

From Ashes of Scandal to His Embrace (Laurinda)

Chapter 61

[614 words]

Kendal had seen Laurinda's ruthless side before, so her demand didn't catch him off guard at all. He agreed right away.

"Relax, I can set that up whenever you want."

Laurinda noticed how quickly Kendal was picking things up and nodded, pleased. "Come on, let's get dinner at Aeterna. My treat."

Kendal felt a little flattered by her invitation. Laurinda was famous for dropping people the second she was done with them, so being asked out to eat was a rare honor.

But when he sat down and saw the table covered with dishes, a wave of helplessness hit him.

"Laurinda, do we really have to eat all this spicy food? You know I'm from Eldoria. I can't handle this kind of heat."

Laurinda only realized her mistake after Kendal spoke. She handed him the ordering tablet, a bit embarrassed.

"Right, I totally forgot you can't do spicy. Go ahead, order whatever you want. I just got a little too excited and forgot about it. Pick anything."

Kendal didn't take the tablet. He just looked at her, as if he was starting to figure out why she suddenly decided to be so generous. Clearly, she was the one craving all the spicy food.

Just as Laurinda reached for her chopsticks, Kendal put out his hand to stop her. She looked up at him, confused.

"What's up? You order first. I'll start eating. If we wait, everything's going to get cold."

Laurinda's eyes sparkled as she stared at the spicy dishes spread across the table. She had to admit, Adolphus's cooking was great, but it was way too mild for someone who loved spicy food as much as she did. She'd been craving real flavor for ages.

Finally, she had a chance to slip out for something exciting, and there was no way she was going to miss it.

"You're still taking medicine. You can't eat spicy food."

Kendal's words were a total mood killer. Laurinda had begged Adolphus for ages to let her skip lunch at home, and he'd just agreed. Now Kendal was shutting her down.

"Oh, come on. It's not like I eat this all the time. Just this once. I'll be good from now on."

Laurinda dodged Kendal's hand and tried to grab a piece of spicy fish, but before she could, someone knocked at the door.

Thinking it was a server, Laurinda called out, "Come in."

The door opened, and a familiar figure appeared in the doorway. Laurinda froze, her chopsticks suspended in the air.

"Laurinda, you're sneaking out for spicy food?"

Irvin poked his head out from behind Adolphus. His eyes lit up at the sight of the spicy dishes, and before Adolphus could even speak, Irvin slipped into the room and politely greeted Kendal.

"Hi."

"Hi," Kendal replied with a small smile.

Kendal didn't know Adolphus or the others, but when he saw Laurinda's guilty expression, he could tell these people were close to her. He stood and offered his hand to Adolphus.

"I'm Laurinda's lawyer. Kendal."

Adolphus glanced at Laurinda, who was slowly lowering her chopsticks, then came forward to shake Kendal's hand.

"I'm Laurinda's family doctor. Adolphus."

"A doctor? Perfect. She never listens

to me, but as her doctor, you can stop her, right? She's not supposed to eat this kind of spicy food while she's on medication, is she?"

Kendal's relief was obvious. Finally, someone who could keep Laurinda in check. He'd been wracking his brain trying to figure out who could stop her from eating the spicy food, and Adolphus had shown up at just the right moment.

"That's right. She really shouldn't be eating spicy food, especially not oily dishes like these."

Laurinda's frustration was written all over her face. Unable to get what she wanted, she slapped her chopsticks down on the table, stood up, and made for the door.

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[688 words]

Before she could leave, Irvin caught her sleeve.

"Hey, where are you going? We haven't even started eating yet. I know spicy isn't your thing, but Aeterna has a ton of good food. We already ordered, so just hang on. I'll ask the waiter to bring our dishes over. Let's eat together, and then we can all head back. You don't mind, right, Kendal?"

Irvin even turned to check with Kendal.

"Not at all. I'd be happy to join you," Kendal replied, picking up on the easy bond between Laurinda and the other two. He was more than willing to get closer to them.

