

From Ashes of Scandal to His Embrace (Laurinda)

Chapter 71

[691 words]

The butler had known since early morning that there was a stranger in the house. When he heard Adolphus's voice, he stepped out of the kitchen and greeted him with his usual calm politeness.

"Good morning, Adolphus. Breakfast is ready for you. I wasn't sure if you preferred something Western or Chinese, so I had both prepared."

"Thank you, that's very thoughtful," Adolphus replied.

He didn't pay any attention to the uncertain look on Irvin's face. He just nodded at the butler and followed him toward the dining room.

As soon as Adolphus walked in, his eyes landed on the bowl of medicine, still kept warm on the table.

He checked the time and realized Laurinda should probably get up and take her medicine soon. If she waited any longer, it could mess with her evening dose.

"Could you ask one of the maids to wake Laurinda? It's best if she has her morning medicine before nine."

The butler had already been thinking the same thing, but he hesitated. He worried Laurinda might not feel well if she didn't get enough sleep.

"Would it be all right for her to take the medicine around noon? Laurinda never sleeps well, and she stayed up pretty late last night. I'm just concerned she'll feel off if she doesn't rest enough."

He sounded genuinely concerned, so Adolphus thought about it and decided to compromise.

"Okay, let's skip the morning dose for now. Just don't put the medicine away yet. When it's time for her next dose, prepare a fresh one and heat it up right before she drinks it. There's no need to keep it warm the whole time."

The butler realized he'd been doing it wrong and quickly threw out the medicine that had been sitting out for too long.

"Got it. I'll make sure to remember next time."

Adolphus nodded and took a seat at the table. While he ate, he chatted with the butler, asking about Laurinda's favorite foods and little details about what she liked.

He listened carefully, making a mental note of everything so he could keep it in mind when he made her medicinal meals.

Once breakfast was over, Adolphus got up, grabbed Laurinda's sports car keys, and drove off the estate.

Irvin watched the flashy car disappear down the drive, unable to hide his

annoyance. He muttered under his breath, "Old fox."

"Who are you talking about?" a voice asked behind him.

"Who else? Adolphus. He's as sly as they come."

He realized too late that Laurinda was standing right behind him, a cat cradled in her arms. She gave him a sleepy look.

Laurinda yawned, then flopped down next to Jasper and rested her head on his shoulder. Her voice was soft and lazy. "Why are you talking about him like that?"

Irvin slid back into his seat, trying to act natural. Just then, Laurinda reached out and moved a chess piece, instantly breaking the deadlock on the board. Irvin's eyes widened.

"Laurinda, how did you do that? I never even noticed that move was possible. You play chess too? Want to go a round?"

Laurinda shrugged, not really interested in a game-she'd just wanted to give Jasper a little hint.

"You and Jasper can play. But you still haven't answered my question. Why are you bad-mouthing Adolphus?"

Irvin hesitated, then said, "It's nothing. I just think he's a tricky guy. Laurinda, you really shouldn't trust him so easily."

He thought Laurinda was too innocent to handle someone as experienced as Adolphus. Guys like that always had something up their sleeves.

Laurinda didn't get why Irvin was so worked up. She just laughed, looking comfortable and at ease.

"Thanks for looking out for me.

Anyway, you two should get ready. A friend of mine is opening a new equestrian center today and were going to have some fun. I want you to come with me."

She was in a great mood and felt like getting out for a while. The horse she'd ordered for Jasper had also arrived, so she figured it was the perfect day to hand over her gift and celebrate.

After breakfast, Laurinda left the dining room and found Irvin and Jasper already dressed and waiting for her in the living room. She couldn't help but tease them a little her eyes sparkling.

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[636 words]

"You two are quick. Give me a sec to get ready and we'll head out."

"Okay." "Okay."

Jasper and Irvin answered at the same time.

Laurinda eyed their innocent faces, squinting a little. Sometimes she wondered if she was falling for their good kid act.

