

Illusions 661

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Andrea suddenly clenched her fists, a flash of irritation and unease flitting across her eyes.

"Ha, jealous of you? Lizetta, I heard you were diagnosed with postpartum depression, but to me, it looks more like you're just being delusional," Andrea retorted with a mocking sneer, yet her palms were sweating.

Truth be told, ever since Mrs. Bernice Madden mistook Lizetta for her mother Elsa, Andrea had been feeling uneasy. All her life, she'd heard whispers about how she didn't quite resemble the Maddens. Elsa, her mother, had passed away when Andrea was just over three, and five years later, her father Conrad remarried, bringing Eartha Madden into their lives as her stepmother. With Mrs. Bernice's dementia worsening, Elsa's old photos had long been packed away.

A couple of days ago, Andrea had the mansion's staff send her an old photo of Elsa, dancing amidst a sea of flowers. Her smile was radiant, stunningly beautiful, and her posture and aura bore an uncanny resemblance to Lizetta's. Lizetta's mysterious origins only fueled Andrea's growing unrest.

That's why she had been so impatient today, coming to the hospital hoping Lizetta would stay away from the Maddens. But Lizetta was unfazed, her face annoyingly smug.

Tapping her chin, Lizetta smirked, "Delusional, huh? Maybe, but let me indulge in my delusions a bit more. Mrs. Bernice mistook me for her daughter but doesn't recognize you, her own granddaughter. Seems like Ms. Madden doesn't look much like your mom, right? You know, seeing Grandpa Nelson and Mrs. Bernice felt incredibly familiar, like long-lost relatives. Given my parents are nowhere to be found, maybe I'm the real Ms. Madden, and you..."

"Shut up!" Andrea interrupted sharply before Lizetta could finish. But Lizetta was merely provoking Andrea, not truly suspecting anything. Yet, Andrea's strong reaction made Lizetta frown slightly, sensing something odd.

Andrea glared at Lizetta with disdain, scoffing, "You're not delusional, you're outright insane!

Thinking you could replace me and

Ms. Madden? Please, I knew it, you

were always scheming to get close

to my grandparents!"

Before Lizetta could respond, the door swung open, and a nurse rushed in, saying urgently, "Is anyone here to see Ms. Gardenia? An elderly lady in dark green clothing had an accident; you should check on her immediately."

"That's my grandma! What happened to her? Where is she?" Andrea's face was filled with worry as she grabbed the nurse, heading out.

Lizetta, startled by the mention of Mrs. Bernice's accident, felt a surge of urgency. She threw off the blankets and hurried out as well.

Upon reaching the corridor, they saw a crowd near the water station, buzzing with chatter. "What happened?"

"The old lady wasn't looking where

she was going and bumped into someone carrying hot water. Thankfully, a young patient nearby reacted quickly, pulling her away just in time, or the scalding water would have been all over her..."

Elbowing her way through, Lizetta saw a shattered enamel basin on the floor, with steam still rising from the puddle. Mrs. Bernice Madden stood to the side, looking bewildered and frightened. And Andrea was

there, berating Elva.

"How could you not take proper care of Grandma!"

"Miss, we couldn't find Wilson in the doctor's office. Thinking he might have gone on rounds, we started searching, leaving the lady to wait in the office. But then, she must have wandered off..."

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"Zip it! Don't you know the condition my grandma's in? How could you just leave her alone in a strange place? It's a miracle nothing happened! What if she really got burned? Could you live with the consequences?" Andrea kept scolding.

"This old lady seems a bit off."

"So she really is out of it, huh? In that condition, she shouldn't be left to wander."

The bystanders, listening to Andrea's words, shook their heads in disapproval at Mrs. Bernice Madden. Mrs. Bernice Madden kept her head down, not saying a word. Lizetta quickly walked over, took Mrs. Bernice Madden's arms in her hands, and bent down to ask softly.

"Grandma, are you hurt anywhere? Did you get burned?"

Mrs. Bernice Madden looked up at Lizetta, her eyes brightening with recognition. She nodded like a child who had found a parent after being bullied.

"Elsa, I didn't wander off, I was looking for a doctor. It hurts here, blow on it..."

Mrs. Bernice Madden lifted her hand, revealing a red patch with two blisters on the back of it to Lizetta.

"I don't need your help! Get away, this wouldn't have happened if she hadn't come to see you." Andrea immediately pulled Lizetta away and held Mrs. Bernice Madden's hand.

"Grandma, why didn't you tell me you got burned? Come on, let's get that looked at." Andrea led the old lady away, and Lizetta was about to follow when she heard someone nearby say.

"We really should thank that young patient from before. If it weren't for them, it could've been more than just a burn on the back of the hand. It seemed like that young person got burned on the arm..."
"Hey, where did that person go?"

Lizetta paused, instinctively

scanning her surroundings. At the

end of the hallway by the emergency exit, she thought she saw a tall figure in a hospital gown push through the door. Could that be the young patient who had bravely intervened?

Hesitating for a moment, Lizetta quickly made her way toward the emergency exit. Pushing the door open, she wasn't sure whether to go up or down when she caught a glimpse of a figure in the corner. Lizetta spun around, startled.

Indeed, a person was leaning

against the wall, a man looking down as he attempted to light a cigarette evidently not expecting anyone to come through the door. The only cigarette hung from his lips but the lighter's flame hadn't been extinguished yet.

The dim corner was lit up by the flicker of the flame, casting shadows across his sharp features as he looked at her, his gaze as fiery as the light. Their eyes met, and Lizetta's heart felt as if it was seized by an invisible force. Regaining her senses, she turned to leave.

However, the man in the corner snapped out of his stupor, dropping the lighter and cigarette to the ground, and stepped forward, abruptly grabbing Lizetta's wrist.

"Liz..." His voice was hoarse.

Hearing him call her name felt both strange and familiar, as if waking from a dream that spanned seasons. She froze, then struggled, "Let go!"

"Ah!" The man inhaled sharply. The sound was soft, but the emergency exit was so quiet that Lizetta looked down.

She saw that his arm, gripping her wrist, was partially soaked through his hospital gown. And the hand on her wrist was visibly burned, the skin purplish-red, an obvious sign of a burn. Instinctively, she frowned