As soon as Kendal gave the okay, Irvin jumped up to go find the waiter.

Laurinda ignored the look Adolphus gave her, sat down again, and focused on her phone, fingers flying as she sent a message.

Adolphus watched her sulking and couldn't help but smile. He motioned for Kendal to sit, then slid into the seat beside Laurinda himself.

He dug out a piece of chocolate from his pocket and placed it in front of her. Laurinda didn't hesitate for a second. She unwrapped it and popped it straight into her mouth.

If she couldn't have spicy food, sweets would have to do.

Irvin soon came back with the waiter, and when Laurinda saw the dishes, she nodded in approval and picked up her chopsticks.

Adolphus relaxed at last, watching her eat. He started chatting with Kendal, but his attention kept drifting back to Laurinda, making sure her plate was never empty.

Kendal noticed how natural all this seemed to Laurinda. He couldn't help but wonder to himself, Is this seriously what a family doctor does?

By the end of the meal, Kendal was more confused than ever. After watching Laurinda get into the car, he went off to find York.

He felt like he had to bring this up. That guy... no, that doctor looked like he was about to steal their precious girl.

In the car, Adolphus handed Laurinda a container of freshly washed strawberries. She didn't even look at him.

Adolphus just smiled, all patience. He picked up a strawberry and held it to her lips, but she turned her head away, refusing to acknowledge him.

She hated when people said one thing and did another. He had promised she could eat out, so why had he followed her here? She was honestly annoyed.

Adolphus knew exactly why she was mad. He spoke gently, trying to explain. "I want to make it clear. I wasn't following you. Foley was out running errands, so I just brought Irvin to Aeterna for lunch."

only knocked on your door

because I happened to see you through the crack as I walked by. also saw that table full of spicy food. Once saw it, there was no way could let you eat that. You've been on bitter medicine for five days. You don't want all that effort to go to waste, do you?"

"And don't think you can sneak things past me. I can tell what you've eaten as soon as I check your pulse. You snuck something spicy on Wednesday, didn't you?"

Laurinda stared at him, shocked. He even knew about her spicy snack session in the dorm? How was that possible? Were doctors really this magical?

"Are you secretly a fortune teller or something?"

He chuckled. "Not at all. Every little change in your body shows up in your pulse. Right now, your system just can't handle spicy food. If you think what I cook is too bland, Rean try making things more flavorful. But you really can't have anything spicy yet."

His voice was soft and soothing, and Laurinda found her irritation slipping away. She took a strawberry from the box he was holding and bit into it. The sweet, fresh taste actually made her feel a bit better.

"These strawberries taste different from the ones back home, but they're just as good."

"Glad you like them. But don't eat too many, okay? Once you're fully better, you can eat as many as you want."

Adolphus knew Laurinda loved

strawberries, so he had arranged for a shipment to be flown in from

Cabinda straight from his ownnet

strawberry garden. Finally, the fruit was going to someone who truly appreciated it.

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Chapter 63

[645 words]

Laurinda's anger faded, leaving her feeling sleepy. She nodded off against Adolphus's shoulder before they even got to school. Adolphus noticed and gently adjusted the blanket around her, making sure she was comfortable.

Irvin, sitting in the front passenger seat, caught a glimpse of them in the rearview mirror. He wasn't surprised. He had seen enough to know Adolphus had a special interest in Laurinda.

When Laurinda woke up, she was in the infirmary's break room. She could hear the sound of the school assembly outside and shivered a little. Who holds an outdoor assembly in this kind of cold? She honestly wondered if the principal had lost his mind. Did he really want all these delicate, overworked seniors to catch a cold?

Laurinda left the break room and spotted Irvin playing a game on the sofa. She glanced around for Adolphus.

"Don't bother looking," Irvin said without looking up. "Adolphus got a call and had to leave. He said he'll be busy the next couple of days. Your medicine's in the fridge, and you're supposed to take it on time."

Suddenly, Irvin straightened up, looking at her with a hopeful expression.