They left the house together. Laurinda didn't bother asking the butler for a car. She drove them herself.

When they arrived at the riding club, Laurinda parked in the spot she was told to use. She popped open the trunk and pulled out a gift. Irvin stepped over and took it from her, totally at ease.

Irvin glanced around at the parking lot, which was packed with luxury cars. He leaned in and lowered his voice. "Wow, your friend who owns this place must be pretty important, huh?"

"They're doing fine. Not from Apex though."

Laurinda didn't say more about the owner. It was complicated and she didn't want to blow anyone's cover by accident.

They hopped onto a little tour cart that took them into the club. Jasper and Irvin couldn't stop looking around, their eyes wide and sparkling. This was easily the fanciest riding club either of them had ever seen.

Laurinda couldn't help but laugh at how fascinated they looked. "Everyone at the opening gets a membership card. It comes with twelve free riding lessons. If you want, you can take classes together."

"Seriously?" Irvin was the first to speak up. He'd grown up in a lab, not running around outside. Now that he had the chance, he was more than willing to try something new.

"Why would I lie? Someone will come by soon to help you pick out a horse. You can give it a shot."

Once they got off the cart, Laurinda spotted a few familiar faces. Most were big names from the Apex business world. There were even a couple of heiresses she used to get along with, but now they just looked like they couldn't wait to see her mess up.

"Well, well. If it isn't Miss Austin herself-oh wait, I forgot. You're not Laurinda Austin anymore, are you? You're just the fake who got kicked out. Laurinda, how do you still have the nerve to show up here? Just being here makes this place feel dirty."

A group of heiresses closed in, blocking Laurinda's way. The same girls who used to trip over themselves to impress her now looked like they'd love nothing more than to see her fail.

Back when Laurinda was the Austin family's future heiress, their families had all made sure they stayed in her good graces. Now, things had changed.

Thinking about the way they used to suck up to her made them want to tear her down even more.

Laurinda just looked at them, cool and calm. She pulled out the diamond-studded invitation she'd been holding and held it up for them to see.

"You don't get to decide if I belong here. Open your eyes. See what this is."

She stood straight, meeting their shocked stares. Her confidence had never come from being an Austin.

"You... how do you even have a diamond invitation? Laurinda, you got kicked out of the Austin family. What right do you have to keep using their name? You're shameless!"

They glared at her, clearly annoyed. So what if she had a diamond invitation? To them, she was nobody now. No way were they going to let her act like she still belonged.

Their argument was starting to draw a crowd. Even the organizer, who was about to give a speech on stage, turned to look.

Seeing everyone watching, the girls

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blocking Laurinda's way only seemed more pleased with themselves. They wanted Laurinda to be embarrassed in front of everyone, maybe even get her thrown out.

"Lacy, looks like someone's making a scene at your opening."

A calm voice carried through the chatter. As soon as people heard the name Lacy, the whole place went quiet.

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Chapter 73

[589 words]

They instinctively stepped aside, opening up a clear path that left Laurinda standing right in the middle for everyone to see.

Irvin, who was next to Laurinda, was racking his brain for a way to help her when he noticed a woman heading their way. His eyes went wide. What was Adah doing here?

Adah spotted him at the same time and flashed him a friendly smile.

Irvin quickly looked away, pretending not to see her.

Lacy approached Laurinda, his eyes gentle as he asked, "What's going on here?"

Before Laurinda could answer, a few of the wealthy girls jumped in, eager to have their say.

"It's her! She's pretending to be part of the Austin family just to get into this event. She stole Ms. Austin's identity for eighteen years and already got kicked out of the family. Now she's still using their name. She's unbelievable."

"That's right. The Austin family already held a press conference to cut ties with her, but she just won't quit. She keeps using their reputation to scam people. Honestly, someone like her doesn't belong here. She should be kicked out."

Baily had just stepped out of his car when he overheard the accusations against Laurinda. His eyes lit up. He thought this was the perfect time to help smooth things over between Laurinda and the Austin family.

