

A MISSTEP IN MARBLE WALLS

"This contains everything," he rasped. "Codes. Assets. Contacts. Secrets. Use them wisely. This...this is the key to everything that makes me great."

The weight of the flash drive felt unreal. It was not just plastic and metal. It was influence, power, lives. Entire countries leaning on a single family's empire.

Master Xavier's breathing grew ragged again.

"One more thing... listen carefully..." His voice dropped to a faint whisper. "A great war is coming. Many eyes watch this throne. For your safety, you must remain hidden. If you fall, Verdanis falls. Everything I built... collapses. Nations will plunge into poverty." 4

The beeping of the heart monitor turned uneven.

Ethan leaned closer, panic rising. "Grandfather...?" 2

The old man gave him one final smile — proud, relieved, peaceful.

"My boy... protect them all..."

The monitor flatlined.

A long, sharp tone cut through the air.

Servants lowered their heads. Doctors stepped back. Steward Leonard covered his face, shoulders shaking.

Ethan stood frozen. The giant of Verdanis was gone. 1

He looked down at the flash drive digging into his palm. It felt like a brand burned into his skin.

He did not feel rich. He did not feel powerful. He did not feel victorious.

He felt a burden so enormous it could crush him. 1

"...What happens now?" he whispered. 1

The heart monitor was silent. The machines hummed softly, still feeding life into no one. The room smelled of antiseptic and sadness. Servants moved like ghosts against the walls. Leonard stood at the foot of the bed, eyes wet. 3

"Young Master Ethan," Leonard said quietly, "maybe you should rest for a moment. You have been through too much today. Even though much is expected of you, you are allowed to be human." 1

Ethan nodded, though he wasn't sure he believed that. He turned away before his legs betrayed him and carried himself to the doors. 1

They opened it for him without a sound. 2

The hallway outside felt like another world. The smell of medicine vanished, replaced by clean air and polished wood. Golden lights glowed softly above marble floors. Servants bowed as he passed, their voices low. 1

"Please accept our condolences, Young Master," one of the doctors that saw him inside the chambers murmured. 1

"Thank you," Ethan said.

The title still felt borrowed. Young Master. Heir. Owner. A few hours ago he was just a man with a ruined company and a failed marriage, sitting at an airport gate. Now Verdanis and several poorer nations were somehow his responsibility.

He walked down the corridor, past framed paintings and carved pillars, past tall windows that showed pale mountain sky. His mind replayed his grandfather's warning: war, enemies, stay hidden. 5

Then he saw her.

She stepped into the hallway from a side passage. At first she was only movement in the distance. Then she came into focus.

Her heels clicked softly but firmly against the marble. Her long hair was tied back neatly. She wore a fitted grey suit and white blouse that framed her figure without looking cheap. A slim folder and a tablet were tucked under her arm. 8

No flashy jewelry, just a simple watch and small earrings.

She was Camila Rowan, the executive director of internal operations in Xavier global holdings. 1

She was beautiful, yes, but it was the way she carried herself that hit him hardest. Her posture, her focused eyes, the calm way she moved. She looked like someone who made decisions that mattered. 1

Ethan stopped walking.

For the first time since his grandfather's death, something other than grief filled his chest. Attraction. Curiosity. Distraction. She looked like purpose in high heels, and he needed anything that wasn't grief. 2

He watched her come closer. Each step was precise, like she had trained herself never to stumble in public.

He became aware of himself. His collar was slightly crooked. His palms were damp. Sweat still clung to his forehead from the emotions in the previous room. He probably looked like a stressed staff member who had just witnessed something heavy. 1

She didn't know who he was. 1

For a moment, that felt... freeing.

Maybe he could be nobody, just for a minute. 1

As she neared, he stepped a little into her path.

"Excuse me," he said. 2

She slowed. She didn't smile. Her eyes swept over his face, down his shirt, to the hand curled around the flash drive, then back to his eyes. Her expression stayed calm and cool. 2

"Yes?" she asked, her voice was professional and controlled.

Ethan offered a small, honest smile. "I know this is sudden," he said, "but I saw you from down the hall and I just had to say this. You look incredibly beautiful. Not just that. You look serious, focused, purposeful. It... stands out." 2

It felt strange to hear his own voice sound almost light again. 2

Her expression did not warm. If anything, her eyes sharpened. 1

"Aren't you one of the junior staff here?" she asked, her voice cutting

through the hallway like she was swatting a fly.

There was no curiosity in her tone. Just irritation.

And a hint of disgust.

By the way, that question hit him like a slap across the face. 1

Ethan froze, caught off guard by the sharpness in her eyes. She wasn't simply judging him — she had already decided who he was the second she saw him. 1

"I... something like that," he said carefully. He remembered his grandfather's directive for him to stay hidden.

She scoffed. "Then you're out of line." Her gaze swept him from head to toe, slow and unapologetic. "Approaching me like this? In this corridor? During work hours? Do they not train their workers here anymore?"

The dismissal in her tone was so heavy it almost pushed him back a step. 1

Ethan blinked once, trying not to laugh at the sheer boldness. "I didn't mean to offend you. I just thought someone who walks with purpose should hear—" 1

She cut him off with a raised hand.

"Please spare me that nonsense," she said sharply. "I don't need compliments from a junior staff with no significant importance. I don't want them. And I definitely don't appreciate anyone stopping me when I have actual business to handle." 2

Her eyes moved over him again, slower this time, as if confirming her assumptions.

"You look stressed. Sweaty. Your shirt isn't even ironed properly. No tie. No badge. Not even a decent pair of shoes," she said. 1

Actually she meant expensive pair of shoes. 1

"So unless you're here to clean something, I don't see why you're talking to me." 1

Ethan inhaled deeply. This woman did not hold back.

She wasn't just uninterested — she was openly contemptuous.

"I'm not interested," she continued. "Not in small talk, not in excuses, and definitely not in men who think they can flirt their way upward."

Her words hit like cold water. 2

Ethan lifted his eyebrows. "Why do you judge so quickly?"