

From Ashes of Scandal to His Embrace (Laurinda)

Chapter 91

[635 words]

Adolphus noticed how much Laurinda didn't want to sit in the wheelchair, so he told the nurse to take it away.

"Just wait here for me. I'll get all our stuff downstairs and then come back up for you. It's freezing outside, so I need to get the car warmed up first."

Laurinda thought about the biting cold and didn't argue. She wasn't afraid of much, but cold weather was her one weakness. She nodded.

"All right, but don't take too long."

She was itching to get home. With her hands still healing, she hadn't been able to do anything about the Charles family. Now, she was ready to handle them as soon as she got back.

Adolphus caught the excited sparkle in her eyes. He gathered their bags and headed downstairs.

Left alone in the room, Laurinda started to feel restless. She figured the car must be warm by now, so she slipped out.

When she reached the nurses' station, she caught some juicy news. Apparently, Baily had been hospitalized after a stroke.

She didn't really care about what happened with the Austin family, but seeing them in trouble always made her day. Curious, she strolled over and asked, "So Baily's in the hospital? What happened?"

After a few days here, Laurinda had already become friendly with the nurses. Every time the butler brought her meals, he'd also drop off fruit or snacks for the staff. They all got along really well.

"You haven't heard about Baily having an accident in the hospital?" one nurse said.

"On your first day, Baily showed up in your room claiming to be your grandfather. Susan was worried he'd bother you, so she kicked him out."

"He wouldn't leave and just sat in the hallway. Then, get this, he actually had an accident right there. Bonnie was nearby at the time. I thought she would've told you."

Laurinda scrunched up her nose, disgusted. Bonnie hadn't said a word, probably because she found it too gross to even mention.

"So what happened after that?" Laurinda pressed.

"Well, Baily refused to admit there was anything wrong with him, and then he actually hit Susan. Susan isn't the type to take that quietly. She started shouting that she was calling the police, and a big crowd gathered the police had to step in

and settle everything: Susan hasn't shown up to work since."

Laurinda listened, not the least bit surprised. That was just like Baily. Whenever things didn't go his way, he'd get violent.

When she was a kid, her parents had

always protected her, so Baily never

dared lay a finger on her. After her

parents passed away, he tried to throw his weight around

*

didn't obey, he'd try to hit her.

But she wasn't the type to just take it. There was no chance she'd ever let that old man actually hurt her.

She couldn't fight back, so she'd run. She dodged his whip and smashed his precious antiques. After a few scenes like that, Baily finally gave up trying to mess with her.

Shaking off those memories, Laurinda was more interested in what had actually happened to Baily.

"So what's going on with him now? Is he really incontinent?"

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She knew his health pretty well. Before she left the Austin family, she'd gotten his most recent medical report on her phone. There

was no fo.

way he could have gotte this bad in just a month.

Her thoughts drifted to Irvin. She wondered just how much he'd done for her behind the scenes.

"The tests didn't find anything wrong. Baily said he didn't even realize what happened. One minute he was fine, and the next..."

"He had the stroke after he saw some news about himself online. He got so angry, he just collapsed. The stories about him are still trending. PR can't keep up at all."

The nurse handed Laurinda her phone, figuring that no matter how well she explained it, actually seeing the news for herself would be way more shocking.

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Chapter 92

[623 words]

Laurinda felt her stomach turn as she finished the video. Just picturing that blurred mess on the floor made her want to throw up. The whole situation was beyond ridiculous.

Baily was never exactly a genius, but the Austin family used to be a big deal. Now, after everything that happened, his name was basically ruined for good. No one would want anything to do with him. He'd go down in history for all the wrong

reasons.

Laurinda handed the phone back to the nurse and asked for Baily's room number. She couldn't shake the feeling that she needed to see his pathetic state for herself.

Back in her room, she grabbed a fruit basket and practically skipped toward the elevator. Finn had dropped off the basket himself. He'd wanted to visit her, but Bonnie had turned him away at the door.