He hurried forward, pulling Laura along, ready to stand up for Laurinda.

But before he could say anything, Adah, standing beside Lacy, spoke up first. "People like that have no shame. Where's security? Get her out of here."

That was when Laurinda finally noticed Adah. Her gaze, cool and a little amused, swept over Adah as if she was barely worth her attention.

Lacy hadn't taken his eyes off Laurinda. He noticed the slight change in her expression and suddenly felt anxious. He jumped in quickly.

"Hold on. Laurinda is here as my guest. I delivered her diamond invitation myself. There are only three, and this has nothing to do with the Austin family."

Everyone turned to look at the invitation in Laurinda's hand. It was definitely different from theirs. Now, they were all wondering what exactly was going on between Laurinda and Lacy.

Lacy gave Adah a quick glance, ignoring how upset she looked, and stepped right up to Laurinda's side.

"I'm really glad you came. Let me take you to the main hall."

He offered his arm with an easy, gentlemanly gesture. Laurinda accepted, and together they walked inside leaving the rest of the group standing there in shock, unable to believe what they'd just seen.

Nobody could wrap their head around the fact that Laurinda was still treated like a VIP even after leaving the Austin family.

"How is this possible? This isn't how it's supposed to go," one of the girls who'd blocked Laurinda whispered, sounding lost. This was nothing like what they'd imagined.

Just then, a group of security guards rolled up in a golf cart and headed straight toward the stunned heiresses.

"I'm sorry, but we've been ordered to ask you to leave the event. You and your families will also be added to our blacklist and won't be allowed back at the equestrian center" one of the guards announced.

"No way. This can't be happening," one of the girls stammered. Their families had been invited. How could they be thrown out?

"We're not leaving... We have invitations," another girl insisted.

"If you won't cooperate, we'll need to find your parents and ask them to leave with you," the guard replied.

The security team moved through the crowd, found each girl's parents, and together, the families were escorted out of the venue.

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Chapter 74

[594 words]

The Austin family sat there in stunned silence, unable to believe what they'd just witnessed. For as long as they could remember, they thought Laurinda's power in Apex came only from the Austin family name. They figured people respected her because they had to respect the Austins.

Today proved them completely wrong.

Now, the Austin family was nothing but the punchline of Apex's jokes. Every family, big or small, took their turn laughing at them. Even if they wanted to protect Laurinda, nobody would care. Their backing meant nothing now.

Laura stood beside Baily, her emotions tangled and heavy. She'd always imagined her life would outshine Laurinda's someday. But after Bonnie had put her in her place, those dreams dissolved. There was something about Laurinda she just didn't have.

Watching everything unfold, Laura finally accepted the truth. Laurinda was someone she would always envy, someone just out of reach. Especially after the Gates family's

warning, the differences between them felt even starker. There was no comparison—never had been, never would be.

Finn felt the same confusion and frustration. He'd interacted with Laurinda before, but he never understood where her quiet confidence came from. After what happened with Fabian, and after seeing that other woman's ruthless methods—so bold that Finn could only seethe in silence he stopped underestimating Laurinda. That woman claimed she was Laurinda's friend, but Finn didn't buy it. He'd seen the way she spoke about Laurinda, the unwavering loyalty in her eyes.

Finn turned away from Laurinda, lowering his voice as he spoke to Harden, who stood at his side. "See that girl? I want you to go after her. If you can win her over, I'll give you five percent of the Gates Group's shares."

Harden looked at Laurinda, ambition flickering in his gaze, but he shook his head. "I can't. I don't have what it takes. She's not someone I could ever hope to be with."

Finn blinked, caught off guard. He'd seen that spark in Harden before, that restless hunger for more. "Just give it a shot," Finn urged. "What if it works out? I'm not asking you to sweep her off her feet overnight. Take your time. I've already arranged for you to transfer into Apex School. You'll have plenty of chances."

