

Chapter 13

The air in the exclusive Manhattan club was thick with the smell of old money—a heady mix of Cuban cigar smoke, aged leather, and expensive bourbon. It was a scent that had always made Connor feel at home, powerful.

Tonight, it was suffocating him.

He sat hunched in a dark corner booth, his third glass of whiskey sweating in his hand. The humiliation of Harding's phone call burned in his gut, a fire that not even the strongest liquor could quench. He was trying to disappear into the shadows, but in a place like this, a fallen prince was the most entertaining spectacle of all.

"Well, well, look what the cat dragged in."

Connor's head snapped up. Kip Wexler, his oldest friend and biggest rival, slid into the booth opposite him. Two other guys from their circle followed, their faces plastered with predatory, gossiping grins.

"Heard you got kicked out of your own wedding. Snow," Kip drawled, signaling the waiter for a round. "And your own apartment. Tough day."

Connor slammed his glass down on the table, the amber liquid sloshing over the rim. "Shut your mouth, Wexler," he growled, his voice low and dangerous. "It's a family matter. A temporary strategy."

Another friend, a smirking hedge fund analyst named Bryce, pulled out his phone. "Is it also a 'temporary strategy' to give your fiancée to your uncle? Because Page Six seems to think it's a permanent transfer of assets."

Kip let out a low whistle, sliding his own phone from his pocket. He swiped the screen a few times, his smirk widening then turned it toward Connor. "Doesn't look like a hostage situation to me," Kip muttered, his voice laced with a morbid fascination. "He looks... smitten."

On the screen was a paparazzi shot from an entertainment feed. Anissa and Harding. They were stepping out of a Michelin-starred restaurant, surrounded by a storm of camera flashes. Anissa was wearing a stunning backless black dress that Connor had never seen before. She was laughing, her head tilted back, a genuine radiant smile on her face.

A gust of wind blew a strand of hair across her face. Harding, with a natural, possessive intimacy, reached out and gently tucked it behind her ear. He adjusted the collar of her coat, his hand lingering for a moment on her shoulder.

Connor stared, his knuckles white as he gripped the edge of the table. His breath hitched in his chest. The casual tenderness of that gesture was more devastating than a punch.

Rage, white-hot and blinding surged through Connor. He lunged across the table, grabbing Bryce by the collar of his thousand-dollar shirt.

"It's not real!" he roared, his face inches from Bryce's. "Anissa is with him to keep my grandfather happy! To stabilize the stock! She's playing a part!"

Kip calmly reached over and pried Connor's fingers off Bryce's shirt. He pushed Connor back into his seat, his playful expression hardening into something more serious. "Easy there, Snow," Kip said, his voice dropping but a glint of amusement danced in his eyes. "Don't shoot the messenger. Bryce is just showing you the headlines. Unless you think the entire Wall Street Journal is in on this 'strategy' with you? You must be more important than we thought."

A cold dread trickled down Connor's spine, but his pride was a fortress. "I know exactly what's happening. Anissa is throwing a tantrum, and my family is overreacting."

Kip sighed, shaking his head. "No. The word on the street is different. The word is, she chose him. Willingly."

Connor burst out laughing, a harsh, broken sound that drew stares from the surrounding tables. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. She's obsessed with me. She loves me. She would never, ever choose that old man over me."

"Then why did she walk down the aisle with him?" Kip pressed, his eyes sharp. "If she was being forced, why didn't she scream? Why didn't she run? I saw the video, man. She looked at him, not you."

The question was a needle, piercing the thick hide of Connor's denial. He remembered the live feed he'd watched in the hospital, the way Anissa had turned her back on the empty altar and walked toward the corridor. The coldness in her posture.

He shoved the memory down. "She was hurt. She was trying to make me jealous. It's a game."

Something inside Connor snapped. He shot to his feet, his chair

screeching backward. He swept his arm across the table, sending glasses crashing to the floor in a symphony of shattering crystal and spilled liquor.

"He's a liar!" Connor screamed, pointing a shaking finger at Kip's phone. "And she's a goddamn traitor! A whore!"

The club went silent. Every eye turned to their corner. Public meltdowns were not part of the decorum.

The club manager, a tall man with an impeccably calm demeanor, appeared at his side, flanked by two large security guards.

"Mr. Snow," the manager said, his voice polite but firm. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave. You are disturbing our members."

"Don't you touch me!" Connor raged as the guards took his arms. "That's my woman! That's my life!"

They dragged him, struggling and cursing through the hushed, judgmental crowd and out the heavy oak doors. They deposited him unceremoniously on the cold, unforgiving pavement of the Upper East Side.

He fell to his knees, his expensive suit now wrinkled and stained. The city's glittering, indifferent traffic flowed past him. He was an outcast.

He fumbled for his backup phone, his hands trembling. He had to call his grandfather. He had to demand an explanation for this nightmare.

The call went straight to Aurthur's assistant.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Snow," the secretary's voice said, cool and distant. "Mr. Aurthur Snow is currently hosting a private dinner at the estate to welcome the new Mrs. Snow to the family. He is unavailable."

The new Mrs. Snow.

The words were bullets, riddling the last vestiges of his denial. It was real. She had replaced him.

A terrifying, wild light ignited in his eyes. He scrambled to his feet. If they wouldn't tell him the truth, he would find it himself. He would find the proof that this was all a lie. He would expose her. He would expose them all.