What was weird was that Finn didn't even try to argue. He just set the basket down and left. That wasn't like him at all. Laurinda couldn't help but wonder what kind of hold Bonnie had over Finn. She'd asked, but Bonnie wouldn't give her a straight answer.

When Laurinda reached Baily's room, she hadn't even knocked before the door swung open.

Jeniffer stepped out and stopped short when she saw Laurinda. Her expression went icy.

"Laurinda, are you happy now? Is this what you wanted for the Austin family? How can you even show your face here? I'll tell you right now, even if you come crawling back, I'll never hand the Austin family to you. This family has a man, and my son is the real heir."

Jeniffer's outburst made Laurinda remember that Aiken did have a son, though she'd almost forgotten about him.

Laurinda nodded, smiling like this was the best news she'd heard all day. "That's great. So the Austin family has an heir. I just hope your son can handle the mess after you husband tore the Austin Group apart. Seriously, wish him fuck."

Jeniffer looked completely thrown by her reaction. She'd always thought Laurinda was cold, willing to tear the family apart for someone who had nothing to do with her. Laurinda had almost killed Aiken, forced Jeniffer's son to leave Apex when he was just a kid, and after leaving the family she'd become even more heartless. When Aiken got in trouble, Baily had tried to contact her, but Laurinda wouldn't even see him. And now she was talking like this, with that infuriating smile.

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"Laurinda, don't you believe in karma? You might not be an Austin by blood, but we raised you. We gave you everything, all the luxury you ever wanted. Don't you have a conscience?"

Jeniffer was shaking with anger. She'd never met anyone as ungrateful as Laurinda. She'd wanted Laurinda out of the family from the moment her parents died, but Aiken wouldn't allow it. He always said the core technology and shares of the Austin Group were in Laurinda's name and couldn't be touched until she turned eighteen. Jeniffer had counted down the days until Laurinda's eighteenth birthday, just so she could kick her out. But after Laurinda finally left, the Austin family started spiraling out of control. Jeniffer couldn't help but wonder if things might have been different if Laurinda had left sooner.

Laurinda met Jeniffer's glare, her lips curling into a cool smile.

"I wasn't raised by the Austin family. My parents raised me. Without them, do you really think the Austin family would have what it does now? Come on, Jeniffer, you know the truth better than anyone."

"They weren't your parents. You're nothing but a bastard."

The slap rang out, sharp and sudden. Laurinda's hand stung as it connected with Jeniffer's cheek.

Jeniffer just stood there, stunned, her face frozen in disbelief. She never imagined Laurinda would actually hit her.

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[656 words]

"You know exactly who I am, Jeniffer. You really thought bringing someone home

with Aiken would erase my identity? Haven't you seen the DNA results? Or did you just decide they were fake? If you're so sure, go ask Aiken in prison whose child Laura really is."

Jeniffer's eyes flickered, shifting from anger to outright fear. She had never imagined Laurinda would know this much. For a moment, she doubted herself. No way. Laurinda was supposed to be useless. How could she possibly know all of this?

"No... No, that can't be... You're lying, right?" Jeniffer's voice shook. Kicking Laurinda out was supposed to hand the Austin family to her and Aiken. But everything had spun out of control. Why did it have to end up like this?

"Why would I need to lie? You and your people know the truth better than anyone. Oh, and congratulations, by the way. You finally got what you wanted. Aiken's locked up, Baily just had a stroke, and the Austin family is yours now. Guess your twenty years of patience finally paid off."

Laurinda gave her a pointed look. "And since you keep calling me a bastard, maybe you want to explain the story about you and the driver's son?"

She didn't bother watching Jeniffer's shocked face any longer. She wasn't interested in seeing Baily, either. She just set the fruit basket down by the hospital room door and walked away without a second glance.

Today, she was finally done with the Austin family. From now on, they were nothing to her. Her parents had tried so hard to fulfill her grandparents' wishes, but the Austin family was rotten through and through. If they were determined to ruin themselves, there was nothing she could do.