He clapped Harden on the shoulder, his face full of encouragement. He couldn't afford to mess up again. One son was already a lost cause. This time, he was determined to make Laurinda his daughter-in-law.

Lacy welcomed Laurinda and her friends into the opening ceremony. Laurinda took the gift Irvin handed her and passed it to Lacy.

"Congrats on the big day," Laurinda said with a warm smile.

"Thank you. Why don't you and your friends

a seat for now? Once

them is over I'll take

you to see your horse." Co

"Sounds good," Laurinda replied, perfectly content to follow Lacy's lead.

The three of them followed an usher to their seats, ignoring the stares and whispers from the crowd.

Just then, a woman in high heels approached, her smile bright and practiced. She sat down next to Laurinda.

"Hi, I'm Adah. I came all the way from Cabinda for Lacy's opening. I was hoping we could be friends."

Adah had noticed how much

attention Lacy paid Laurinda and et

wanted to get on her good side She was curious, too. Anyone that special to Lacy had to be important.

Laurinda glanced at Adah's outstretched hand but didn't take it. From the very first moment she'd seen Adah she felt an unexplainable dislike. She had no interest in being friends.

"Sorry. I don't think we're the same kind of people. There's really no need for us to be friends."

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Chapter 75

[615 words]

Laurinda looked away, refusing to make eye contact with Adah. Even as Adah's face turned bright red with anger, Laurinda stayed completely unfazed.

"Laurinda, are you really going to be this petty?" Adah said, her voice tight. "I'll admit, maybe I went a little overboard just now, but I was only trying to make sure you didn't mess up the opening ceremony. There's no reason to hold a grudge so big that we can't even be friends anymore, right?"

That actually got Laurinda's attention. She didn't bother arguing, just lifted an eyebrow and watched Adah coolly.

"Worried I'd ruin the ceremony? That's interesting. Tell me, Adah, what exactly gives you the right to say that? Are you a shareholder? A partner? The manager? Or maybe you're part of Lacy's family?"

Adah looked completely thrown. She bit her lip, thinking for what felt like forever before mumbling, "None of those. I'm... just a friend."

Laurinda let out a soft laugh and really leaned on the word. "Wow. You're pretty controlling for just a 'friend.'"

She left it at that, not bothering to say anything more.

Adah had never been talked to like that before. Her whole life, nobody had ever made her feel so embarrassed. She thought Laurinda was being unbelievably rude, acting all superior. Deciding she'd had enough, Adah stood up and walked away without another word.

Once Adah was gone, Laurinda glanced at Irvin, who was trying-and failing-not to laugh. She'd already noticed he seemed to know Adah.

"So, you see someone you know and just pretend not to notice?" Laurinda teased.

Irvin snapped out of it, quickly hiding his smile and putting on an innocent face. "We're not exactly on good terms. Laurinda, she's the reason I broke up with my girlfriend."

That got Laurinda's attention in a heartbeat. She perked up, clearly waiting for the juicy details.

Irvin caught her nosy look and just rolled his eyes. Part of him wanted to spill everything, sure that Laurinda wouldn't be so amused if she knew the whole story. But he didn't dare cross Adolphus, so he clammed up.

When he didn't say any more, Laurinda lost interest and looked away.

The opening ceremony finally started. Laurinda sat up straighter, clapping politely from time to time. Anyone who tried to greet her was pretty much ignored.

When it ended, Lacy came over to personally lead Laurinda and her friends out. People in the hall watched them leave, whispering and wondering. One curious guest sidled up to Baily.

"Baily, I had no idea you had connections with Northland people. Laurinda and Lacy seemed really close."

Baily honestly had no clue how Laurinda knew Lacy, but he wasn't about to miss a chance to look good, "Laurinda's been raised as the Austin family's heir for years. It's only natural she'd know some impressive people. She just never told me about it before."

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Some people rolled their eyes, not buying it. Others felt jealous, thinking Laurinda had used the Austin family's resources to get ahead. Most were just annoyed, saying Laurinda was ungrateful for using the family's support without giving anything back.

