go.

She put her phone down and looked up to see Shirley still looking worried.

"What's up?"

"I was the one who messaged our teacher to come help. I didn't get her into trouble, did I?"

"No, don't worry. She can handle herself."

Laurinda tried to reassure her. But she couldn't stop thinking about Laura's smug little face. The whole Austin family mess was moving way too slow for her liking. She was starting to get impatient, already thinking up new ways to make life harder for them.

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Meanwhile, Fabian was in the back of Bonnie's car, pain shooting through his arm, his whole body weirdly weak. He tried to sit up and look out the window, only to realize they weren't heading home at all.

"Where are you taking me? Do you even know who I am? If you touch me, my dad is never going to let this go. Just take me to the hospital, okay?"

The scenery outside got emptier and more run-down, and Fabian's anxiety kept growing. He tried to fight back, but the pain and weakness left him helpless.

Bonnie glanced at him struggling in the rearview mirror and just laughed, cold and sharp.

"You like sending those gross selfies, right? Scrawny little creep, sending pictures to Laurinda. Today, you can take as many as you want."

Her voice was so chilling that Fabian felt like he was sitting next to a villain from a nightmare. He was certain she was going to ruin him.

"Please, just let me go, alright? I swear my dad won't mess with you. I won't bother Laurinda ever again Please, khow I was wrong. Is it money? My dad can pay you, alot, just take me back. Im begging you okay? Please... please...

Fabian's voice dropped to a desperate whisper. He was so scared that if Bonnie told him to get on his knees, he'd do it without a second thought.

Bonnie didn't even look back. He started shaking, not sure if it was fear or pain or both.

She had zero intention of letting him go. She'd wanted to deal with Fabian for a long time, ever since he sent those disgusting photos to Laurinda, who was just seventeen. The thought made her furious there was no way she was letting him

walk away.

The car pulled up in front of an abandoned warehouse. Some people inside heard them arrive and hurried out.

"Bonnie."

She nodded. "Take him in and get the pictures. Don't hold back. Give him the full treatment."

Two people dragged Fabian out. He kept struggling, tossing out offers and promises, hoping Bonnie would change her mind.

She ignored him completely and headed toward the entrance.

Right by the door, she spotted someone hiding in a corner. Bonnie had known Laura was following her all along. She'd even slowed down at a few lights to make sure Laura could keep up.

When she walked over, Laura was on her phone, frantically trying to call the Gates family. No one was answering.

Laura felt someone behind her and turned around. The sight of Bonnie's striking face made her recoil in fear and fall straight to the ground. Her voice shook as she stammered. "What... what did you do to Fabian?"

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## Chapter 60

[ 630 words ]

"I'm warning you, I've already called the police. Do you even know who Fabian is? He's from the Gates family. If you hurt him, they'll never let you walk away. He's their only son. You... you can't do anything to him."

Bonnie looked at Laura trembling and scared, crouched down, and squeezed Laura's chin, forcing her to look up.

"Wow, you'd do all this for Fabian? The Gates family should really send you a thank-you card. Laura, right? Why not take this chance to get a real title, make sure Fabian can never leave you?"

Laura, who had been a bundle of nerves, suddenly calmed down at Bonnie's words. But a second later, she snapped back, putting on a show of resistance.

"What... what are you trying to do? I'm from the Austin family! Aren't you scared of us? If you lay a finger on me or Fabian, neither the Gates family nor the Austins will let you go..."

"You talk too much."

Bonnie couldn't be bothered to listen anymore. She knocked Laura out cold and dragged her off toward the photo studio.

\*\*\*

Friday morning, Laurinda got a call to come to the police station and sign a settlement agreement. The moment she walked in, she spotted Finn's assistant and the Austin family's butler waiting in the lobby.

Cain looked surprised to see Laurinda, and for a second, it looked like he wanted to say something, but couldn't quite get the words out.

Laurinda barely glanced at him, then followed Kendal inside.

Once she'd signed the papers and collected the compensation, Laurinda didn't rush off. She told Kendal she'd be right back and headed into the old detective's office.

The officer had been trying to avoid her, but Laurinda showed up anyway. He let out a long sigh when he saw her.

"What are you doing here? You treat the police station like your own backyard or something?"

Laurinda laughed at his grumbling, pulled out a chair, and sat down across from him.

"I'm just here to bring you a thank-you banner... Since you

wouldn't come out to get it, I had to bring it in myself. And while I'm here, I wanted to ask about the Gates family. I saw Finn's assistant and the Austin butler in the lobby. What's up with them?"

The detective's face went from friendly to serious in an instant. He waved her off.

"Enough, go on. Some things aren't for you to know. You're still young, go back to school."

He didn't tell Laurinda what happened to Fabian. Just thinking about the scene made his stomach turn. There was no way he'd ever share those details with her.

Laurinda could tell he wasn't going to talk, so she thought about trying another way to ask. Before she could even open her mouth, the officer shoed her out of the office.

Standing in the hallway, Laurinda rubbed her nose, curiosity gnawing at her. What could have happened that nobody would talk about it?

But honestly, that wasn't even what she wanted to know most. What she really wondered was what kind of dirt Bonnie had on Finn, enough to keep him from causing trouble. Letting her stay at school and teach like nothing ever happened.

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It was just... weird.

Kendal spotted Laurinda coming out and hurried over, lowering her voice as she grinned.

"I asked around. Aiken's investigation is finished, and they're about to press charges. Looks like he's not getting out for at least eight or ten years."

Laurinda wasn't shocked by Aiken's fate, just a bit disappointed. She'd spent so much time setting a trap for him in the Austin Group, and now it probably wouldn't even get used.

She'd hoped to take him down for white-collar crime, but things had taken a different turn. Sometimes, no matter how much you plan, fate has other ideas.

"See if you can find someone inside to..... ruin him for good....."

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