

Chapter 14

The hotel suite was a gilded cage, anonymous and expensive smelling of stale air and desperation. Empty bourbon bottles littered the floor like fallen soldiers.

Connor sat on the edge of the unmade bed, his backup phone clutched in his hand. The screen's harsh blue light illuminated his haggard face. He was a man possessed, scrolling relentlessly through Twitter, Reddit, any dark corner of the internet where a conspiracy theory might be brewing. He was hunting for a single dissenting voice, one comment that agreed with him that the marriage was a sham.

He found nothing but fawning articles about the Snow family's brilliant power move, endless praise for the new, mysterious Mrs. Snow.

With a frustrated growl, he switched to a news app. And then he saw it.

A breaking news alert from Page Six flashed on his screen. An exclusive leak, posted just an hour ago.

Connor's breath caught in his throat. His thumb froze on the screen.

It was a marriage certificate. Officially issued by a New York State Supreme Court Justice. The date was yesterday's. The names, printed in crisp, black ink, were Harding Snow and Anissa Roy. Their signatures, bold and final, were scrawled at the bottom.

His world narrowed to that single, damning piece of paper. His hand started to shake so violently the phone almost slipped from his grasp. He zoomed in, his eyes scanning for any flaw, any sign of digital manipulation. The judge's seal looked terrifyingly authentic.

"No," he whispered, his voice a dry rasp. "It's photoshopped. It has to be. That judge... he's on my grandfather's payroll."

He immediately called his personal lawyer, a man he kept for DUIs and contract disputes.

"I'm sending you a picture," Connor said, his voice tight and urgent. "I need you to verify it. Now. Find out if it's real."

The ten minutes he waited were the longest of his life. He paced the small room, his heart pounding a frantic, panicked rhythm.

The phone rang. He snatched it up. "Well?"

His lawyer's voice was heavy, funereal. "It's real, Connor. The certificate was filed this morning. It's ironclad. Legally, she is his wife. My advice? Let it go. You're poking a bear you can't afford to fight."

Connor hung up, the lawyer's words echoing in the silent room.

But his mind, a cornered animal, refused to accept defeat. It created a new narrative, a new delusion to cling to.

Anissa had something on Harding.

Of course. That was it. She was blackmailing him. She had to be. He frantically searched his memory, trying to recall anything she might have overheard, any secret she might possess.

And then it hit him. The trust fund. A few months ago, drunk on champagne and his own arrogance, he had bragged to her about a secret vulnerability in the family trust's bylaws, a loophole that could be exploited during a succession crisis. He had been trying to impress her with his insider knowledge.

A wild, feverish excitement seized him. He shot to his feet, a triumphant, manic grin spreading across his face.

"You clever, clever bitch," he said to the empty room.

She had used his own secret against his family. She had forced Harding into this sham marriage to gain power and get her revenge on him.

The thought was strangely comforting. It meant she didn't love Harding. It meant her actions were still, in a twisted way, all about him. Her hate was just the other side of the coin of her love.

He had to see her. He had to confront her, tell her he knew her game. He would tell her he'd give her anything she wanted—the money, the status, the revenge—if she would just come back to him.

He grabbed his jacket and stormed out of the hotel, hailing the first cab he saw.

"Billionaire's Row," he barked at the driver.

But when he arrived at the gleaming tower where Harding lived, the entire building was on lockdown. The lobby, usually open and airy, was now patrolled by a dozen men in black suits with earpieces. They were not the building's usual security. They were Harding's private army.

Alex Stone stepped out to meet him on the sidewalk, his expression even colder than before.

"I warned you, Mr. Snow," Alex said, his voice dangerously low.

"I need to see her!" Connor shouted, trying to push past him.

This time, Alex didn't just block him. He gave a sharp nod, and two of his men grabbed Connor's arms, their grips like iron vices. They physically lifted him and deposited him back on the curb.

Connor struggled, his face red with fury. He screamed Anissa's name up at the impenetrable wall of glass, his voice hoarse and pathetic.

"If you come within a hundred feet of this building again," Alex warned, "the restraining order will be activated, and you will be arrested. This is your final warning."

Thrown back onto the street, his suit disheveled, Connor's mind raced. The front door was a no-go. But he knew another way.

A service entrance. In the back, leading to the underground parking garage. He and Anissa had used it once to sneak in after a late night avoiding the lobby's cameras. But as he circled the block and pressed himself against the cold brick of the alleyway, he saw it. The entrance was no longer a quiet, forgotten door. Two hulking men in black suits stood sentinel, and a brand-new, military-grade iris scanner glowed red beside the reinforced steel. There was no flaw. There was no way in. He was staring at an impenetrable fortress.

He took a step back, his mind racing, when a hand shot out of the darkness and clamped down on his shoulder. It was a grip of pure steel.

A man in a tactical vest and a face devoid of expression stepped out from the shadows. His voice was flat, calm, and utterly final. "This is private property, sir. You need to leave. Now. This is your only warning."