

157 The Anniversary

A day before the rehearsal dinner for the Bennett wedding ceremony, people gathered at the grand reception hall of the Emerald Hotel to celebrate another remarkable event. 1

Tonight was indeed a special occasion—the 50th anniversary of H Construction, the family company of Edward Harris, one of the pillars of the business world.

The event was not just a celebration of half a century of success, but a gathering of the most influential people in the country, all under one roof. And that of course meant the silent clash of two secretly rival couples: Richard and Samantha Clark against Liam and Amelie Bennett.

"We only need to show that we do not care for them," Amelie told Liam as they were sharing a ride on their way to the hotel. "Knowing Richard's pettiness, he will try to avoid us and I think it's for the best. The bigger the distance between us, the better."

Now in the opulence of the banquet hall which

she helped decorate, Amelie stood near the center of the room, her hand resting lightly on Liam's arm as they engaged in a lively conversation with a group of men and women who rushed to them the moment they saw them.

Amelie, with the help of her friends, of course, had been careful in curating her circle, and tonight it was evident that her efforts had paid off.

Surrounding her were the most powerful women and men in society, each one vying for her attention, their laughter and conversation filled with admiration and respect. Amelie, with her wit and charm, had finally regained the popularity and respect that was shattered not so long ago.

But as she exchanged pleasantries, she couldn't help but feel a twinge of discomfort. While Amelie enjoyed the attention, the unspoken alliances forming around her were undeniable.

This event, still, was a battleground for social dominance. And from across the room, struggling with forceful mingling, stood her main opponent.

Vanessa stood apart from the main crowd, her figure resembling a chiseled statue, wrapped in a deep emerald gown that contrasted with her dark hair.

She was an observer tonight, with only a few guests stopping by to exchange polite, if not obligatory, greetings.

The change was stark. It was impossible to miss that Amelie was the one with the upper hand, while Vanessa's influence had visibly waned.

'I was aware of her schemes the moment I learned that she brought back Elizabeth Gilmore, but I still hoped that Angelina would not side with her in the end. Hateful, as always. That woman will never rest until she has me ousted.'

Indeed, hovering around Amelie, like a persistent fly, was Angelina Castillo—a socialite whose lethal weapon was her ability to side with people in secret by letting them gain something useful from her friendship.

It was clear to Vanessa that this was no accident. Amelie had orchestrated this shift, aligning herself with the right people, and now Vanessa was feeling the repercussions.

Across the room, Samantha lingered on the fringes of her own crowd—a gathering of women led by Shelly Grant, who had recently become Samantha's "friend."

Shelly and her supporters were far from a truly powerful elite, but they were useful in their own way. Samantha's eyes flitted around the room, observing the subtle dynamics, until they landed on Vanessa. There was something almost pitiful about the way Vanessa stood there; she was almost out of place.

"Is that Vanessa Bennett over there?" Samantha asked leaning toward Shelly.

Shelly unglued her lips from a tall champagne flute, then followed Samantha's gaze, and nodded. "Yes, that's her. Poor woman, I heard she's having a hard time keeping her popularity now. Angelina Castillo, along with Elizabeth Gilmore, is slandering her left and right, keeping her away from all the important social gatherings."

Samantha's eyes widened slightly, a spark of excitement igniting within her. "Really? And what exactly are they saying?"

Shelly glanced around, lowering her voice as she answered. "They say she hates Amelie Bennett. And you know, since both Angelina and Elizabeth are quite popular, everyone wants to be on their good side. Especially now that Liam Bennett is a known tycoon—only a fool would try and openly go against his wife."

Shelly's smile faltered slightly, realizing the implications of her words. Samantha frowned; she knew she, too, was going against Amelie herself. But before she could dwell on it, Shelly continued, desperately trying to change the subject.

"But you know... rumor has it that Vanessa has the hots for her brother-in-law. I heard that when her parents told her she would marry a Bennett, she confessed to Angelina that she hoped it would be Liam.

But alas, her future partner was Noah instead. I heard she was furious and even threw a tantrum; that's why her family is reluctant to meddle in her life anymore, and they barely even talk now. She's a power-hungry vixen, that Vanessa. Looks all elegant and composed, but I know a scheming bitch when I see one." 1

Samantha raised an eyebrow at Shelly's gossip, thinking to herself, *'Yes, and that is precisely why you've become my friend, you stupid bitch.'*

But as she looked back at Vanessa, a new idea began to form in her mind.

'If she hates Amelie, then she is my ally... And if she still has her eyes on Liam, then maybe I can help her get her hands on him as well. It won't help me in the long run, but it sure will destroy Amelie's marriage. That prude will not be able to tolerate another one of her husband's affairs, especially with his own sister-in-law.'

Samantha turned back to Shelly, a calculating smile playing on her lips. "Will you introduce me to Vanessa then?" she asked, her voice dripping with false sweetness. "She looks kind of lonely, and I think it's time we fixed that."

Shelly, eager to please, nodded enthusiastically. "Of course, Sam. Let's go."

They made their way across the room, and Samantha could feel the eyes of the crowd on them, a small thrill running through her entire body.

Vanessa noticed their approach and stiffened slightly while Shelly offered her a bright, practiced smile. "Mrs. Bennett, I don't think you've met Samantha Clark. She's been dying to get to know you."

Vanessa turned her eyes to Samantha, assessing her appearance with a cool smile. "Really? She has?"

Samantha extended her hand, curling her pouty lips into a wide grin. "It goes without saying, Mrs. Bennett. Nice to finally meet you."

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