

The Mocked Miss's Hidden Crowns – Chapter 96

Back in the classroom, Charlotte handed Andrew two bottles of water she'd picked up at the school store.

"Returning yours."

Andrew had one foot propped on his chair, chewing the end of his pen, completely tangled up in his math worksheet. When Charlotte suddenly offered him the water, he froze. Was she really returning the water?

"It's just a bottle of..." Andrew started to brush it off, but the second he met Charlotte's eyes, he lost his nerve. He quickly changed his tone. "My treat. Just consider it a friendly gesture."

Parrish reached over and took one of the bottles, grinning. "Thanks, Charlotte!" He wasn't about to refuse a gift, especially from the girl herself. Andrew realized too late that he'd missed his chance and grabbed the other bottle, his cool expression slipping into something a little awkward. Why did it feel like he and Parrish were both just giving in to Charlotte without a fight?

"No problem," Charlotte replied quietly. She went back to her seat, pulled her windbreaker over to use as a pillow, and turned her back to the guys, settling in for a

nap.

"Still zoning out?" Parrish nudged Andrew, noticing he was just staring at the water bottle.

"Your brother said if you come in last place again in this month's exams, he's going to break your legs."

Andrew wasn't actually a bad student. He'd gotten into Vanguard High on his own, but as soon as he arrived, he just stopped trying and never got back on track.

He glanced at Charlotte, already fast asleep, and smirked. "I'm not going to be last." Without Charlotte in the class, he might have been a little worried, but with her around, he figured he'd be safe from the bottom.

Parrish eyed Charlotte, thoughtful. "What if she's only bad at physics and crushes every other subject?"

Andrew fell silent, unsure. That didn't seem likely.

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When the evening study session ended, Charlotte picked up her bag and

headed out the door. Andrew jumped up and hurried after her.

"Charlotte, where do you live? Is it on my way? Want to walk together?"

Charlotte glanced at his name badge, a tiny hint of a smile at the corner of her mouth. "Not for now," she answered coolly, shooting him down without a second thought.

Andrew stopped in his tracks, scratching his head. "What did she mean by that?" He replayed the words in his mind. Not for now?

Parrish shrugged, just as lost. "No idea. But honestly, I like how direct she is."

"Yeah, but what's the point if you like her? You think she'd go for you?" Andrew kicked him lightly. "Keep dreaming."

"And she'd go for you?" Parrish threw on his cap, leaning in with a teasing grin. "Charlotte's not someone just anyone could handle."

Andrew felt a lump in his throat. He grabbed his backpack and threw it at Parrish. "Get out of here!"

Parrish laughed and sprinted off, disappearing down the hallway.

Andrew stood there, replaying the look Charlotte had given him. It sent a chill down his spine.

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At the Blair Estate, the great hall was alive with the bustle of servants getting ready for the Blair family's monthly dinner. This time, the event was even more elaborate, celebrating Patricia's recovery.

Andrew was sprawled on the sofa playing a game on his phone when he heard the sound of a sports car outside. Without even looking up, he called out, "Who just got here?"

"It's Anthony, sir," a servant replied.

Andrew shot up, scrambled for the stairs, and called over his shoulder, "If Anthony asks, just say I'm studying!"

The servants could only stare.

Almost as soon as Andrew disappeared, slow and confident footsteps filled the entryway. Everyone in the hall looked up.

Anthony stood just under six foot three, dressed in a crisp white shirt and a dark silk tie. His features were so sharp and perfect they looked sculpted, and he carried himself with a cold, commanding presence. The air in the room seemed to drop as he walked in.

The servants straightened up immediately. "Mr. Valentine."

Anthony nodded slightly, cool eyes sweeping over the hall. "Where's my grandmother?"

"Mrs. Blair is resting," one of the staff answered.

"Is Andrew back?" Anthony loosened his tie, an edge of seriousness in his eyes.

The servants exchanged a look. "He's upstairs," one said, then hesitated, quickly adding, "He's not sleeping."

"Don't wake Patricia. Let her rest." Anthony glanced upward, undid the top button of his shirt, revealing a glimpse of his collarbone, and headed for the stairs.

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"Yes, Mr. Valentine." The maids nodded, but couldn't help sneaking another look at his retreating figure. The gossip about Anthony was always swirling. Last time, Patricia had called and heard a woman's voice near him. Everyone wondered who could possibly catch the attention of someone as cool and untouchable as Anthony.

In his room, Anthony settled onto the sofa, long legs crossed, posture relaxed but aura chilly. He picked up his phone and opened the message from the teacher. His gaze darkened as he read the exam results.

