

158 Youthful Arrogance

"Well, you ladies get acquainted then! I have someone else I need to talk to!" 1

Shelly smiled and left the two women to mingle. Vanessa watched the woman disappear into the crowd and reached out for a wine glass from a passing waiter, her face still expressionless.

She took a sip, her eyes never leaving Samantha's face, studying the younger woman with a mixture of curiosity and caution. Samantha, noticing her glare, smiled brightly and leaned in slightly, her tone dripping with fake concern.

"Are you enjoying the party? I couldn't help but notice that you've been somewhat neglected tonight..." She pouted a little, an exaggerated expression that made Vanessa's frown deepen.

"Not at all, Mrs. Clark," the woman replied coolly. "This evening is not about me, after all."

Samantha nodded quickly, agreeing with Vanessa's words. "Yes, you're absolutely right. I hate people who try to steal the spotlight from

others. A fifty-year anniversary—what a spectacular occasion! And yet, the Bennetts still managed to make it all about themselves."

Samantha flinched dramatically, her eyes widening in mock horror as she turned back to Vanessa, offering her a guilty look. "Oops!" She playfully smacked her own lips and shook her head, feigning regret. "I meant Amelie and Liam, of course! But mostly Amelie. She keeps pretending to be so righteous and whatnot, but we all know she's completely rotten inside!"

Vanessa listened to Samantha's words, her expression carefully neutral. Inside, however, she was observing the woman's every move, every inflection. *'I was aware of her manners--or rather the lack of them--but does she really think I can't see through her fake attempt to ingratiate herself with me?'*

Her gaze drifted across the room, landing on Liam, who was surrounded by a crowd of admirers. Even at a celebration for someone else, he commanded attention, his charm effortlessly drawing people in.

Vanessa's attention turned inward as she

watched him, her mind sucking her into her inner thoughts once more. *'Still... I can't help but agree with her. Amelie doesn't get her own hands dirty, but she does her dirty deeds with the help of others instead.'*

Samantha had fallen silent, noticing that Vanessa's attention was fixed elsewhere. Following her gaze, she saw Liam and immediately understood. *'Gotcha,'* she declared silently and with satisfaction. *'Whether she loves him or simply wants his power, it doesn't really matter. She wants that forbidden fruit and I might be able to help her.'*

"Mrs. Bennett," Samantha's voice broke through Vanessa's thoughts, pulling her back to the conversation.

Vanessa blinked, focusing on Samantha once more as the latter continued, her voice tinged with feigned concern. "I apologize if I crossed the line while talking about your sister-in-law. You see, I, and the other girls in my circle, are really worried about you, Mrs. Bennett. We don't think it's fair that you're being treated so badly simply because Amelie Bennett has such popular friends. What did you do that was so wrong? You



have just lost a husband, for God's sake!"

Samantha widened her eyes theatrically and pressed a hand to her mouth, as if shocked by her own words. "Oh, I'm sorry, Mrs. Bennett, I didn't mean—"

"It's fine," Vanessa cut her off, her voice turning cold again. Her face darkened, and Samantha, sensing that she had struck a nerve, quickly rushed to change the subject.

"Say, Mrs. Bennett... With all things considered... How come you're still staying at the Bennett residence? Especially with a new Mrs. Bennett in charge?"

Across the room, Liam stood surrounded by friends and business associates, his charm as effortless as ever. His attention was drawn away when Richard Clark approached, holding two glasses of wine, one of which he offered to Liam.

Liam raised his hand against the glass and shook his head, rejecting the drink, and Richard set it down on a small round table between them.

"With all the people gathering around you, Mr. Bennett, it's hard to tell whether this party is for Mr. Harris or the actual wedding rehearsal for your upcoming ceremony," Richard noted, his tone light but with an edge that didn't go unnoticed.

Liam could only smile at his words. "What can I say, Mr. Clark? People are drawn to my innate charm. I suppose it has something to do with my age. Or perhaps my appearance."

He grinned as he spoke, enjoying the way Richard's expression darkened ever so slightly. It was a petty victory, but one he relished nonetheless. It was fun to sting his opponent.

Richard scoffed, masking his irritation behind a sip of wine. "Yes, youth has its advantages," he said smoothly. "But it also has its flaws. Arrogance, for instance. Or recklessness."

Liam's grin widened. "There's nothing wrong with a little arrogance, Mr. Clark."

"Not when that arrogance clouds one's mind and makes him slip up," Richard retorted, his gaze sharpening as he fixed Liam with a hard stare.

Liam felt a slight unease creep into his chest, the playful banter losing its edge as Richard's words took on a more menacing tone. Richard leaned in closer, his voice low as he added, "I'm keeping my eye on you, Mr. Bennett. You and your friend... Mr. Kyle Marshall."

With that, Richard smiled coldly and walked away, leaving Liam standing there, his brow furrowed in irritation. Then, his attention was drawn to the other side of the room, where Amelie stood, her face pale, tears brimming in her eyes.

Liam's heart lurched, and he quickly made his way over to her, gently placing his hands on her shoulders. "Lily, what's wrong? Are you okay?"

Amelie looked up at him, her lips trembling, tears beginning to spill down her cheeks. Her voice was barely a whisper as she spoke. "Liam... It's your grandfather... He—he passed away." 2

For a moment, the world seemed to stop. Liam's breath caught in his throat, his mind struggling to process the words. His grandfather—one of the most influential figures in his life, the man who had shaped so much of who he was—was

gone.

He could not believe that.

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