"Are you going to The Adams Family's place? I'm not heading back to Cabinda this week, and Adolphus isn't around. If you're going, can I come with you? I really like Jasper. I've played all the little games he made. They're actually really fun. I want to ask him to help me write a program."

Laurinda didn't expect Irvin to be into Jasper's games, or to want him to code something. In that moment, she honestly thought Irvin seemed even more

interesting than some of Jasper's friends.

She hesitated before saying, "I'm not going to The Adams Family's, but you can come to my place. Larson and Beatrice went to Nexus for an old friend's grandson's wedding, so no one's home."

"What about Jasper?" Irvin asked right away. Jasper was clearly his main concern. If Jasper wasn't going to be there, Irvin didn't feel comfortable going to Laurinda's house alone. He didn't want to give anyone the wrong idea.

"Jasper will be home. If you want to come, just get permission to leave and pack whatever you'll need for two days. I'm heading back soon."

"Alright, I'll go pack now. Wait for me," Irvin said, then dashed out of the infirmary.

Laurinda didn't need to pack anything, so she just messaged Shirley to let her know she'd be home that night.

Shirley replied right away with a frozen-face emoji, then sent another message saying Laurinda was lucky to skip the assembly if she'd gone, she'd probably have turned into an ice sculpture by now.

While they were chatting, York sent a photo. It was Finn and Harden together in the same frame.

Laurinda's curiosity flared up. She immediately video-called York. "When did this happen?"

"Finn invited Harden to lunch today. They also went to a paternity testing center together," York said.

"Wow, he didn't waste any time. Is Finn really planning to let Fabian go just like that?"

At the mention of Fabian, York thought of Bonnie's tactics. He honestly didn't know whether to feel bad for Fabian or not.

"Finn already sent Fabian abroad. He probably won't come back."

Otherwise, Finn wouldn't be so eager to bring his illegitimate son into The Gates Family also heard Alice has accepted Harden."

Laurinda hadn't expected things to turn out like this. If even Alice was okay with it, Fabian must really be out of the picture.

She got even more curious about what Bonnie had done that day.

"York, do you know what Bonnie did to Fabian? How did Finn give up someone he invested so much on so easily? I thought it would drag on for a while."

York avoided looking at Laurinda's curious face. He cleared his throat and quickly changed the subject.

"Anyway, I asked Jack to pick you up. The butler already brought Jasper home. If there's nothing else, I better get back to work."

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Chapter 64

[640 words]

York rattled off everything he had to say, then hung up on her without warning. Laurinda's eyes narrowed, curiosity bubbling up inside her. Something about this whole situation felt off.

"Laurinda, I'm all set. My leave's approved too. Can we head out now? Wait, aren't you taking anything home?" Irvin ran back, looking confused when he noticed Laurinda hadn't packed a thing.

"I'm just going home. What would I need to bring? Let's go. We can hang out at the milk tea shop by the school gate while we wait." Laurinda had sorted out her leave earlier that morning, so she didn't need to check in with her teacher. She stood up, ready to walk out.

But she barely made it a few steps before Irvin tugged her back. He pointed toward the fridge. "Adolphus told me to remind you. You have to take your medicine home and drink it every day."

Laurinda scowled in the direction he was pointing. She'd left it on purpose, hoping to avoid the daily routine. Did he really have to bring it up?

Irvin noticed she wasn't moving, so he set down his bag, hurried over to the fridge, and grabbed the medicine Adolphus had already packed up. He looked way too pleased with himself. "Alright, got everything. Now we can really go."

Laurinda couldn't help but twitch a little smile, half annoyed, half amused. "Wow, you're really on top of things, huh?"

They walked to the school gate, handed over their leave slips to the guard, and watched as the doors swung open.

Outside, a luxury car was parked by the curb. Irvin eyed the gleaming Maybach and asked, "Is that our ride?"

Laurinda glanced over and shook her head. "No, that's not for us. Our car isn't here yet. Let's wait at the milk tea shop."

She'd already messaged Jack, who said he'd be there in about ten minutes. That gave her just enough time to grab a drink and chill while she waited.