"Twenty-eight points?" His tone was casual on the surface, but there was a dangerous edge. "Did you take the test with your eyes closed?"

Andrew kept his head down, not daring to answer. How could he ever compare to Anthony? Anthony had skipped grades since grade school, topped the national exams, graduated with dual degrees from

Cambridge and became the youngest finance master in MIT history. Next to him, Andrew felt completely useless.

"Answer me."

Anthony's voice cut through the silence, cold and sharp.

Andrew flinched, then looked up, voice barely above a mumble. "I did better. I'm not last anymore. There's someone in my class who scored even lower."

Someone worse than him? Anthony scrolled down to the bottom of the list and found the name, clear as day: Charlotte.

For a second, his cold expression faltered. A small, helpless smile tugged at

his lips and the ice in his eyes melted completely. Seven points. Only she could get a score that turned out to be lucky.

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"Huh?"

When Anthony's face finally softened, Andrew scratched at his hair, looking sheepish. Was Anthony really not mad anymore just because he wasn't dead last? Honestly, if it weren't for Charlotte's disastrous score, he'd be toast.

Andrew was just starting to relax when Anthony suddenly looked up. The warmth in his eyes vanished, replaced by a cold, sharp glare that made Andrew's skin crawl.

"So, you're trying to see who can fail harder, you or her?" Anthony tapped the screen with his long fingers. His voice was deep, and there was a chill in it that sent a shiver down Andrew's spine.

"I'm not competing," Andrew sputtered, completely lost. "It's just, Charlotte really is last."

Anthony stood up. His legs were so long and straight he looked like he could almost touch the ceiling, and as he stepped in front of Andrew, it felt like a mountain was about to fall on him.

Andrew sucked in a shaky breath, his knees knocking together.

"I'll work harder next time, I swear," he blurted out. "I promise I won't be last in this month's exams." He hunched his shoulders, trying to look sincere and harmless. With Charlotte around, last place would definitely be hers.

Anthony gave him a cold, lazy look that somehow made him even more intimidating, like he didn't even need to try to scare the life out of you.

"Is she behaving herself at school?"

Andrew blinked, totally thrown. "Uh... what?" Charlotte? Why was Anthony suddenly asking about her? Did he think Andrew had cheated and still couldn't beat her?

Panic surged up, and Andrew scrambled to explain himself. "Nope, not at all! She zones out in class, picks fights after school. She even came dead last on the last test..."

Anthony's brows pulled together. "Picks fights after school?"

"Yeah," Andrew nodded, still not sure why Anthony cared so much. "Charlotte made this bet with one of the teachers. She said if she can't get second place

in the whole year, she'll drop out."

Anthony's lips twitched, just barely. He knew Charlotte wasn't the type to talk big for nothing. If she said she could get second, she probably meant it.

Something flickered in his eyes, dark and impossible to read.

Since Anthony didn't seem angry anymore, Andrew pressed his lips together, then said, a little quieter, "Even though Charlotte's grades are bad she's actually a really decent person. It'd be a shame she got kicked out of Vanguard just because of her scores."

Anthony's cool gaze landed on him, eyes narrowing as if he was sizing Andrew up.

"So?"

Andrew looked down, voice barely above a whisper. "I was hoping... maybe you could help? Put in a word for her at school, don't let them kick her out. With the way things were going, Bald Lee would definitely show her the door."

Anthony noticed the flush on Andrew's cheeks, and his eyes instantly iced over. "You seem pretty worried about her," he said, his voice low and rough.

"We're friends now!" Andrew shot back, trying to sound brave. "Didn't you always say friends should have each other's backs?"

Anthony's smile was slow and cold, his eyes glinting with something dangerous. "Maybe worry about yourself for once."

"Anthony"

"You've got five extra math worksheets tonight. Don't even think about sleeping until you finish them."

"Anthony..." Andrew hurried after him, frowning in confusion. Wasn't Anthony supposed to be less mad now that he'd moved up a spot? Why was he suddenly being so harsh?

Anthony stopped, turned, and fixed Andrew with a stare that was all shadows.

"Do you like her?"

Andrew's breath hitched. She was gorgeous and cool-how could he not feel something?

"Add five more worksheets." Without

giving Andrew a chance to protest, Anthony's voice dropped, each word icy and clear. "If you even think about dating, you better start worrying about your legs."

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Andrew just stood there, sweating bullets, his face going from red to pale in seconds. Like he'd ever have the guts, much less the chance, to actually date her.

