

Chapter 15

The office was a cavern of blinking server lights and humming fans, hidden in a basement in the Meatpacking District. It smelled of stale coffee and burnt electronics.

Connor sat hunched in a chair, watching a man with a spiderweb tattoo on his neck tap furiously at a keyboard. This was his last resort, a high-priced team of black-hat hackers he'd paid with the last of his emergency cash.

His objective was simple: break into the Snow Industries internal servers. Find the digital trail. He needed a single email, a single encrypted text, a single wire transfer that would prove the marriage was a transaction, a blackmail plot.

"We're in," the hacker muttered, his eyes glued to the lines of code scrolling down the screen. "Bypassing the first firewall now."

Connor leaned forward, his hands clenched into fists. This was it. The proof was just moments away.

The progress bar on the screen crept forward. 60%... 70%... 80%...

It stopped.

Then, the screen flickered. A single line of red warning code flashed, stark and ominous.

The hacker's face went pale. "Shit," he breathed. "Shit, we've been traced. It's a honeypot. They're coming back at us."

Before he could finish the sentence, every monitor in the room went black. The sudden darkness was absolute, the silence deafening.

A second later, they all flared back to life in unison, displaying a single, terrifying image.

It was a close-up of Harding Snow's eyes. Cold, gray-blue, and utterly merciless. They seemed to stare directly at Connor, through the screen, through the miles of fiber optic cable, and into his soul.

Beneath the image, a line of text typed itself out, slow and deliberate.

Snow Industries cybersecurity is managed by Jax Valer. Next time you try this, I won't just fry your hard drives.

A primal fear, cold and sharp, pierced through Connor's rage. This wasn't a corporate defense system. This was a personal threat from a digital ghost. This was a level of power he had never even conceived of.

The hackers were already scrambling, ripping cables from the walls, their faces slick with sweat. "Get out," the lead hacker stammered, not even looking at Connor. "The job is off. We're done. Get out!"

Connor found himself back on the midnight street, the cold wind cutting through his thin suit jacket. He was completely and utterly locked out. His money was gone, his home was gone, his name was worthless, and now, even the digital world was a fortress he couldn't breach.

He finally understood. Harding hadn't just married Anissa. He had built an impenetrable wall around her, a fortress forged from the full, terrifying weight of the Snow empire.

And Connor wasn't even allowed to peek over the ramparts.

He started walking, with no destination in mind. His feet carried him through the empty streets of Manhattan, a ghost in a city that had once been his kingdom.

He stopped in front of a darkened storefront. The televisions inside were still on, playing a looped recording of a high-profile charity gala that had taken place earlier that evening.

And there she was.

Anissa.

She was wearing a breathtaking crimson gown, the fabric clinging to her like a second skin. Around her neck was the legendary Snow family ruby necklace, a piece reserved only for the true matriarch. It glittered under the camera lights, red as blood.

She was smiling but it wasn't the soft, compliant smile he knew. This was a smile of confidence, of power. She was radiant, captivating, a queen in her element. He had never seen her look like that. He had never realized she could look like that.

He pressed his hand against the cold glass of the window, his breath fogging the surface. For the first time, a terrifying thought wormed its way into his mind: Maybe she's happy. Maybe she truly doesn't need me.

The thought was so agonizing so destructive to the very foundation of his ego, that he immediately crushed it.

Jealousy, black and venomous, flooded his veins, choking out the despair.

"That's my necklace," he snarled at her reflection, his voice a low, guttural growl. "My woman. My life."

He wouldn't accept this. He couldn't.

If the subtle ways were blocked, he would have to use force. He would go where they had to see him, where they couldn't ignore him.

He knew the family was hosting their annual summer kickoff dinner at the Hampton estate this weekend. A public family affair.

He pulled out his phone, his mind clear and sharp with a new, desperate purpose. He bought a one-way train ticket to the Hamptons.

Then, he sent a text to the one person in the family who hated Anissa's rise as much as he did. His mother, Beatrice.

Mom, I need to be at the dinner on Saturday. You have to get me in.

Her reply was almost instantaneous, a torrent of angry, anxious words.

Of course you're coming! I'm not facing that little gold-digging tramp alone. Your grandfather has lost his mind! We need to do something.

A cold, cruel smile spread across Connor's face. He had an ally. He had a plan.

He leaned his head back against the train seat, the city lights blurring past the window. He closed his eyes, and all he could see was Anissa's face, not the soft, loving one he remembered, but the cold, powerful stranger from the news. The jealousy was a physical thing, a serpent coiling in his gut, poisoning him, but also giving him a terrible strength. He would crash their party. He would take back what was his.