As Laurinda and Irvin headed toward the shop, they heard a car door slam and a familiar voice calling out behind them. Laurinda didn't even slow down.

"Laurinda, wait up. Baily asked me to pick you up. He wants to talk," the butler called, jogging to catch up and blocking her path.

Laurinda looked at his worried face and couldn't help but laugh, a little bitter. "I said the day I left the Austin family that didn't have anything to do with them anymore. They had a whole press conference about kicking me out. There's nothing left between us. Why would want to see Baily?"

She hadn't actually watched the press conference, but she could guess what they'd said. Them wanting her back now? No way.

"Laurinda, ever since you left, Baily hasn't stopped thinking about you. Just see him, just this once," the

butter pleat his voice full of...

emotion. If Laurinda didn't already know what kind of people the Austins really were, she might have believed him.

"Drop the act. I said I wouldn't see him, and I won't. Nothing you say is going to change my mind."

She stepped around the butler and kept walking toward the shop.

Irvin followed close behind, glancing back at the butler standing there, a calculating look flickering in his eyes.

Inside, Irvin took the milk tea Laurinda bought him and kept staring at her until she finally snapped. "What are you looking at? If you want to know something, just ask."

Irvin grinned, wide and mischievous. "That old guy who stopped you, he was the butler from your old house, right?"

"Yeah," Laurinda replied, chewing on a tapioca pearl, not really paying attention. Then she paused, fixing Irvin with a suspicious look. "You're not planning something, are you?"

"What could I possibly be up to? I just think people who mess with you ought to get what's coming to them. I've got some laxatives if you want to use them."

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Chapter 65

[526 words]

Irvin flashed Laurinda a sly smile. He promised his laxatives wouldn't actually hurt anyone, just cause some serious embarrassment.

Now Laurinda got why Adolphus always looked so conflicted whenever Irvin's "medicine" came up. This guy really was something else.

"Isn't giving laxatives to an old man a little messed up? If something goes wrong, we're in big trouble. Maybe we should just drop it," she said.

"It'll be fine. My stuff's impossible to trace and totally harmless. Want some? I can hook you up."

Before Laurinda could answer, Irvin started pulling a handful of little bottles from his pocket. There were red ones, blue ones, yellow, green-every color you could think of.

She stared, amazed, as he lined them up on the table like he was showing off his prized collection. Did he really just carry these around?

"Didn't Foley confiscate all your stuff?" she asked.

Irvin looked smug. "No way. These are my backup stash. I'd never let Foley take everything. He only got a few."

He started explaining, his eyes lighting up. "This red one gives you a rash. The white one is that paralysis thing I gave you before. Purple makes your nose bleed. Green knocks you out for a whole day. Careful with that one, you don't wanna end up dosing yourself."

He pointed to more bottles. "Black makes people hallucinate. They'll do whatever you say. The yellow one is the laxative. Just a drop and they'll never forget it..."

Laurinda looked at all those colorful bottles and couldn't help but think Irvin was a total menace. He was basically a walking chemistry set.

"You got anything else?" she asked, suddenly curious.

She realized she barely knew Irvin at all. Honestly, Adolphus probably didn't either. He was full of surprises.

"What are you looking for? The illegal stuff's off-limits, you know," Irvin said.

She raised an eyebrow. "Off-limits? So you actually have illegal stuff?"

His words caught her off guard. Now she was sure Irvin was a hidden gem, a real-life cheat code.

Laurinda's interest spiked. She

casually swept all the vials into her backpack, then leaned in close her voice dropping. "So what's the stuff. you can't give me? I just wanna know. I promise I won't ask for it."

Irvin shrank back, clearly spooked by her intensity. He shook his head fast.

"No, really, that's it. I just mess around with harmless stuff. I'd never make anything truly dangerous. My family would kill me."

She didn't buy it for a second. His face said he was hiding something, but she let it go. There was time. Someday, Irvin would show all his cards.

