



148 Crisis

Samantha's smile faltered slightly as she set the box aside. "It's for Richard," she said quietly, trying to keep the disappointment out of her expression. 1

Kyle leaned in, inspecting the watch with a raised eyebrow. "It's a fine gift, but definitely not what you were hoping for, I'm guessing. Well, just like I gifted you something that is neither for you nor your husband, some people might feel more comfortable gifting things they think have only a general meaning."

Samantha just smiled politely in response. "Let's try another one."

She reached for the next box, smaller and wrapped in deep blue paper. Her fingers made quick work of the wrapping, but when she opened it, she was met with another gift for Richard—this time, a set of monogrammed cufflinks. The disappointment was harder to hide now, and she could feel the irritation bubbling up inside her. 1

Box after box, the story was the same. Each gift was something elegant, expensive, and undeniably tailored for her husband. Finally, she reached the last box, her frustration barely contained.

It was from Liam and Amelie. She frowned, her fingers hesitating over the wrapping. She couldn't help but think it might be yet another gift meant to slight her, another token meant for Richard rather than for her or the baby. It had been humiliating enough.

But she opened it anyway, and when she did, she was taken aback. Inside was a pair of silk baby shoes, absolutely gorgeous and clearly expensive, but... enormous in their size. They were far too big for a newborn, or even a toddler. The shoes were more fitting for a child much older. 3

She held them up, frowning as she inspected them. "They're lovely, no denying that," she muttered, though confusion colored her tone.

Kyle, who had been watching her intently, suddenly winced as he struggled to contain his laughter. Samantha shot him a confused look,

one eyebrow raised. "What's wrong? Are you laughing?!"

He shook his head, chuckling as he leaned closer. "Don't they remind you of something?" 4

Samantha offered him another confused look, her brows knitting together. "What do you mean?"

Kyle's grin only widened. "Never mind, then. Mrs. Bennett certainly gave you a truly generous gift."

Samantha stared at him for a while, her mind racing as she tried to decipher his meaning. But after a moment, she decided to let it go, setting the shoes back in the box. Whatever the joke was, she wasn't in the mood to unravel it.

*** 1

Richard sat behind his massive darkwood desk, the walls of his office at JFC Group's headquarters closing in on him.

The usual sense of power he felt from commanding the top floor of one of the city's most prestigious buildings was nowhere to be

found today. His eyes were fixed on the elegant invitation in his hand, its creamy paper and gold lettering openly mocking him. It was an invitation to Amelie's wedding—a symbol of everything he had lost and everything she had become. 2

He could still see her on his wedding day, her face a mixture of anger and disappointment. The words she had spoken to him echoed in his mind, sharp and cutting. Even now, they felt like fresh wounds that refused to heal. She had looked him straight in the eye, her voice cold, telling him exactly what she thought of him, of their past; everything she had never dared to say to him before.

Richard clenched his jaw, his grip tightening on the invitation. "After everything she said to me back then," he thought bitterly, "inviting me to her wedding is like pushing a dagger deeper into my heart." It wasn't just an invitation—it was a reminder of how thoroughly he had failed her, and how little he meant to her now. 2

The anger surged, and without a second thought, Richard fed the invitation into the shredder beside his desk, watching with grim



satisfaction as it was reduced to mere garbage. And yet, the act brought him no peace. Instead, a heavy sigh escaped his lips as he leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes against the frustration that threatened to overwhelm him again.

A sharp knock on the door broke the silence. Richard opened his eyes and straightened, trying to push his emotions aside. "Come in."

The door opened, and Mr. Doyle, one of the senior accountants, stepped inside, running all over his boss' office. The man's usually composed demeanor was marred by a concerned expression, which immediately set Richard on edge.

"What is it?" He asked, arching his brow.

Mr. Doyle hesitated for a moment, then cleared his throat. "Mr. Clark, we've been filing the monthly financial report and came across a rather large undeclared transfer from one of... well, Mrs. Ashford's accounts. Mrs. Amelie Ashford, I mean."

Richard's stomach tightened, the remnants of his earlier irritation flaring up into something more intense. "It's Mrs. Bennett now," he corrected, his

voice low with annoyance. "What do you mean, an undeclared transfer? Where to?"

"To your wife's private bank account, sir."

Richard groaned inwardly, rubbing his temples as if trying to ward off the headache that was surely on its way. *I told her not to donate that money. So she went behind my back and transferred it to her own account anyway... It's one problem after another with her, God...* ²

He wiped a hand down his face, trying to regain some semblance of composure. "So? What's the problem? The money is technically hers anyway."

Mr. Doyle shifted uneasily, his concern deepening. "It's true, but this money is linked to the welfare accounts, which Mrs. Ash—I mean, Mrs. Bennett never terminated. If no action is taken, Mrs. Samantha Clark will be charged with fraud, and you will be audited. The tax office has already sent us a notice."

Richard's eyes widened in shock. "What?!"

For a moment, all he could do was stare at the accountant, his mind racing. This wasn't just a minor oversight anymore—it was a full-blown

crisis. A crisis that had the potential to destroy everything he had worked for. 4

"Get me all the details," he finally managed to say, his voice tight. "I want to know exactly what we're dealing with."

Mr. Doyle nodded, already moving toward the door. "Yes, sir. I'll have the full report on your desk within the hour."

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