

From Substitute To Queen

Chapter 4: I'm Prettier

His gaze swept the room, silently demanding to know who had dared invite me. I noticed Emily shrink back, avoiding his stare.

Camila glided over with a smile that never reached her eyes. "You must be Sable Crawford. I'm Camila Ross. I'm sure Darrell's mentioned me."

Actually, he barely has. "Nice to meet you."

"Has anyone ever told you we look alike?" Camila's laugh tinkled like broken glass. "It's quite striking, really."

Darrell's jaw clenched. Our resemblance was his dirty little secret.

"Oh my god!" Camila's gaze dropped to our feet. "We're wearing the same shoes! These are the Louboutin limited edition, aren't they? There are only two pairs in the world."

The room held its breath.

I looked directly at Darrell, then back at Camila with innocent eyes. "How coincidental. Though I don't really see the resemblance between us – I'm prettier."

Someone gasped. Darrell looked like he wanted to disappear.

That's when Lisa Morrison decided to strike.

"Those have to be knockoffs." Her voice cut through the silence like a blade. "Sable's just a small-town doctor. There's no way she can afford real Louboutins. Each pair costs thirty thousand dollars."

"Exactly," Jennifer chimed in. "That's more than she makes in a year. The fakes these days are so convincing though."

Every eye in the room fixed on me. Even Darrell looked uncomfortable, his expression clearly doubtful.

"Look at that confidence," Ryan laughed. "An orphan with no family background trying to compete with beta bloodlines. Pathetic."

"Fake designer goods to match her fake identity," Lisa added with vicious glee. "And she thinks she can be our Luna? Delusional."

Camila put on her most concerned expression. "Sable, you don't need to buy counterfeits to fit in. Darrell isn't the type to care about material things anyway."

The implication hung heavy – *unlike you, shallow gold-digger*.

Darrell stepped closer, his voice low and harsh. "What the hell are you trying to prove? We'll discuss this at home."

"Do you think they're fake too?" I asked him directly.

He said nothing. His silence was answer enough.

Emily tried to intervene. "Maybe we should just—"

"I should change my shoes?" I interrupted, looking straight at Darrell.

"That would be best," he muttered. "Everyone's watching. This is embarrassing."

Camila moved closer with false sympathy. "Really, Sable, you should change them. Fake leather will give you blisters, and I'd hate for you to be uncomfortable."

"Fake? You seem awfully certain about that." My voice stayed level. "What makes you so sure only someone like you deserves the real thing?"

"I didn't mean—"

"What did you mean then? First you 'worry' about my feet, then insist they're counterfeit. You just want everyone to know yours are real and mine are fake, right?"

Darrell immediately jumped to her defense. "Enough, Sable! Camila was trying to help. Why are you being so hostile?"

Camila waved her hand graciously. "It's fine, Relly. Don't get upset. She's probably just having a bad day."

Relly. The pet name hit like a physical blow. They had inside jokes, shared history, intimate nicknames.

Someone suggested drinking games to break the tension. Camila laughed and joined in immediately, the perfect party guest.

I retreated to a corner with a glass of wine. Darrell followed.

"If you don't have money, don't buy fakes," he hissed. "You embarrassed me tonight."

"After three years together, don't you know what kind of person I am?"

I pulled the receipt from my purse. "Moonridge Luxury Boutique. Purchased today at 3 PM. Thirty thousand dollars. Here's my bank statement."

His expression shifted instantly, embarrassment replacing anger. "Where did you get thirty thousand dollars? You're just a doctor. And Why didn't you show this earlier?"

"Didn't feel like it."

He opened his mouth to press further, but someone called out, "Come on, we're starting a new round!"

The interruption gave me the perfect excuse to walk away without answering his questions.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled after a pause. "I was wrong to doubt you."

I walked away without responding and joined the drinking game. But when I looked up after my turn, I found Darrell staring at Camila with raw longing as Marcus and Thomas pressured her to drink more. His expression held worry and something deeper – genuine love.

When she reached for her fourth drink, he shot up and snatched the glass away.

"You're on your period," he snapped. "You can't drink this much. Do you want to make yourself sick?"

Oh, what a shame. Guess they couldn't fuck last night after all.

The room went dead quiet. Camila's cheeks flushed pink. "Why do you care?"

"She's done drinking." His Alpha authority rolled through the room like thunder. "Anyone who pushes her will answer to me."

The threat hung in the air. No one dared challenge him.

I watched with bitter amusement as Camila reached for the glass playfully. He held it high above his head, and she lost her balance, tumbling into his chest. His free arm wrapped around her waist automatically.

"Careful," he murmured, voice soft with shared memories. "After all these years, your balance still sucks."

She giggled, lightly punching his chest. "You're so mean, Darrell."

The room erupted in laughter and whistles. Their chemistry was undeniable, electric.

Just as Darrell opened his mouth to respond, his eyes accidentally met mine across the room.

The look I gave him could have frozen hell itself.

Darrell's eyes snapped to mine across the room, and the blood drained from his face.

He jerked his arm away from Camila so abruptly she stumbled sideways. Two quick steps backward put distance between them, but the damage was done. Everyone had seen how naturally he'd held her.

The whispers started immediately. I watched him navigate through the crowd, his jaw tight with embarrassment. When he reached me, he dropped into the chair beside mine with forced casualness.

"Hey." He touched my knee. "Having fun?"

I took a sip of wine. "It's been educational."

His fingers drummed against his thigh – a nervous tell I'd learned to recognize. He kept glancing around the room like he expected someone to call him out.

"You seem tense," I observed.

"Just... pack politics, you know?" He forced a laugh. "Always complicated when old friends visit."

Old friends. "Right."

Darrell studied my face with the intensity of someone trying to solve a puzzle. I could practically see the gears turning as he searched for the reaction he expected – tears, accusations, jealousy.

"So..." He leaned closer. "You have anything you want to say about tonight?"

The question carried an edge of challenge. He was testing me, probing for the emotional breakdown he knew how to handle.

I smiled. "No. Why would I?"

"Really?" His eyes narrowed. "Nothing at all?"

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