"Alright, keep your secrets. I'm not that nosy But just remember, it's fine to give this tuff to me but don't

go handing it out. You don't want to

get arrested because of this."

Irvin scratched his head, a little embarrassed. "Don't worry. You're the only one I

trust with this stuff. No one else even knows I have it."

He didn't really know why, but he trusted Laurinda. He just had a gut feeling she'd never use anything against him.

"Good. Jack's here. Time to go home," Laurinda said, spotting Jack's car outside. She grabbed her bubble tea, slung her bag over her shoulder, and stood up, ready to head out.

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Chapter 66

[616 words]

Irvin juggled the luggage and medicine in one hand, his boba tea in the other, trailing behind Laurinda as they left the shop together.

Once they stepped outside, Laurinda glanced back at Cain, who was still standing near the door. She offered a gentle reminder.

"Cain, the weather's freezing. Don't catch a cold. You should head back. I'm not coming home to the Austin family."

"Laurinda..."

Cain didn't even get to finish before Laurinda opened the car door and slid inside. The car pulled away without a second thought.

Cain stood there, watching the car disappear down the street, letting out a long, helpless sigh.

The driver got out of his car and walked up to him.

"Should we go after her? Didn't Mr. Baily say to bring her back, even if it means forcing her?"

"No need. Laurinda said she isn't coming back, and she means it. Chasing after her won't change anything. Let's just go home and tell Baily the truth."

Back at the Austin estate, Cain reported everything to Baily. The moment he heard the news, Baily seemed to age ten years in a heartbeat. He could only mumble in disbelief.

"How could this happen? Who would walk away from the Austin fortune? She's just an orphan who doesn't even know her real parents. Why wouldn't she want to come back? What is she thinking?"

Baily couldn't accept that Laurinda would turn down the chance to rejoin the family. He knew she was proud, which was exactly why he'd called that press conference in the first place. He wanted to break her stubbornness. In his mind, without the Austin family, Laurinda was nothing.

But reality was playing out so differently from what he'd imagined.

Jeniffer, who had been listening nearby, grew worried as soon as she realized Baily wanted Laurinda back. The Austin fortune should belong to her son, not some outsider. She rushed over.

"Dad, are you really giving up on Aiken? He's your son! You can't just leave him like this. You know what he's like. He'd never hurt the Baker family, he must have been set up!"

Just the mention of Aiken's name made Baily's headache worse. He and his wife had always favored Aiken, which only made him more useless over time. Still, he never expected things to go this far.

Aiken had done things much worse than the Baker incident. How could he possibly save him now?

When Jeniffer saw that Baily was serious about abandoning Aiken, she ran up and grabbed his arm.

"Dad, Aiken is all you have left!"

"You don't understand a thing! I have my own reasons for this. Get out of my way!"

Baily shook her off, got to his feet, and leaned on his cane as he made his way to the study. He was going to call Laurinda himself. He refused to believe anyone would say no to becoming the heir to the Austin family.

Jeniffer watched him go, her innocent expression falling away, replaced by something cold and determined. They'd worked so hard to force Laurinda out. There was no way she'd let Laurinda come back now. The Austin fortune had to go to her son. As for Laura, she didn't matter at all. She was just a pawn.

Jeniffer went back to her room, made a quick phone call, then changed her clothes and slipped out of the Austin estate.

Laurinda led Irvin into her home.

Irvin couldn't help but stare. The estate was enormous, bigger than anything he'd seen, even compared to the Main family's place back in Cabinda.

He edged closer to Laurinda, trying to act casual, then muttered quietly, "Weren't you supposed to be the lost little princess? How does someone like you end up with a place like this? You're not just some princess. You're the real thing."

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Chapter 67

[568 words]

Laurinda turned her head and saw Irvin leaning in a little too close. She shifted away with a light laugh.

"I left the Austin family because I wanted to. Who decided I was struggling? The Austin family means nothing to me."

Irvin nodded, totally agreeing. "Exactly. You're your own big deal."

"Laurinda, you're back!"