The Austin family itself felt the same way. As the crowd thinned, Baily leaned over and whispered to Laura, "Go talk to Laurinda. Remind her that everything she has comes from the Austin family. She needs to O introduce you to Lacy. If she won't come back to us, then it's time she

returned some of what she's

gained."

Lacy led Laurinda and the others toward the stables, but Laurinda's beloved horse was nowhere to be found. Lacy called over a staff member.

"What happened to the horse in stall two?"

The staffer checked his tablet, then answered, "The horse from stall two was picked up by a Ms. Charles. She should be over at the racetrack now."

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Chapter 76

[476 words]

Laurinda's heart jumped when she heard her horse had been taken. She knew Kent's temper better than anyone.

"I told you, no one's allowed to ride Kent. How could you let someone take him?" she demanded.

The staff member looked nervous under Lacy's glare and blurted out, "We tried to stop Adah, but she insisted. She said she was your friend and told us to trust her with Kent."

Laurinda narrowed her eyes at that. Adah, calling herself her friend? That was rich.

But right now, Kent mattered more. Pushing her anger down, Laurinda's voice turned cold. "Let's go check. We can't let anything happen."

Lacy got it. He knew how serious this was. Together, they rushed toward the riding arena.

As soon as they reached the edge, they heard shouts and gasps. Laurinda's chest tightened. She didn't wait for Lacy, just took off running.

Inside, she saw Kent out of control, wild-eyed and rearing. One of the staff was off to the side, raising a tranquilizer gun and looking for a shot.

"Stop! Don't shoot!" Laurinda yelled.

Lacy caught up as she shouted. He froze, panic rising. If something happened to Kent, the whole business could go under.

"Don't shoot!" he echoed, but Laurinda wasn't listening. She was already sprinting ahead.

She made a beeline for Adah. As she got close, she saw Adah digging her shoe into Kent's side, making him even more frantic.

Laurinda didn't think twice. She climbed the fence, vaulted straight onto Kent's back and kicked Adani hard in the shoulder Adah flew off, landing with a thud on the ground.

With Adah gone, Laurinda slid into place on Kent's back. She wrapped her arms tight around his neck and let him run, holding on for dear life.

Everyone watching sucked in a breath. They all knew how dangerous a panicked horse could be.

Just as it looked like Laurinda might get thrown off, Irvin hurried over to Lacy, his voice tight with panic. "Why can't they just shoot? Isn't

Laurinda's

sworn phore than a

horse's

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Lacy looked over, helpless. "It's not up to me. Laurinda won't let anyone shoot. Kent

was a birthday gift from her dad. He means everything to her."

Irvin hadn't realized it was that serious. Suddenly, he had an idea. He ran toward Laurinda, yelling, "Laurinda, catch!"

He tossed her a small brown bottle.

Laurinda heard him and saw the bottle flying through the air. She let go of Kent's neck for a split second caught the bottle, then landed back on the saddle.

Everyone gasped again. If she'd slipped, she could've been trampled.

Laurinda looked at the bottle, not sure what was inside, but she trusted Irvin. Kent was way too far gone. If this kept up, it could ruin him forever.

Without pausing, Laurinda leaned in close, opened the bottle, and poured the powder right into Kent's mouth.

She tightened her grip on the reins and gave Kent a gentle nudge, careful to avoid the spot Adah had just kicked.

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Chapter 77

[599 words]

After about ten minutes, Kent finally calmed down. His steps grew steady again as he carried Laurinda around the arena.

Laurinda, still draped over his back, felt the horse's breathing slow. She let out a shaky breath of relief, her fingers loosening on the reins.

With Kent back to himself, he slowed to a gentle trot and let out a soft whinny. The familiar rhythm soothed her nerves.

Once she was sure Kent wasn't going to bolt again, Laurinda stroked his mane, feeling all her strength drain away as she slumped over his back.

