

Chapter 11 Confrontation in the Corridor

The repressed dinner finally, blessedly, came to an end. As if a silent command had been given, the family members scattered along the long table rose with palpable relief.

Isidora remained seated, her head bowed low. The antique emerald necklace Cedrick had forced her to wear felt like a heavy, cold yoke around her neck, its facets refracting the merciless light of the crystal chandeliers. She deliberately slowed her movements, picking at a loose thread on the linen tablecloth, hoping to wait until everyone had left before she had to rise and endure their hostile, probing stares.

But Cedrick Garrison did not immediately leave his seat at the head of the table. He swirled the remaining red wine in his glass, his gaze sharp and penetrating, fixed on the deliberate curve of her hunched spine.

The butler stepped forward, his voice smooth as polished silver. "Ladies and gentlemen, dessert and coffee will be served in the drawing room."

The announcement was a death knell to her plan. Isidora was forced to stand, her joints stiff. She fell in line behind the dispersing crowd, keeping her eyes glued to the floor.

As she passed the head of the table, a long, elegant leg suddenly extended into her path. It was a seemingly casual movement, yet perfectly timed to block her only way forward.

Isidora couldn't react in time. Her knee brushed lightly against the hard muscle of his calf, sheathed in the fine wool of his expensive suit trousers. A jolt, like a current of electricity, shot through her entire body.

She looked up in alarm, only to fall directly into Cedrick's deep, dark eyes. They were filled with a mocking predatory amusement.

He leaned in slightly, his voice a low rasp meant only for her. "Walk with your head up," he murmured, his tone laced with cold contempt. "Or do

you prefer crawling?*

Isidora bit her lip so hard she tasted blood. She took a quick half-step back, pulling away from his magnetic heat. "My apologies," she mumbled, nodding indiscriminately before turning and fleeing the dining hall as if the hounds of hell were at her heels.

She hurried through a long corridor paved with heavy Persian rugs, her one goal to reach a washroom, to splash cold water on her face and calm the frantic bird hammering against her ribs. The hallway was dimly lit, the walls lined with the Garrison family's collection of priceless antiques, each housed in its own display.

Just as she reached a corner, a faint, sharp sound cut through the silence. The crisp *click* of a glass case being jimmied open.

She froze, her senses on high alert. Instinctively, she slipped behind the cool marble of a massive Roman column and peered cautiously around its edge.

There, bathed in the weak light from a wall sconce, was Stella Garrison. Kevin's spoiled younger sister was hunched furtively before a display case, the very one that housed a legendary Russian Fabergé egg.

Using a specially modified hairpin Stella skillfully worked the brass lock. With another soft *click*, the cabinet door swung open. She reached in, her fingers closing around the priceless, jewel-encrusted egg.

Isidora understood in a flash. The notorious gambling debts in Monte Carlo, the whispers of her desperation—the high-society princess was stealing from her own family to sell on the black market.

Just as Stella was about to slip the egg into her expensive Hermès handbag, she turned. Her eyes met Isidora's.

The air in the corridor solidified. Panic flared in Stella's eyes, and her hand trembled violently. The Fabergé egg, worth more than a small country's GDP, slipped from her grasp.

Before a scream could form in her throat, Isidora lunged. She didn't think she just moved, her hand shooting out to firmly grip Stella's wrist, her other hand cupping the base of Stella's palm, stopping the egg's disastrous fall just inches from the hard marble floor.

For a second, there was only the sound of their ragged breaths. Then, Stella, realizing what had happened, ripped her hand away. The initial fear morphed into pure, unadulterated rage.

"You!" she hissed, her voice a venomous whisper. She jabbed a finger at Isidora's face, which was pale beneath its mask of heavy foundation. "You ugly little freak! What are you doing spying on me? You're nothing but a pathetic creature who sold her dignity for a trust fund!"

But the cowering girl from the dinner table was gone. Isidora didn't flinch. She stood her ground, a sharpness previously unseen glinting in her eyes, a stark contrast to her usually timid demeanor.

"The consequences for stealing from the family collection are severe, Stella," Isidora said, her voice chillingly calm.

"I'll say you did it!" Stella spat.

"And they'll believe you?" Isidora countered coolly. "Or will they believe the girl with millions in gambling debts? I wonder," she continued, her voice dropping "what the current head of this family will do when he finds out. It won't just be freezing your accounts. He'll kick you out. For good."

At the mention of the family's head, a name she hadn't even spoken, Stella's face turned deathly white. A raw, unconcealable fear flashed in her eyes.

Seizing the moment, Isidora reached out and plucked the Fabergé egg from Stella's now-limp fingers. With brisk, efficient movements, she placed the treasure back on its velvet pedestal, closed the glass door, and clicked the lock shut.

She dusted off her hands, a gesture of finality. "You'd be wise to behave yourself," she said, her tone flat and dismissive. "Don't cause trouble."

Stella, who had never in her life been spoken to this way by someone she considered a nobody, began to tremble with a profound sense of humiliation.

Just then, the sound of a servant's footsteps echoed from the far end of the hall.

Stella knew she couldn't linger. She shot Isidora a look of pure hatred, a promise of future pain. Then, she spun on her heel, her stilettos clicking angrily against the marble, and stormed away, silently vowing to make the unassuming ugly freak pay a terrible, terrible price for this night.

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