

TWO – THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

Luke stared at his reflection in the mirror, willing his jangled nerves to calm down. It was eight thirty already. Fiona and her family had already left for the exquisite ballroom where the event was going to be held hours ago, making it easier for Luke to slip out without being seen.

He had on a navy blue suit, crisp white shirt and pristine navy blue slacks. His wavy brown hair was perfectly slicked back and his jaw was shaven smooth.

After successfully dodging the mansion's security guard, he whistled for a taxi.

Luke pulled open the back door and slipped in.

"Boons and Diamonds Event Hall, Central London."

The driver paused with his hands on the wheel, giving Luke's cheap suit a suspicious glance in the rear view mirror.

"Are you sure that is where you're going? I heard the Carmichael families are having an event there." He asked.

Luke glared at him,

"I am Fiona Carmichael's fiance . Can you take me to the hall now?"

Visibly surprised, the driver zoomed off without another word, wondering why a powerful family would give their only daughter in marriage to such a cheap stake. He kept sending Luke suspicious glances all the way to his location.

When they finally arrived at the hall, Luke paid him and alighted the taxi, his pulse thundering with anxiety. He was only here because of Fiona. He just hoped he would be able to avoid the rest of the Carmichaels until it was time for him to leave.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?" One of the security men asked, blocking the entrance.

Luke gave him a hesitant smile.

"I'm a guest here."

The guard leveled him with a disdainful up and down look.

"What's your name?"

"Luke Bradford."

At the mention of his name, the guard's lips

twisted in a mocking smile.

"Oh. The famous low born who got engaged to a princess.

Luke looked away, shame and embarrassment coursing through him.

"Last I checked, you were not invited to this party. Mr and Mrs. Carmichael gave specific instructions that no member of the lowly Bradford family should be allowed into this hall today. What then are you doing here, young man?"

Luke did not want to cause a scene, so he replied in a leveled tone,

"I was invited by Fiona herself. Please just check if she's here and confirm with her."

The guard's gray eyes darkened with anger. He grabbed Luke's shoulder and pushed him hard, toppling him a few steps backwards.

"Stop spewing lies and get the hell out of here. No one would invite a church rat like you to a high profile event, least of all the Carmichaels. Get out before I call security on you."

Luke's body already ached from when David slammed a ball at it yesterday. Now, it was burning. His eyes filled with shame as the other guests regarded his cheap shoes and even cheaper suit with open disgust.

Wondering what he had done to deserve such embarrassment, he made to leave when a voice stopped him.

"Luke! Where are you going?"

He looked up and sighted Nina hurrying in his direction. Her blue eyes twinkled with delight. She looked stunning in her thigh length blue sequinned dress.

"Miss Washington," the guard said, shock written all over his features, "surely he was not invited to this party."

Nina gave him with a hard look, daring him to oppose her.

"Fiona invited him herself and she just sent me to pick him up. The Carmichaels are expecting him as well. you have a problem with that?"

When he didn't reply, Nina grabbed Luke's arm and led him towards the hall.

Luke looked over his shoulder to find the guard staring at him with contempt. Serves you right, he thought.

Inside the hall, he looked around. The hall sparkled and shimmered, reflecting hundreds of expensive Italian crystals. The grand stairs was decorated from top to bottom with sweet smelling, red roses. A gigantic chandelier hung from the ceiling, adding to the hall's classic ambience.

All around him, expensively dressed guests talked and laughed. Jewellery that no doubt cost a fortune hung from the necks of world class models, business tycoons and oil moguls.

This was no doubt a gathering of the rich.

"Oh, Luke. I'm so glad you are here."

Luke spun around and his heart dropped when he came face to face with Mr and Mrs Carmichael, Fiona's parents and his future in-laws.

"I...uh..."

Her lips curled in a secretive smile, ramping up Luke's confusion. Something was fishy somewhere. The Carmichaels were never happy to see him.

"But what on earth are you wearing?!" Mrs. Carmichael exclaimed. "How much did you buy that suit? Two dollars? And the shoes...ugh!"

Her harsh words hurt Luke deeply and Mr Carmichael began laughing at him. He merely kept his head firmly lowered to the ground to avoid causing a scene.

When Hanson Carmichael was alive, the Carmichaels had treated Luke with the respect he deserved. Once the old man died, they made it a point to insult him at every turn.

Just as Mrs. Carmichael was about to say more, the trumpeters blew a royal tune, indicating the arrival of the birthday girl.

The hall instantly became hushed and everyone turned in the direction of the grand stairs.

When Fiona appeared at the top of the stairs, a hushed murmur spread through the crowd as everyone's eyes glued on her in wonder.

Luke's breath caught in his throat as he stared at his beautiful fiancée. Her floor length red dress shimmered and twinkled with a thousand, carefully studded diamonds. The dress showed her slim figure perfectly, then flared from the knee downwards, giving her the resemblance of a mermaid out of fantasy land.

Her gleaming blonde hair flowed down her shoulders and her blue eyes twinkled like the stars.

She was the focus of the entire room as she began her slow descent. Behind her, her friends, Carmella and Estelle followed, acting as her escorts and led her over to her Queen-like seat.

Before long, it was time to present the gifts.

"I, the duke of Petersburg and my family present to you, this Romanian diamond ring. It is worth fifteen million dollars and is the only one of its kind."

Cheers erupted from the crowd as Fiona received the Duke's ridiculously expensive gift.

Next,

"As the founder of Heavensville motors, it is my pleasure to present to the beautiful Fiona, two brand new sport cars from our latest collection, both worth ten million each."

Luke could already see Mrs. Carmichael's eyes light with greed as more gifts were announced.

One by one, the guests continued to shower her with expensive gifts.

When it was David Hummington's turn, Luke's heart turned icy cold with anger.

At just twenty three, David was one of the youngest millionaires in London, and the man whom the Carmichaels wished their daughter had been engaged to.

He was also proud, pompous and ruthless...and a big bully.

Soft, romantic music came on and the hall fell silent once more as David in his perfect, expensive suit brought out a miniature box from his pocket.

Luke began to sweat in his suit when he saw Fiona's eyes glow with happiness.

Something was wrong. He could feel it...

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