"He's fine, the horse is fine! Someone get Laurinda and Kent back here!" Lacy's voice carried across the field, tight with worry. His heart was still pounding at the thought of what could have gone wrong.

As a staff member led Kent in, Jasper and Irvin rushed forward. They didn't notice the tall figure who was already moving faster than either of them.

Adolphus had jumped in his car and raced over the moment Irvin messaged him. As soon as he reached the arena, he spotted Laurinda slumped on the horse, barely holding on.

His breath caught. He didn't even want to imagine what might have happened. Adah, who was getting her wounds treated, spotted Adolphus and her eyes lit up. She pushed past the medic, eager to get his attention.

But Adolphus didn't even glance her way. He ran straight for Laurinda.

By the time Adah caught up, she saw Adolphus lifting Laurinda down from the horse with gentle, careful hands.

She had never seen him like this before. He was so tender, so different from the cold Adolphus she knew. She just stood there, frozen, unable to believe what she was seeing.

How could this be? What was Laurinda to him?

Adah's hands curled into tight fists by her sides. The sting from her own injuries was nothing compared to the ache in her chest. She could handle Adolphus ignoring her, but seeing him treat Laurinda like this was too much.

As soon as Laurinda was in his arms, Lacy shouted for the medics to come check her over.

Laurinda looked up and realized who was holding her. With a soft sigh She nestled into Adus's chest. feel like I'm about to fall apart," she whispered.

Seeing she was awake, Adolphus finally let himself breathe. He sat down on the ground, still holding her close, his hand gently checking her pulse.

"How is she? Adolphus, if you don't know what you're doing, let her go and let the doctors take a look!" Irvin blurted out. He had never seen Adolphusso intense before. It scared him, but he refused to back down. Laurinda's safety came first. Cóntent

"Call an ambulance. She shouldn't be moved right now. I'll take care of the hospital," Adolphus replied.

The mention of an ambulance made both Irvin and Lacy panic. Lacy's hand shook as he fumbled for his phone.

"I'm on it," Irvin said, already running off to make the call.

Adolphus watched him go, trusting that Irvin would get help here fast.

"Clear the way, bring the stretcher over," he called out.

Carefully, Adolphus laid Laurinda on the stretcher. He pulled a set of thin needles from his pocket and pressed them into several points on her body, trying to ease her pain

Adah edged closer, her eyes wide and pleading, as if silently accusing him of betrayal.

Irvin came back just in time to see her act. He stomped over, grabbed her by the arm, and pulled her back.

Adah yelled, her voice sharp with pain. "Ow, you're hurting me!"

Watching her put on a show only made Irvin more frustrated. His expression turned stormy as he shot her a glare.

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Chapter 78

[566 words]

"It hurts? Good. It should. If Laurinda hadn't risked everything to pull you out, you'd be dead right now. You had no business touching her horse in the first place. If you want to get yourself killed, fine, but don't drag anyone else into your mess."

"Adah, this isn't the Charles estate. Nobody here is going to pamper you. Move aside."

Irvin glanced at Laurinda's pale, strained face and felt his anger flare. He wanted Adah to pay for what she'd done.

After Adolphus finished his acupuncture, some color returned to Laurinda's cheeks.

Laird stood nearby, watching her anxiously. He leaned in, voice low. "Is she really in bad shape?"

"Her pulse is still erratic. She needs more tests."

"The ambulance is here!" someone from the staff yelled as the vehicle drove onto the grounds.

Adolphus saw the uneven path in front of them, so he bent down and carefully scooped Laurinda into his arms.

Laurinda reached up weakly, grabbing his collar. "Wait..."

Adolphus paused, looking down at her, her face covered in sweat. "What is it?"

"Kent... Have Lacy get Kent checked out. That woman kicked him, he might be hurt."

Hearing Laurinda worry about the horse even now made Adolphus a little mad. His voice dropped. "Seriously? You're in this condition and still thinking about that horse?"

"He's not just a horse. He's family..."