A clear, excited voice rang out from across the yard, and then a small figure came barreling toward them.

Irvin saw how fast the kid was running and didn't hesitate to step in front of Laurinda, ready to stop him before he crashed into her.

But Jasper stopped on a dime, just a few feet away. He looked at Irvin with bright, shining eyes, thrilled to see someone who actually got his weird little games.

"Irvin, you're here too! Come on, I made a new program for you, I'll show you..."

Before Laurinda could even say hi, Jasper grabbed Irvin's hand and pulled him away.

Watching the two of them go, Laurinda felt her heart melt a little. It was nice, seeing Jasper have someone to really play with. It made her feel oddly at peace.

The butler glanced at the medicine in her hand. "Is that your medicine, ma'am?"

Laurinda looked down at the bitter-smelling bag. She was ready to tell the butler to just toss it out, but then remembered what Adolphus said about being able to tell what she'd taken just by checking her pulse. She swallowed her words and handed the bag over.

"It's mine. Just put it in the fridge, please."

He took it right away and walked with her toward the main house.

"It's the first time you've brought a friend home. We should make sure you're all comfortable. Does your friend have anything he doesn't eat?"

Thinking of why Irvin was here, Laurinda smiled. "He's mostly Jasper's friend and honestly, he'll eat anything. Just go ask them. Jasper's studying what they want 'm on medication, so just keep my food light."

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Laurinda pushed open the glass door, and suddenly a black ball of fluff launched itself at her. She caught it easily, pressing a gent finger to its forehead "Coco, that's not how you behave. I've told you so many times not to jump on people." She laughed, squeezing its soft little paws. When she noticed the sharp claws, she set her bag down and took Coco to give its nails a trim.

Coco curled up in her arms, purring like the clingiest little gremlin, and Laurinda couldn't help but adore it.

At dinner, Irvin found himself amazed once again at how Laurinda lived. He seriously wanted to snap a photo and send it to a certain Someone just to show what real luxury looked like. FindNovel.net tos

Laurinda caught him making faces-confused one minute, annoyed the next-and had no idea what was going through his head.

She tapped her fingers on the table. "What's up? Is the food not good?"

Her chef wasn't some international superstar, but he was still one of the best in the country. It wasn't like the food could be bad.

"No way. It's so good I want to take a picture and rub it in Fabian's face. He's always looking down on you."

Laurinda realized Irvin was standing up for her and just shook her head with a helpless smile.

"He's not worth your time. Just eat. After dinner, the butler will help you pick a room."
"Can I share a room with Jasper?"

"No!"

"No!"

Laurinda and Jasper answered at the exact same time, wearing identical looks of disapproval. Irvin just stared at them, totally confused.

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[586 words]

He scratched his head, looking a little awkward. "Is it not okay? Never mind, forget it."

"You can't sleep in the same room, but you can stay in the one next to Jasper's."

Laurinda didn't say any more, and Irvin didn't ask. Just knowing he'd be right next to Jasper made him happy enough.

After dinner, Laurinda took her medicine and scooped up Coco, heading upstairs. She stopped at the landing, glancing back at the two of them in the living room, still playing chess. Her voice was calm. "No later than nine o'clock."

"Okay!"

Jasper, totally focused on the chessboard a moment ago, perked up and answered with the bright eagerness of a little kid.

To Jasper, nothing mattered more than Laurinda. Whatever she said, he listened.

Irvin checked the time. Jasper really was just a kid, so a nine o'clock bedtime made sense. He nodded.

"I'll keep an eye on him."

Laurinda watched the two of them, both acting like kids, then turned and headed upstairs without another word.

As soon as she stepped into her study, she heard something buzzing in her desk drawer. She set Coco down, walked over, and opened the drawer to find a phone. She glanced at the screen and saw a number she hadn't seen in ages. She answered.

"Layne, what's going on?"

She hadn't used this phone in forever. Ever since her last injury, she'd left the special task force behind. She never thought anyone would call this number again.