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The dining hall was buzzing with quiet voices as everyone gathered around the polished mahogany table. Patricia sat at the head, her snowy white hair done up neatly. She wore a red and purple silk tunic embroidered with peonies, looking every bit as sharp and lively as ever.

Anthony took the seat to her left. He had those chiseled features and that air of effortless confidence, all the best traits from his parents, only somehow even better.

On Patricia's right sat her second son, Daniel, next to his wife Dorothy and their son Andrew.

Something about the air felt heavy, like everyone was holding back.

Dorothy set her chopsticks down, glanced across at Anthony, and flashed a bright smile. "Anthony, do you know which country your parents are in now?"

Patricia's face tightened at the question, clearly annoyed. Years ago, Matthew had used his health as an excuse to hand over the entire family business to Anthony, then taken his wife traveling around the world. Last time Patricia was seriously ill, the two of them had flown back from Egypt. As soon as she got better, they vanished again. If they hadn't given her such a talented grandson, Patricia might have lost her patience with them long ago.

"No idea," Anthony answered, voice flat, head slightly bowed. "Honestly, Dorothy, if you hadn't mentioned it, I would've forgotten I even have parents." Probably, his parents had forgotten about him too.

Dorothy couldn't think of a response. Anthony had been the perfect kid growing up, never causing trouble, never making his parents worry. They got to live their lives stress-free. Then she looked at her own son, who was busy shoveling food into his mouth, and felt her blood pressure spike.

"You got a thirty on your test and you can still eat?" she snapped.

Andrew grinned, completely unfazed. "Mom, let me finish eating before you start yelling, okay?"

"You little-" Dorothy started, but just then, a phone rang.

Anthony set down his utensils, wiped his hands with a napkin, and picked up

his phone. He glanced at Dorothy and Andrew, who were still mid-argument. "Quiet."

Instantly, the whole room went silent.

Anthony answered the call, listening intently. His eyebrows drew together in a frown.

"I understand," he said, then hung up. He looked over at Andrew. "No evening study session today?"

Andrew blinked, a little lost. "No, school ended at five."

Anthony's expression turned even darker. "Grandma, Uncle Daniel, Aunt Dorothy, please enjoy your meal. I have something I need to take care of."

He started to stand, but Patricia stopped him.

"Sit down. I have something to ask you."

Anthony glanced at his watch, his Anthony glanced eyes growing stormy, but he sat back down. In the past, he'd faced company disasters, ever

billion dollar losses without batting an eye. But just now, Patricia had caught something new in his

gaze—a flicker of panic and worry.

If it wasn't about the company, then what could possibly get under Anthony's skin

like that? Could it be about a girl? Did Anthony finally have a girlfriend?

"I want to ask you...." Patricia began, her voice full of energy. But as she looked at him, she froze, staring at his forehead. "Oh what happened to your head?

It didn't look like a bump or a scratch. The shape was odd... almost like a bite mark.

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A bite mark?

Patricia's eyes sparkled. She pushed herself up, a little unsteady, then leaned in close with a grin, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Did a girl leave that?"

Anthony lounged in his seat, tapping his fingers on his phone, not really paying attention. "No, I just hit something."

"Don't lie to me!" Patricia shot him a look, barely able to hide her excitement. "You think I can't tell what that is?"

Anthony thought of how Charlotte had clung to him, refusing to let go. His lips turned up just a bit, and for a moment, his usually cold face looked almost gentle.

"So, if you have a girlfriend, why haven't you brought her home for me to meet?" Patricia pressed.

Girlfriend?

Andrew, who had been quietly listening, suddenly looked up, his eyes wide. Anthony... had a girlfriend? With how frosty and distant he always was, Andrew was half convinced Anthony would be single forever. Now he was feeling a little excited, and honestly, curious. What kind of girl could possibly win over Anthony?

"Is it that you won't bring her, or that she won't come?" Patricia asked.

Anthony raised an eyebrow and leaned back, the sharp edge to his voice softening. "Grandma, please stop worrying."

Patricia's smile vanished in an instant. "Oh no, so she really doesn't want to come? How are you even courting her? Did you send her flowers? Take her out to dinner? At least watched a romance movie together?" Patricia's questions came faster and faster, her voice getting more anxious. "You brat, do you keep that poker face when you're with her? Did you make her mad?"

"No." Anthony rubbed his forehead, letting out a quiet, helpless laugh. "Alright, Grandma, you just got better. Please rest. I have to go."

"Wait..." Patricia called out as he started to leave. "At least show me a photo, will you?"

But he was already gone before she could finish.

Patricia muttered in annoyance. "That little brat, hiding her like she's a secret treasure."

