

Chapter 16

Anissa stepped out of the en-suite bathroom, the steam clinging to her skin. She was wearing a simple, silk slip dress, the dark emerald fabric cool against her body. Water dripped from the ends of her dark hair onto her bare shoulders.

Harding was standing by the floor-to-ceiling windows, his back to her. He was on the phone, his voice a low, commanding rumble as he finalized the details of a multi-billion-dollar acquisition in the Asian market. The city lights glittered below him like a fallen constellation.

She moved quietly toward the bed, trying not to disturb him, but the faint rustle of silk made him turn. He ended the call without a goodbye.

His gaze fell on her, and for a fraction of a second, it lingered on the curve of her collarbone, the droplets of water tracing paths down her skin. His throat moved as he swallowed, a small, almost imperceptible motion. Then his eyes flicked away, his professional mask snapping back into place.

He gestured toward a plush armchair. A neatly folded set of gray cashmere loungewear was sitting on it. "You should put those on," he said, his voice a little rougher than usual. "You'll catch a cold."

She sensed a flicker of something in his tone—a tension, a restraint—but she dismissed it as his natural austerity. He was a man who prized control.

She slipped on the soft pants and long-sleeved top. They were warm and impossibly comfortable. She walked to the bed and slid under the cool, high-thread-count sheets, acutely aware of the vast, empty space beside her.

The room was a landscape of unspoken rules and invisible boundaries.

Harding switched off the main lights, leaving only a single, warm lamp glowing on his nightstand. He lay down on his side of the bed, the mattress barely dipping under his weight. He was perfectly still, his body held in a rigid line, a clear foot of empty space separating them.

Anissa turned onto her side, facing away from him. The silence was thick, charged.

"Thank you," she whispered into the darkness.

She felt him shift slightly. "For what?" his voice was a low murmur, seeming to come from right beside her ear.

She turned her head, her cheek pressing into the soft pillow. She could just make out the sharp silhouette of his profile against the city glow. "For the phone call today. For... giving me the space to handle things my own way. With my family."

He was silent for a long moment. Then, she felt the duvet shift. He reached across the divide and gently pulled the blanket up, tucking it securely around her shoulder. His fingers brushed the nape of her neck, a touch so light it was like an electric current.

"It's part of the agreement," he said, his voice softer now. "Your safety. Your peace of mind. There's no pressure here, Anissa. Take all the time you need."

Her heart did a strange, stuttering beat. To be treated with such quiet consideration, such profound respect... it was a foreign language. Connor had only ever demanded. Her family had only ever taken. This gentle giving was unnerving and yet, deeply calming.

She closed her eyes, inhaling the faint, clean scent of cedarwood that clung to him, to the sheets, to the very air in the room. It was the scent of safety.

For the first time in years, she didn't have a single nightmare.

She woke to the soft morning light, feeling warm and deeply rested. She stretched languidly, her hand brushing against something solid and warm.

Her eyes flew open.

Sometime during the night, she had crossed the invisible line. She was curled on her side, her back pressed against Harding's chest. His arm was draped loosely around her waist, his large hand resting on her hip. His breathing was slow and even, deep in sleep.

Heat flooded her cheeks. She was mortified. She tried to inch away, to slip out of his hold without waking him.

It was too late.

His breathing pattern changed. He slowly opened his eyes. For a moment, as he looked down at her nestled against him, his expression was unguarded, soft with a warmth she had never seen before. Then, just as quickly, the mask of cool control slammed back down.

He immediately released her and sat up, running a hand through his already perfect hair.

"My apologies," he said, his voice thick and raspy with sleep. "I'm not used to... sharing a bed."

"No, it was me," she said quickly, sitting up and pulling the duvet to her chin. "I must have... I move around a lot."

They looked at each other, a silent, awkward moment hanging in the air. It wasn't just awkward. It was charged with a new, sweet intimacy.

A polite knock at the bedroom door broke the spell.

"Sir?" It was Eleanor. "Your seven o'clock meeting is confirmed. And Madam, your stylist will be here at nine."

Harding swung his legs out of bed and walked toward the massive closet. When he emerged a few minutes later, he was once again the untouchable emperor of Wall Street, dressed in a flawless bespoke suit.

He walked to her side of the bed. She was still sitting there, her mind replaying the feeling of waking up in his arms.

He stopped, looking down at her. A small, almost imperceptible smile touched his lips.

"There are some people arriving this morning," he said. "People I trust with my life. They're your team now. Your shield."

"Who are they?" she asked, her curiosity piqued.

He simply reached out and gently brushed a stray strand of hair from her forehead. The casual, affectionate gesture sent another jolt through her.

"You'll see," he said, and then he turned and left, the soft click of the door closing behind him echoing in the silent room. She was left alone in the massive bed, the warmth of his touch still tingling on her skin.



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