When Laurinda reached the elevator, Adolphus was already waiting for her. She couldn't help but break into a smile. "Are we all packed up? Can we go home now?"

"Not yet. We need to stop by the treatment room so you can get your hand checked out. The wound's opened up again."

Adolphus took her wrist and had her open her hand. The scabbed-over cut was bleeding again. He shook his head and sighed.

"I told you not to get it wet, but I guess I forgot to say don't use it to slap people. Does it hurt?"

"Not really. Actually, it felt amazing. I finally got to slap her. Call it payback for everything she put me through."

Adolphus held her wrist gently, his expression full of concern. He glanced back at Jeniffer, who was still frozen in shock, and his mind was already working on what to do next.

"So you're really done with the Austin family?"

"I am. Letting them keep a place to live is already more kindness than they deserve."

Laurinda was finished with their games. As far as she was concerned, the Austin family's downfall was nothing more than what they deserved. She had done more than enough.

"Alright, we'll let them stay." Adolphus slipped his arm around her and guided her into the elevator. Neither of them looked back.

Once again, Laurinda's hands were wrapped up in thick, cartoonish bandages. She slumped into the car and grumbled, "Seriously, this is making my life so much harder."

Adolphus looked at her cute,

bundled-up hands and gently

pushed her raised fist down. "Just a

little longer once scabs over
again, you wont need all this
wrapping," he said softly.

Seeing the smile on his face, Laurinda got suspicious. She was
pretty sure he was doing this on purpose. If he wasnt driving, she
might have tried to sock him right in the arm with her bandaged hand.

Meanwhile, Laura was at school, and she just couldn't settle down. She kept worrying
about Adah.

Everything with the Austin Group and the family had gotten way too overwhelming in the
last few days She felt like she was drowning, trailingafter managers just to sign one
document after another The pressure was suffocating. She didn't even have time to
check on

dah

and she had no idea how Adah was doing now.

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Chapter 94

[591 words]

She really wanted to be friends with Adah. In her mind, if she could get close to Adah,
Laurinda wouldn't matter anymore, and even the Gates family would be nothing to her.

Laura rushed out of school and hurried straight to the hospital. But when she found out
Adah had been sent to the psych ward, she was left standing there in shock.

Wasn't Adah supposed to be Cabinda Adah? How did she end up as a psychiatric
patient? Was her identity all a lie?

Right as Laura tracked down where Adah was staying, the Charles family showed up at Apex Hospital too. One of the men looked over Adah's medical chart, his jaw tight, like he wanted to rip the papers apart.

A mental illness label was a stain that would never wash off. There was no way the Charles family would accept something like that. How could Adah have been so careless?

"Bagot, Adah's still being treated on the ninth floor. Should we bring her home?" someone asked.

Bagot pressed his fingers to his temples, frustration all over his face. Ever since Lacy had pulled out of their deal, the Charles family had been hit with problem after problem.

First, there was an issue with their chip data. Then contracts started getting canceled from all sides. After that, a tax scandal blew up.

If it hadn't been for a lot of behind-the-scenes maneuvering, the Charles family probably would have gone under completely.

It was only later they figured out the person behind all of it was Adah. She'd crossed someone she never should have messed with.

Bagot was here today to take Adah to apologize, hoping that maybe, just maybe, they'd be shown some mercy.

"Yes, bring her back. Call her doctor right now. Tell them her mental illness is just a misunderstanding, have her transferred out, and make sure the medical records are changed."

The Charles family couldn't have a stain like that hanging over them, especially not something as serious as mental illness.

Laura overheard Bagot talking to his assistant. She hesitated for a second, then stepped forward, blocking Bagot's path.

"Excuse me, I'm sorry to interrupt. I just heard you say you're Adah's family. I'm her friend. I'm the one

who brought her to the hospital net

when she got sick. I wanted to ask how she's doing. I thought it was just an allergic reaction. Why is she in the psych ward? Can I see her?"