Laurinda knew Adolphus was just worried, so she wasn't bothered by his tone. She nuzzled into his chest and managed a tired smile. "I want to sleep."

Her soft plea made all his anger disappear, replaced by nothing but worry and tenderness. "Go ahead and sleep. You'll feel better when you wake up."

Irvin kept blocking Adah, not letting her get anywhere near Adolphus. She didn't get a chance to say a word to him before he was gone, and by then, her patience snapped.

"Irvin, what is your deal? I know you can't stand me, but I've told you a hundred times, whatever happened, with Cathleen and Sam has nothing to do with me. Can't you stop making drama out of nothing?"

Irvin just laughed, cold and mocking. "Nothing to do with you? Please. Everyone knows you keep Sam on the hook as your backup plan. When Adolphus isn't around you stick to Sam like glue. But the minute Adolphus comes back, suddenly you act like Sam means nothing. That's just pathetic."

"Cathleen's too soft. She doesn't want a fight to mess up things between our families. But I'm not her. If I can't even protect Cathleen, how am I supposed to run the Main family?"

"Adah, listen. Stay away from Adolphus. And... I don't know what you've got against Laurinda, but after today, you're done."

He flicked his sleeve and walked off, leaving Adah standing there, screaming in frustration.

Adah had come here hoping to get closer to Lacy, maybe land a deal with him. She never thought it would blow up like this. Why did it feel like everyone was against her?

After telling the vet to check on Kent, Lacy turned back and saw Adah standing alone, looking like she was about to break. He walked over.

"Adah, I'll be telling Bagot exactly what happened today. Our families' partnership is over. I don't work with people who only think about themselves."

"And as for Kent, every medical bill, every treatment, every bit of his care from now on will be sent to the Charles family. If Kent is seriously hurt, I'll take legal action someone, please show Ms. Charles out."

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[567 words]

Lacy's words froze Adah in place. She stared at him, completely shocked.

"Lacy, I'm your guest. Are you really going to risk offending the Charles family for that woman? You know exactly what the Charles family means in Cabinda. Are you sure this is what you want?"

Adah just couldn't wrap her head around it. Why was everyone siding with Laurinda against her? Irvin had done it. Now Lacy was doing the same. What did Laurinda have that she didn't?

Lacy just looked at her like she was missing the obvious. He didn't even bother to argue.

"You're right, the Charles family is important in Cabinda. But the city isn't going to fall apart without you. If I wanted to shake things up, I could. Just ask the James family..."

Adah's face drained of color. She could hear the warning in his voice.

And he mentioned the James family. Did he know something about what happened to them?

Panic crept across her face. Lacy had no patience left. He gestured to the manager nearby and pointed at Adah.

The manager understood right away. He walked over, didn't bother with pleasantries, and led Adah out.

Now Adah was standing on the side of the road, completely lost, replaying the look on Lacy's face when he brought up the James family.

How did things go so wrong? She'd arrived as an honored guest. Now she was being kicked out.

A car from the Austin family stopped in front of her. Laura stepped out, holding a coat. She came over and gently draped it over Adah's shoulders.

"Adah, it's freezing in Apex. You're barely dressed for this weather. If you want, I can take you to the hospital. I saw Laurinda kick you from outside the arena. You must be hurting."

Adah snapped back to reality at Laura's soft voice and warm smile. She felt an unexpected surge of gratitude.

"Thank you. Really."

"No problem. Maybe it's fate we ran into each other. I'm happy to help."

Laura helped Adah into the car. Baily, sitting up front, shot Laura an approving look.

He didn't know how Laura figured out who Adah really was, but having a connection with one of Cabinda's most powerful families could only help the Austins.

Way better than Laurinda, that ungrateful girl, who'd lived with the Austin family for eighteen years, kept her connections a secret and never once offered to help them.

York and Bonnie rushed over as soon as they heard about Laurinda's accident.