"So he does have a girlfriend. No wonder he refused that blind date last time. Dorothy, who was sitting nearby, took a sip of water. Her expression was complicated, and her smile was more for show than anything real the future Mrs. Blair is going to be the lady of the Blair family. That's not a role just anyone can fill."

Patricia frowned. Her grandson wouldn't choose anyone less than extraordinary.

"By the way, Mom, remember Ms.

Carter I mentioned? She'd be perfect

for Anthony," Dorothy said "She'

him

met him too and she likes a lot."

Maybe we should-"

"Enough!" Patricia cut her off, her voice sharp and cold.

"Melissa isn't good enough for Anthony."

Not good enough? Dorothy froze.

"But Mom the Carters are a well-known family here in Cabinda. And Ms.

Carter went to Cambridge. She has the looks, the background, the character

How could she possibly not be-" '

How could she not be good enough for Anthony?

Patricia set her cup down with a thud. "Anthony doesn't like her. That's all there is to

it. So she's not good enough. And you stay out of his business."

Dorothy felt as if someone had dumped a bucket of cold water over her. She clammed up, not daring to say another word.

In the car, Anthony was slouched in the back seat, his long fingers gripping his phone. There was a hint of worry in his usually sharp eyes.

"Is Charlotte home yet?" he asked.

"Miss Charlotte hasn't returned yet," Helen answered respectfully.

Anthony pressed his lips together, said nothing, and hung up. Immediately, he called Charlotte's number.

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The phone barely rang before a clear voice came through.

"Uncle?"

Hearing her, Anthony felt his tension melt away. A small smile tugged at his lips, and his voice softened. "Why aren't you home yet?"

Home.

He actually called it home.

That simple word sent a ripple through Charlotte's heart. She stopped in her tracks, fingers tightening on her phone, eyes fixed on her toes, a shy smile playing at her lips. "Something came up. I'll be home later."

No classes today. She couldn't go back to the Main estate. She barely knew anyone in Cabinda. What could she possibly have to do?

"Do you need my help?"

"No."

Right then, she caught sight of a man in expensive clothes, his arm draped around a curvy woman, both stepping out of a hotel.

"Don't wander off. Be careful. Call me if you need anything, alright?" Anthony didn't push, just gently reminded her.

"Okay."

After her soft reply, she noticed the call was still connected. Anthony's lips curled even more, his voice warm. "Next time, you hang up first."

The line went dead.

Hans, sitting behind the wheel, sucked in a quiet breath. He glanced at Anthony in the rearview mirror. Ms. Main was the first person he'd ever seen hang up on Anthony like that.

But instead of being mad, Anthony looked almost helpless, with a fondness in his smile that was impossible to miss. He really did spoil Ms. Main.

Charlotte wiped her phone clean and slipped it into her backpack. She pulled out a hat and mask, put them on, and started walking, following the man from a distance.

She watched the couple enter an upscale private club.

On the surface, it looked like just another entertainment spot, but everyone in the know understood it was Jesse's illegal underground casino. Poker, bridge, blackjack, roulette-everything was here, with millions in cash moving through very day. Most of the gamblers were spoiled rich kids, burning their family fortunes for fun.

The casino hid on the top floor, tucked away where no one but insiders could find it. Everyone knew everyone, so nobody ever reported anything.

Charlotte zipped up her jacket and walked to the entrance. She paid 18,888 for a VIP card, and the staff treated her with extra respect as they led her inside.

She picked a secluded spot and sat down, pulling out the carton of milk Anthony had given her that morning. She poked in the straw and sipped, her cold gaze fixed on the man fidgeting not far away.

The last batch of medicine she'd

used on him hadn't been that strong, but the side effects were clearly lingering. He was running to the room at least ten times

now. If everything was going according to plan, Jesse wouldn't last much longer.

Sure enough, a moment later, Jesse squeezed his legs together and hurried off to the restroom.

As soon as he left, his voluptuous

companion plopped onto the couch, crossed her legs, and lit a cigarette

"Jesse is so gross," she complained. "Usually, he can hold out for fifteen minutes. Today it was barely ten, and he kept running to the bathroom. By the end, I could actually smell shit on him." She spat to the side her side her face full of disgust "If it wasn't for that Hermes bag he promised me, I would've left, pants up and all."

Her friend burst out laughing. "Guys like him have weak kidneys anyway. Lasting ten minutes is already a miracle." She lowered her voice, glancing around. "I heard that back in the day, he even went after underage girls..."

The words made Charlotte bite down on her straw. The smile on her lips turned sharp and dangerous.