Bagot frowned, giving Laura a once-over. He didn't really believe she was Adah's friend. He knew Adah well enough to know she never made friends unless there was something in it for her.

He shot a look at his assistant, who nodded in understanding.

"Sure. If you're Adah's friend, come with me to pick her up."

The assistant led Laura away. As they walked, Laura glanced back at Bagot, already thinking about how to get closer to him.

It was clear he was someone important. If she could get him on her side, she'd have the Austin family in her pocket, and no one else would stand a chance.

Thanks to the assistant, Laura got to see Adah.

By then, the swelling on Adah's face had gone down a little. She could finally open her eyes.

When she spotted Laura, her energy came rushing back. She jumped off the bed and slapped Laura hard across the face.

"You betrayed me!"

Laura was stunned. She held her cheek, shaking her head, eyes wide with hurt.

"I... I didn't do anything. Why would hurt you? Adah, I thought we were friends. I even paid your hospital bills. Why would ever do something like that to you?"

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Chapter 95

[666 words]

When Laura first saw how serious Adah's condition was, she forced herself to pay the two hundred thousand dollar hospital deposit. She just wanted Adah to think well of her. There was no way she'd ever try to hurt Adah. So when Adah accused her, she felt completely blindsided.

"You really want to stand there and act innocent? If you hadn't taken my bag and my phone, how could I have ended up here? Do I look like someone who can't afford my own hospital bills? I have money, you know!"

All the stress from the past few days finally crashed down on Adah. Being treated like she'd lost her mind had been unbearable. No phone, no way to reach her family, no one to ask for help. She blamed Laura for everything.

Laura never imagined Adah would think she'd done any of this on purpose. She pressed her hands to her face and shook her head, cheeks burning as she tried to explain.

"I really didn't take your bag, I swear. You were holding it yourself when they wheeled you into the ER. I wanted to go in with you, but the nurse told me to pay the fees. Then I got a call, something happened at home, and I had to leave. That's all."

Adah stared at her, and for a second, Laura's honest face made her doubt herself. Maybe she had been holding her own bag. But if Laura didn't take it, how did it just vanish?

"If it wasn't you, then why couldn't the nurses find it? Laura, don't lie to me. If I find out you took my bag on purpose, I won't let you off easy. You better not be messing with me."

Laura's cheek still stung from where Adah had slapped her. In her mind, she cursed Adah out, but on the outside, all she showed was hurt and confusion.

"I didn't take your bag, I promise. You can check the hospital security cameras if you want. I was running around trying to help you. Why would I hurt you? Remember, I even offered to call your family, but you wouldn't give me their number..."

Her voice trailed off as she started to quietly sob.

Adah's head was spinning. She couldn't figure out who would have taken her bag and phone. Was someone out to get her? Even her allergic reaction seemed strange.

She waved Laura off, a little impatient. "Okay, stop crying. If it really wasn't you, I'll apologize. And don't worry, I'll pay back every cent you covered for me. I'm not going to let you lose out."

She paused, then added, "You said there was some trouble at home. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Now that she realized she might have been wrong about Laura, Adah felt guilty. Remembering how Laura had taken care of her, she realized that snapping her was way out of line. She wanted to do something to make it right.

"Our family issues are pretty complicated, Adah. You don't need to get involved. We'll handle it ourselves."

Laura shook her head, looking so strong and collected that Adah couldn't help but admire her a little.

It reminded her of that conversation in the car between Baily and Laura. She hadn't realized Laurinda could be so awful. Then she thought of how gentle Adolphus was with Laurinda, and it made her clench her fists.

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"It's Laurinda again, isn't it? Don't worry. Once I'm better, I'll make sure she regrets it. With the Charles family behind me, dealing with someone like her is nothing."

An assistant standing nearby heard her and almost rolled his eyes. Adah really had no clue. The Charles family was practically on the edge of collapse because of her, and she was still bragging.