York pressed up against the little hospital window, watching Adolphus treat Laurinda. His feelings were all over the place.

Ever since he learned who Adolphus really was, he wasn't sure if having him around Laurinda was a good idea.

The strangest part was that Laurinda didn't seem to mind him at all.

York finally stepped away and walked over to Jasper, who looked like he was about to explode. York reached out, ruffled Jasper's hair, and tried to keep his voice light.

"Adolphus knows what he's doing. Laurinda will be okay with him here."

Jasper looked up at York and Bonnie, his face serious.

"That woman is from the Charles family. I've already caused them some trouble, but it's not enough. What they've lost so far is just the beginning. She targeted Laurinda on purpose."

"On purpose?" Bonnie's face fell. "What exactly happened?"

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Jasper told them everything that went down at the riding arena. Bonnie turned away immediately pulling out her phone to call Larr She needed to know exactly who had been involved in targeting Laurinda.

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Chapter 80

[581 words]

Bonnie could see right away that Jasper wanted to take care of the Charles family on his own.

York crouched down, watching Jasper's serious expression. It was obvious the kid was furious. Quietly, York felt a little sorry for whoever was about to cross Jasper. "Alright, it's all yours. But if it gets out of hand, call me. I'll cover for you," he said.

"I won't need backup. I've got this. I've already looked into it. The Charles family's chip tech is far from perfect. I just have to mess with the code a little when they're not paying attention. Their whole system will crash and burn. That'll be the end of the Charles family."

York didn't know what to say after that. He just sat beside Jasper, feeling completely out of his depth.

How were regular people supposed to keep up with these two? Wasn't anyone going to leave them a chance to survive?

A little while later, the door to Laurinda's hospital room opened. Bonnie had just finished a call and rushed straight to Adolphus, her face tight with worry.

"How is she? Is she alright?" she blurted out.

"She's doing much better now. Her joints are a bit strained from handling the horse, and she's pretty worn out, but with a few days of rest, she'll be fine. Nothing too serious. I've already set everything back in place."

"She's still sleeping, so you can go in and check on her, but try not to wake her. She needs to rest."

As he finished speaking, Adolphus gently ruffled Jasper's hair. Looking at the boy's face, so much like Laurinda's, his eyes softened. He knelt so he and Jasper were eye to eye.

"Don't worry. As long as I'm here, nothing will happen to Laurinda. Go keep her company."

Jasper nodded, whispered a thank you, then took Bonnie's hand and the two of them went into the room.

Out in the hallway, only Adolphus and York were left. York could tell Adolphus had something to say, so he spoke up first. "Let's talk outside."

"No need. I have an office here. We can talk there."

Adolphus led the way, and York followed him into the office.

York automatically took in his surroundings. He noticed a bunch of unopened boxes and guessed Adomah phus hadn't officially started at the hospital yet. tñ FindNovel.net

"You're planning to be a doctor here? General medicine?"

"Surgery."

Adolphus pulled a pack of cigarettes from his jacket and offered one to York.

York shook his head. "I don't smoke. Laurinda doesn't like people smoking around her."

Hearing that, Adolphus put the cigarettes away without lighting one himself.

"So what really happened with her injuries?"

When Adolphus checked Laurinda's pulse earlier, he could tell she'd been hurt before. But after today's scans he finally understood how serious her injuries were the kind that could have killed her if things had gone wrong.

York sat across from him. He knew there was no hiding Laurinda's injuries from a surgeon.

And maybe, he thought, if Adolphus and Laurinda were going to be together, Adolphus deserved to know the truth.

"Since she was fourteen, Laurinda's gone on a special mission every year. I don't know the details."

"She'd usually be gone for ten days, sometimes two weeks. Last March, she went off for another mission."

"But this time, she disappeared for a whole I

touchonth. I managed to get in

touch with her team leader, and

thats when I found out she'd been

missing for over twenty days."

"I finally found her in a small town in Madagascar. She was covered in wounds. The

worst was a stab wound to her chest."

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