"Here's the thing," Layne said. "Criminal Investigations just got a weird case. Three people have gone missing during the investigation. The suspects left behind a few clues. We were hoping you could come and help us figure them out."

"Sure."

Laurinda agreed right away. She hung up, grabbed her car keys from the drawer, and headed downstairs.

The living room was empty by the time she got there. The butler heard her coming and stepped out. When he saw her slipping on her coat, he walked over.

"Heading out?"

"Yeah, I've got something to take care of. Coco's still in my study have Jasper bring her down. I'm not sure when I'll be back, so don't wait up."

Laurinda pulled on her puffer jacket, grabbed a mask, and left in a hurry. The butler rushed after her but only caught a glimpse of her car's taillights disappearing down the drive.

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He turned back and saw Jasper standing in the doorway in his thin pajamas, looking a little lost.

"She left again?"

The butler's heart ached for him. He picked Jasper up and tried to comfort him as they walked back inside.

"Don't worry, Laurinda will come home safe. It's cold out here. She left you a mission, you know—she wants you to go to her study and bring Coco downstairs."

"Okay, I'll go get Coco."

Jasper slipped out of the butler's arms. When he heard footsteps behind him, he quickly put on his most innocent face and bounced up the stairs like any happy kid.

Irvin heard Jasper was heading to Laurinda's study, but he didn't follow. He just waited for him downstairs.

Twenty-five minutes later, Laurinda showed up outside the Criminal Investigations office at the police station and knocked gently.

Someone opened the door and looked at her, surprised. "Can I help you? If you're here to report something, the office next door is open."

"I'm the tech specialist Layne called in."

At her words, everyone inside looked

up. Their faces were tired and anxious but when they saw how young she was, their eyes filled with doubt. Still, they kept their voices polite.

"You're the one Layne sent? Come in. Let me explain what's going on."

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Chapter 69

[591 words]

Laurinda listened quietly while the officer finished the briefing. She took her time, eyes roaming over every clue, until something caught her attention—a string of numbers that most people would have missed.

"Can I get the computer?" she asked.

One of the techs, a woman, handed over a laptop right away and slid over to give Laurinda some room.

Laurinda booted it up, opened the editor, and typed in a command. Code filled the screen in a rush. She entered the numbers, hit enter, and watched as the monitor went black for a second. Then, a 3D map popped up, crisscrossed with red lines, all leading to a single glowing dot.

"That's where the three officers are," Laurinda announced.

Everyone in CID lit up with excitement. In a heartbeat, a bunch of them rushed out, eager to find their missing teammates and—maybe just as much—to see if Laurinda could really pull this off. They had searched for a whole day and night without any luck. Laurinda did what they couldn't in less than twenty minutes.

Soon, the meeting room was almost empty, just Laurinda and the technician who'd given her the laptop left behind.

The technician smiled at her, kind and a little apologetic. "We just need you to wait a bit longer, until we're sure they're found. Thanks for being patient."

"No worries, I get it," Laurinda said with a small shake of her head.

Her eyes drifted to the corner of the tech's screen, where an icon blinked in a way that set off alarm bells in her mind. Laurinda sat down, tapped out a few lines of code, and just as she thought—the CID network was under attack.

She turned to the technician. "Hey, if it's okay with you, I can help upgrade your firewall."

The technician's eyes went wide. This was basically her dream come true. She'd wanted to reinforce the firewall for ages, but their system was so specialized that nobody on staff could handle a real upgrade.

"That would be amazing. Thank you," she said, practically glowing.

While Laurinda worked, the tech quietly ordered her a boba tea and watched her patch up holes in the system, one after another. Seeing all

the vulnerabilities get fixed was a little terrifying—who knew what could have happened if a hacker had gotten through?

Not long after Laurinda finished, shouts and laughter came from the hallway. The CID team had just

come back.

They'd rescued all three

missing officers and even caught a few of the guys holding them

Maybe not the masterminds, but still a win.

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Laurinda finished the last line of code, closed the laptop, and slid it back to the technician.

"All set. Everyone's safe and your firewall's good to go. I'll head out now."