He couldn't listen anymore. He left the room and went to find Adah's doctor, only to discover that her

psychiatric records couldn't

be

changed. He knew he couldn't drag

his feet, so he rushed straight to

Bagot.

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Bagot sat in the hospital director's office, his gaze sharp as he studied the medical records in his hands.

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Chapter 96

[550 words]

"Just tell me what it'll take to get Adah's psychiatric record erased. Whatever you want, name it. I'll make it happen."

Bagot was ready for the director to make some outrageous demand. But the director didn't say a word. He just took the file from Bagot's hand and flipped to the last page.

He set the file back in front of Bagot and tapped his finger on the doctor's signature at the bottom.

Bagot's eyes widened the moment he saw the sharp, bold signature. He couldn't help the way his pupils trembled.

"How is it him? Are you saying Adolphus told you to do this?"

"No. Adolphus didn't tell us anything. He's the one who diagnosed Adah. If you want to change her record, you'll need him to sign off on it himself."

Bagot's face turned so dark it was almost scary. He never thought Adolphus would get involved in something like this.

Thinking back, when the Charles family ran into trouble, his father had gone to ask Felix for help. Felix hadn't even agreed to meet him. Now it made sense. Adolphus must have called Felix ahead of time.

He just couldn't figure out who Adah had pissed off this time. Why would even Adolphus get involved?

Bagot closed the file, forced a polite smile, and tried to hide his frustration.

"If that's how it is, I won't make things harder for you. But about transferring Adah to another hospital..."

"That won't be an issue. I already asked my assistant to transfer Adah's records to the hospital in Cabinda, just like you wanted. You can take her any time, all the paperwork's ready."

Bagot could no longer hold back his anger. He slammed his fist onto the director's desk and stood up.

"You really think I won't do anything just because Adolphus is backing you? You have to push it this far? Not leave any room at all?"

The director didn't even flinch. He kept smiling, completely unfazed.

"Come on. You call him Adolphus too, don't you? Honestly, we're not that different. He's just... someone neither of us can afford to cross."

The director's words, dripping

sarcasm, made Bagot's face go from bad to worse. But he couldn't say a thing. The Charles family was→ in no position to take on Adolphus.

"You..."

Fuming, Bagot stormed out of the office and slammed the door behind him.

The director just watched the door

swing shut and took a slow sip of

his tea He realized Adolphus's name

was ever more useful, Hanshee

thought. He'd have to make sure to

stay on his good side.

Meanwhile, Adolphus was playing chess with Laurinda when he suddenly sneezed.

Laurinda lounged back, watching him rub his nose.

"Someone's talking about you."

Adolphus paused, met her bright eyes, and laughed softly.

"Talking about me? Why not missing me?"

"It's definitely the Charles family. You not only had their precious daughter sent to psych, you even made it official on her record. Who else would it be?"

Laurinda had only found out what Adolphus did to Adah because the director had called her. If her hands weren't injured, she would have clapped for him.

Thinking about Laurinda's words and remembering all the nasty things the Charles family had done, Adolphus smirked.

"The Charles family isn't real high society. They only got where they are by playing dirty. They were never one of Cabinda's major families. They stole everything the James family built and used it to take their place."

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- Chapter 97

[655 words]

The mention of the James family made Laurinda pause, a name bubbling up from her memory.

Adolphus noticed her thoughtful expression and asked, "What's on your mind?"

"I was just thinking about that James family you mentioned. When Jasper was four, I worked with a programmer named James. He said he was from Cabinda. His skills were unreal. York ended up poaching him because he was that good. Do you think he might be part of the James family?"

"What was his name?" Adolphus leaned in, his brow furrowed. It seemed almost too strange to be true, that Laurinda had crossed paths with someone from the James family after all these years.

"I'm trying to remember... give me a second..." Laurinda racked her brain, but nothing came to mind. She called for the butler, hoping he could help.

The butler came in, tablet in hand, and quickly searched through some records. He pulled up a photo and handed it to Adolphus.

"This is him. His name's Galen."

