

Chapter 17

Anissa stood in the center of Harding's vast, book-lined study. She had changed into a sharp, white power suit, the tailored lines giving her an armor of confidence she was only just beginning to feel.

Harding stood beside her. In front of them were three individuals who radiated an aura of quiet, lethal competence.

"Anissa," Harding said, his voice formal. "This is Alex Stone, head of my personal security. Jax Valer, our head of cybersecurity. And Dr. Julian Alcott, my private physician."

He paused, his gaze sweeping over the three of them before settling on her. "They are the three most critical pillars of my life. From this moment on, their primary loyalty is to you."

Alex Stone, the man who had blocked Connor at the tower, stepped forward. He presented her with a sleek, heavy black phone. "This is a military-grade encrypted device, Mrs. Snow. It cannot be tracked or hacked. My personal number is the only one programmed into it. You call, day or night and we will be there. You want a car, a jet, or a small army, you need only ask."

Next, Jax Valer, a man who looked more like a rock star than a tech genius with his dark, intense eyes and casual attire, handed her a slim tablet. "This gives you full administrative access to all your personal and newly acquired assets, liquid and fixed. It also contains a back-door key to the entire Snow Industries internal network. You can see anything, track anyone. You are now the ghost in the machine."

Finally, Dr. Alcott, a kind-faced man in his fifties, offered her a simple, elegant black card. "This is a lifetime membership to The Sanctuary, the most exclusive and advanced private medical network in the world. Your health is our paramount concern. A team is on standby for you, anywhere on the globe, 24/7."

Anissa took the items one by one. The phone was heavy, the tablet cool, the card smooth. They were not just objects. They were keys. They were weapons. They were the tangible proof of a trust so absolute it staggered her. This wasn't a contract anymore. This was an abdication of power, a willing transfer.

Harding watched her, his expression intense. "You are not just Mrs. Snow," he said, his voice low and resonant. "You are the co-commander of this empire. Your command is my command."

She met his gaze, her own reflecting a new, steely resolve. She would not be a liability. She would be his greatest asset.

Just then, an alert buzzed in Alex's earpiece. His professional calm fractured for a second, his jaw tightening.

"Sir," he said, turning to Harding. "We have a situation. Connor Snow is on Fifth Avenue, near the flagship Cartier store. He appears to be waiting, looking for an opportunity."

A dangerous, predatory light flared in Harding's eyes. "Does he need to be... removed?" he asked, his voice dropping to a chilling whisper. He looked at Anissa. "Or would you prefer to take a drive?"

Harding's offer was tempting—to have Connor simply disappear, erased from her life like a bad debt. But Anissa shook her head. Some wounds needed to be cauterized in person. She needed him to see her, to see the woman he had discarded standing beside the man who now owned his world. The humiliation would be a far more satisfying revenge than a quiet disappearance. She needed to be the one to deliver the final, killing blow. Anissa straightened her shoulders, the fabric of her suit feeling like a suit of armor. "Let's go for a drive," she said, her voice cold as ice. "It's time I took out my own trash."

Harding nodded once. "Alex, prepare the motorcade."

Minutes later, a convoy of three black Maybachs slid silently out of the underground garage. Anissa sat in the back of the center car, the tinted, bulletproof windows turning the bustling streets of New York into a silent film.

As the motorcade slowed for a construction bottleneck near the Plaza, a figure burst from the crowded sidewalk. Connor. He must have been stalking the perimeter for hours, waiting for the cars to decelerate. He sprinted into the street, placing himself directly in front of their lead car, forcing it to a halt.

Alex, in the front passenger seat, instantly had his hand on the weapon holstered under his jacket. "All units, hold position. Potential threat," he murmured into his wrist communicator.

Connor spotted her car and ran toward it, his fists pounding against the thick, impenetrable glass.

"Anissa!" he screamed, his voice muffled but his face contorted with rage.

and a strange, pleading desperation. "Anissa, get out of the car! We need to talk! Let me save you!"

She looked at the pathetic creature on the other side of the glass. The man she had once loved, the man who had destroyed her. She felt nothing. Not pain, not sadness. Just a profound, weary disgust.

With a steady hand, she pressed the button to lower the window a few inches.

The sounds of the city, and of his frantic voice, rushed in.

"What do you want, Connor?" she asked, her voice utterly devoid of emotion.

He sagged against the car, relief washing over his face. He thought he had broken through. "Anissa, thank God. I'm here to get you out. I know he's forcing you. I know he's blackmailing you. Just give me a sign. I'll get you away from him. We can run away together."

A laugh, sharp and mocking escaped her lips. "Who, exactly, told you I was being forced?"

He stared at her, confused. "He is! He has to be! Just come with me, Anissa. I'll take care of you. I'll protect you."

Her eyes turned to chips of ice. She leaned forward, her voice a low, cutting whisper that sliced through his delusion.

"I married him because I wanted to, Connor."

She let the words hang in the air for a moment before delivering the final blow.

"And you? You are just something I threw away."

The words hit him like a physical blow. His face crumpled. In a fit of pure, instinctual rage, he reached through the gap in the window, his fingers clawing, trying to grab her.

The window slid shut, blocking him.

At that exact moment, the back door of the Maybach behind them opened.

Harding emerged.

He was wearing a long, black overcoat, his figure silhouetted against the midday sun. He moved with the silent, deadly grace of a panther, every step radiating an aura of absolute, crushing power.

Connor saw him and stumbled back, a flicker of primal fear in his eyes.



But his desperation was stronger. He pointed a shaking finger at Harding.

"You!" he shrieked. "You did this! You stole her from me! You're a monster, a vulture!"

Harding didn't even glance at him. He walked to Anissa's window, bent down slightly, his presence a shield between her and the world.

"Madam," he said, his voice a low, intimate rumble that was only for her. "There appears to be some garbage blocking our path. Shall I have it removed?"

Anissa looked up at him, at the man who was her husband, her protector. A warmth spread through her chest, a feeling so new, so powerful, it almost took her breath away.

She shook her head, a small, dangerous smile playing on her lips.

"Don't dirty your hands," she said. "I'll handle it myself."