"I'll walk you out. And, um... if it's not too much, could I get your contact info? Promise I won't bug you unless it's really important."

"Sure," Laurinda said easily, pulling out her phone and swapping details with her.

She barely made it out the door
before the rest of the team
surrounded her, talking over each
other about how tough the rescue
had been. Everyone kept saying how
they never
would have found the
missing officers without her pinpoint directions.

Just then, someone tall pushed through the crowd and pulled Laurinda into his arms.

"You're crowding her," he said, voice booming.

That familiar pine scent wrapped around Laurinda and all her tension melted away. She let Adolphus guide her out of the crowd.

The cool air outside helped clear her head. She looked up at him, not surprised to see him there. "All done with work?" she asked, her tone easy.

"Yeah, finished up. Are you heading home?"

"I am. Want to come with me?"

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Chapter 70

[589 words]

Adolphus met Laurinda's shining eyes and took the keys from her hand. He bent down, his voice soft by her ear. "Give me two minutes. I just need to talk to them, then we can go."

Laurinda nodded and stood quietly in the hallway. The others, still buzzing from their victory, lingered nearby, watching her.

Under their stares, Laurinda felt a little awkward. She turned to them and said, "Congratulations. You pulled off the rescue."

One of them spoke up. "We should be thanking you. Really, thank you for your help."

Together, they snapped to attention and saluted her in perfect unison.

Adolphus came out just in time to see it. He grinned. "Late-night snacks are on me tonight. Sam's covering the bill."

Sam, trailing behind, started to protest but gave up with a sigh, watching as Adolphus took Laurinda's hand and led her away.

In the car, neither said a word about what happened at the station. The silence stretched all the way to the estate, comfortable and a little expectant.

When they finally pulled up, they glanced at each other and shared a quiet smile. Laurinda unbuckled her seatbelt, her hand resting on the door.

"So, are you staying over or heading back?" she asked.

Adolphus hadn't planned on staying, but now that he was here, the idea of leaving felt wrong. He wanted to be close to her, just a little longer.

"Is it alright if I stay?"

"Of course. Just so you know, the staff's already gone to bed. You'll have to make your own bed tonight."

"That's fine with me."

Laurinda led him upstairs to a room next to Irvin's. Adolphus leaned in the doorway, glancing at the room next door. It definitely didn't look like her bedroom.

"You don't sleep on this floor?"

"I'm up on the third. There's clean bedding in the closet and toiletries in the bathroom. Get settled and down for something to eat. Content."

She disappeared down the hall and Adolphus watched her go, grinning to himself. He'd made it inside her home. Maybe he was finally getting somewhere.

After he got cleaned up, Adolphus came downstairs and spotted Laurinda in the kitchen, searing a steak in a hot pan.

He let his mind wander, picturing himself walking over, wrapping his arms around her waist, burying his face in her neck and whispering her name.

A sudden noise snapped him out of it. Laurinda had turned around, caught him staring, and lobbed an onion at him.

He caught it easily, a sheepish smile on his face. "What were you daydreaming about? Get over here and help."

He walked over and took the plate she handed him. "Didn't know you could cook."

Adolphus sat at the table and took a bite. The steak was shockingly good. He cut off another piece and offered it to Laurinda.

She shook her head. "Not this late. I'll let you enjoy it. I'm heading up to get ready for bed."

As she stood, Adolphus gently caught her wrist. His voice was soft. "Stay with me for a bit."

She looked into his deep, warm eyes and gave in, sitting back down.

They stayed like that for a while, quiet and close. He ate. She watched him, a gentle calm settling between them.

The next morning, Adolphus came downstairs and immediately noticed Irvin in the living room, playing chess with Jasper. Both of them looked up, caught off guard.

Irvin spoke first. "Adolphus, when did you get here?"

"Last night. Came back with Laurinda. What about you?"

"I wanted to see Jasper, so Laurinda brought me along."

Irvin gave Adolphus a look, like he wanted to say more, but he kept it to himself for now.

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