Adolphus stared at the photo, recognition flickering in his eyes. "That's him. Years ago, the James family and the Charles family worked on a joint project. Galen was the one who designed it."

"Something happened after that. He got kicked off the team, and not long after, the whole project blew up. The James family ended up losing everything, while the Charles family somehow came out on top."

"Gentry, Galen's father, is still in prison," Adolphus added quietly.

Laurinda set down the chess piece she'd been fidgeting with, a sly grin appearing on her lips. The look she gave Adolphus was so full of mischief it made him lose his train of thought for a second.

"How about this," she said, her eyes bright with excitement. "Instead of crushing the Charles family ourselves, which is honestly kind of boring, why don't we let Galen take back everything for the James family? Let the Charles family feel what it's like to lose, just like the James family did all those years ago."

She looked like she could already see the drama playing out, two powerful families going head-to-head, the way wild animals battle in an arena.

Adolphus couldn't help but smile at how happy she seemed. The Charles family's fate was already sealed in his mind. If letting Laurinda stir things up brought her joy, then so be it.

"Sounds good to me."

"Perfect. I'll call York and have him bring Galen back. We'll come up with a plan."

With a real project to sink her teeth into, Laurinda seemed to come alive again. Staying home to recover had been so dull, but now, she finally had something to look forward to.

Adolphus watched her buzzing around, a fond smile on his face. He pulled out his phone and sent a quick message to Egan.

Pause everything with the Charles family. There's a new plan.

Egan was in the middle of a meeting when the message popped up. He stared at it for a moment, then took a screenshot and sent it to Sam.

Why is Adolphus pulling out now?

Sam was busy dealing with the Austin family mess. He squinted at his phone, then shot back a reply.

He said there's a new plan. If you're not busy, come over and help me with the Austins. Foley and I are working ourselves to death.

No thanks...

Egan flatly turned him down, then followed up with a jab.

You're named "Dedication" for a reason. Get back to work and live up to it.

A week later, the Austin family situation finally exploded.

The news of bankruptcy hit like a bomb. Everyone was in shock.

Jeniffer was especially devastated. She dropped to the floor, stunned, unable to process what had

happened. She'd just managed to

get control of the family and now out of nowhere, the second-ranked Austin family was collapsing.

"How could this happen? Why? The Austin Group was always making

money. How did it all

How did it all fall apart so

fast? Someone must be behind this!"

As she replayed the last few weeks in her mind, Jeniffer decided it had to be Laura's

fault.

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Chapter 98

[613 words]

She pushed herself up from the floor, barely steady on her feet, and stumbled up the stairs. When she reached Laura's room, she started slamming on the door as hard as she could.

"Laura, was it you? Are you the one making a mess at the company? You know nothing, but you still took the heir's spot and signed off on everything. You ruined the Austin family. You're the reason the Austin Group is finished!"

Jeniffer's voice was raw, desperate, echoing through the hallway. Inside, Laura crouched in a corner, hugging her knees, her whole body shaking. She felt lost and terrified, completely alone.

None of it made sense. How could the Austin family's bankruptcy be her fault? Why was everyone blaming her?

When Aiken first brought her home, he had promised her a better life. She never got a single day of that. Now, all of a sudden, she was the one everyone expected to take the fall for the company's collapse.

The moment she heard about the bankruptcy, her mind just went blank. She didn't know what would happen next, but she understood what it meant to be held responsible. One wrong step and she could spend the rest of her life in prison. She couldn't accept that.

She spent the whole night making call after call, reaching out to the Gates family, the Charles family, even Laurinda. She dialed Laurinda's number over and over. No one picked up.

She hated the idea of her life ending with the Austin family, but nobody wanted to help her.

Suddenly, Laurinda's words from the day she left echoed in her mind. "Congratulations on becoming the Austin family's heir..."

Laura froze. It was like her whole body went numb. She couldn't believe it. Had Laurinda set her up from the very beginning?

Back then, she never understood why Laurinda would give up being the heir. Everyone wanted that spot. Now, it all made sense. Laurinda must have known what would happen to the Austin family. She used Laura as a shield, escaping right before the ship sank. Laura was just her scapegoat.

"No. This isn't right. It shouldn't have turned out like this. Why? Why did it have to be this way? Laurinda did this. She's the one who destroyed the Austin family."

"I'm not taking the blame for Laurinda. I'm not the heir. I'm just Aiken's illegitimate daughter. I have to tell them the truth."

Laura jumped to her feet, yanked the door open, and ran out. Jeniffer tried to catch her, but her hand only closed on empty air.

Baily was being wheeled out of his room by a caretaker, his expression dark and unreadable.

He had heard about the bankruptcy the day before. At first, he couldn't handle it. But after looking through the financial reports and seeing all the disastrous investments Aiken had made, he realized the truth. Aiken was the one who destroyed the Austin family.

And Baily had to admit, he was part of the problem. He never should have listened to Aiken and forced Laurinda out.

When he saw Laura racing down the stairs, wild with panic, Baily shouted at the butler, "Stop her! Don't let her leave!"

The butler and the rest of the staff didn't move. They just stood there, watching as Laura rushed out the door.

"Are you all ignoring me? Why didn't

you stop her?" Baily was

half-paralyzed, but that didn't stop his voice. He still saw himself as the head of the family, barking orders, expecting everyone to obey

The butler walked over and stood tall beside him. There was nothing servile or deferential in his posture anymore.

"Mr. Baily, we all resigned yesterday. Once we get our last paychecks, we're leaving the Austin family for good. Please take care of our wages."

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Chapter 99

[595 words]

Baily stared at the group of more than twenty people gathered by the dining room. A sudden headache hit him so hard he had to press his only good hand to his

forehead.

"Whoever paid you before, go ask them. I don't have your money."

The Austin family was bankrupt. Everything Baily owned had been frozen. All he had was his private stash, and he needed that to pay for his treatments. He had to survive. There was no way he was about to hand out wages.

The butler didn't even blink at Baily's attitude. He answered smoothly, not a hint of surprise in his voice.

"If Mr. Baily won't pay us, then we'll have to help ourselves. Don't worry, we'll only take what's worth the amount we're owed. We're not here to rob you. Everyone, just take whatever you see that's equal to your pay."

When Laurinda heard the news that the Austin estate was being stripped clean, she laughed so hard she folded over the table, barely able to catch her breath.

She almost wished she'd seen Baily's face when it happened. She never expected the Austin family would fall this far.

Adolphus was gently dabbing ointment onto her hand. He looked at her, his eyes softening. "Alright, don't laugh too hard or you'll hurt yourself. Sit up, I'm almost done with the medicine."

Sam, who was nearby, watched the scene unfold and felt like he was being force-fed a romance novel. Since when was Adolphus this gentle? Seriously, what was going on here?

Adolphus caught Sam's look and raised his head, his voice calm. "Do you need something? If not, go do your own thing."

Sam's smile faltered. Was he getting kicked out? He muttered, "I was hoping to stay for lunch."

This wasn't his first time at the Austin house. Ever since he'd tried their food, he'd been coming up with all sorts of excuses to come back, but he'd never actually scored a meal.

Today, though, he was determined not to leave hungry.

Laurinda turned to look at Sam, remembering how he'd practically run away when he heard Irvin was coming over. She couldn't help but be curious about what was going on between them.

"Why did Irvin call you a jerk?"

Sam was just about to sit down, but her question made him freeze, stuck in an awkward half-sitting pose.

Adolphus glanced at him, then went back to putting ointment on Laurinda's hand, not even pretending to help him out of the awkwardness.

Sam tried to smile, but it came out~ nervous. His mind raced as he tried

to think of an excuse that would

explain livin's attitude without getting himself into more trouble.

He really didn't want to bring up Adah. He had a hunch that if Laurinda found out

Adah was part of this, he'd never be allowed back in her house again.

Laurinda waited, but Sam stayed silent. Finally, she reached out, tilted Adolphus's chin toward her, and locked eyes with him.

"He's your friend. If he won't talk, you will. What's going on?"

Adolphus had never had anyone tilt his chin like that before. He swallowed, a little stunned.

"It's because of Adah..."

Sam tried to hide it, but Adolphus didn't hesitate to tell the truth.

"Adah?"

Just as expected, Laurinda's face darkened at the name. Suddenly, it all made sense why Irvin always got so riled up when Adah was mentioned.

"Laurinda, don't listen to him. There's nothing between me and Adah. Irvin just got the wrong idea."

After saying that, Sam seemed to

relax a little. It was the first time he'd talked about his situation with-

Cathleen in front of someone else

with

Irvin accusing him he'd never tried to defend himself before.

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Chapter 100

[627 words]

"I'm a pretty easygoing guy. I don't like getting tangled up in all the little mind games some girls play. So when Adah started hanging around me on purpose, I just kept my distance. I never explained anything about us to anyone."

"One night, Cathleen got drunk and told me she hated seeing me so close to Adah. She said dating me made her miserable and exhausted. She wanted out. She asked me to let her go."

"Our engagement was a business arrangement between our families. I couldn't let a girl spend her whole life trapped in a marriage that made her unhappy, so I agreed to end it."

"Since we were calling things off, I thought we should tell our families right away. So I went to the Main Family myself and asked to break off the engagement."

"But then the rumors started. Somehow, people said I dumped Cathleen because I didn't like her."

"It was humiliating for her. I guess the pressure got to her, because after that she started struggling with depression. She even had thoughts of hurting herself. That's when Irvin came after me, convinced I'd broken her heart on purpose."

By the end, Sam just sounded tired. The truth was, he did care about Cathleen. If he hadn't, he never would have agreed to the engagement in the first place.

But Cathleen was so hard to get close to. Even when he tried to build a connection, she always kept him at arm's length. Eventually, they didn't even feel like a couple anymore. They weren't even as close as normal friends.

"So what does Adah have to do with any of this?" Laurinda asked, resting her chin on her hand as she looked at Sam. She was honestly curious what kind of tricks Adah might have pulled.

"When Adolphus was out of the country, Adah kept trying to get into our social circle, so she'd stick close to me. My family does business with Len's company, and every time I

saw Len's wife, she'd ask me to keep an eye on Adah. So Adah was always hanging around me, and people started to assume there was something going on between us."

"Then Adolphus came back. Len's wife decided to try setting Adah up with him instead. That's when the gossip started. People said Adah dumped me for Adolphus, and I dumped Cathleen for Adah."

"Oh, I get it now," Laurinda said, looking like everything finally made sense. She'd gotten the full story, but she still thought Adah probably did a lot more than Sam was letting on.

Still, none of it really interested her. Sam and Cathleen's problems, had nothing to do with her. Their breakup wasn't just one person's fault, anyway. They both had issues.

Sometimes breaking up is actually a good thing. The real tragedy is when two

end up stuck together

resenting each other

Laurinda noticed her hands were dry and starting to itch a little. She glanced at

Sam. "Do you know how to play cards?"

Sam was caught off guard by how quickly she changed the subject. He shook his head, then nodded, unsure.

"Laurinda, what are you talking about?"

"I'm bored. Let's play cards."

On a whim, Laurinda dragged Sam, Adolphus, and the butler into a game of poker.

Adolphus sat next to Laurinda and kept helping her win. Eventually, Sam couldn't take it anymore.

He hadn't even been trying to beat Laurinda, but Adolphus was being way too obvious about treating him like a fool.

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"I'm done. Seriously, I can't play like this. If you two want to be all

couplesy, fine, but don't treat me like an idiot. I'm out. I'm hungry anyway. I'm going to get something to

The butler heard Sam and stood up right away. Truth was, he'd wanted to stop playing for a while.

"I'll go check if lunch is ready in the kitchen."

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