

Chapter 18

The car door opened with a soft, expensive click.

Anissa stepped out onto the asphalt of Fifth Avenue. The sound of her high heels hitting the pavement was sharp and definitive. She stood tall, the white of her suit a stark contrast to the black Maybachs and the dark, simmering rage of the two men.

Connor stared at her. The woman in front of him was a stranger. The expensive suit, the cold confidence, the massive sapphire necklace at her throat that he now recognized as a Roy family heirloom he thought was lost—it was all alien. This was not his Anissa.

"Anissa, please," he tried again, his voice cracking as he took a step toward her. "Let's just talk." He reached for her hand.

A low growl rumbled in Harding's chest. Alex and his men moved forward, ready to form a human wall.

Anissa raised a single, elegant hand, and they stopped. This was her battle.

She looked directly into Connor's eyes, her own gaze flat and merciless. "Stop playing the victim, Connor. It's pathetic."

He was stunned by her venom. "I'm trying to help you!" he insisted, his voice rising. "Can't you see that? Stop this act!"

A cold, humorless smile touched her lips. "The act? You mean the part where I'm supposed to be a good little girl who comes running back when you snap your fingers? The part where I should be grateful you're willing to take me back after you publicly humiliated me for a C-list actress?"

"That was a mistake!" he pleaded, his desperation making him clumsy. "Seraphina is just a friend!"

Anissa had heard enough. She was done with his lies, done with this pathetic, circular argument. She turned her head slightly, her eyes meeting Harding's over the roof of the car. There was a silent communication, a flicker of understanding.

Harding moved. He came around the car and stood beside her, his presence a solid, unshakeable wall. He slid his arm around her waist, pulling her against his side in a gesture of clear, indisputable ownership.

He looked at Connor, his eyes like chips of ice.

"Address her correctly," Harding commanded, his voice low and lethal.

Connor stared, bewildered. "What are you talking about?"

Harding's grip on Anissa's waist tightened. His voice dropped, becoming a blade. "By rank. By family protocol. You will address your aunt with the respect she is owed."

Aunt.

The word detonated in Connor's brain. It was the ultimate humiliation. The final, irrevocable confirmation of his demotion. His face flushed a dark, mottled red. He started to tremble, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides.

"You... you old bastard," he finally choked out, lunging forward, his face a mask of pure hatred. "You stole my fiancée! You're a goddamn predator!"

Harding's body tensed, ready to strike. But Anissa was faster. She placed a hand on his chest, stopping him.

She turned her gaze back to the raging Connor, and the smile that spread across her face was terrifying. It was pure, predatory satisfaction.

"It seems," she said, her voice dripping with condescending pity, "that you need to be taught a lesson in manners... nephew."

That final word, "nephew," was the spark that lit the fuse.

Connor lost what little control he had left. With a wild roar, he lunged, not at Harding but at her. His hands reached for her, trying to physically rip her away from his uncle's side.

His fingers had barely brushed the fabric of her sleeve when his world turned upside down.

The moment Connor lunged, a switch flipped in Anissa's mind. A cold, detached part of her took over, a part forged in the brutal self-defense training her past life had forced upon her. It was a muscle memory she thought she had buried, the instinct of a surgeon who knows the precise point of weakness. Her body moved before her mind could even process the fear, executing the counter-move with chilling precision. She didn't try to match his strength; she sidestepped his clumsy lunge, her heart hammering against her ribs. As he stumbled forward, off-balance, she grabbed his outstretched wrist with both hands and used every ounce of his forward momentum to slam his arm down against the razor-sharp edge of the Maybach's door frame. A sickening crack echoed in the air, followed by Connor's scream of agony. Without giving him a second to

recover, she shoved him hard in the chest. He crashed to the pavement, landing hard on one knee, clutching his broken wrist, entirely at her mercy.

Gasps rippled through the crowd of onlookers that had gathered on the sidewalk. They stared, mouths agape, at the impeccably dressed woman who had just effortlessly subdued a man a head taller than her.

Harding watched, his expression unreadable, but a flicker of something hot and appreciative ignited in the depths of his eyes. He made no move to interfere. This was her victory.

Anissa leaned down, her lips close to Connor's ear. Her voice was a venomous whisper.

"This is your last warning. Touch me again, and I will not just break your wrist. I will end you."

She released him with a contemptuous shove, sending him sprawling onto the dirty asphalt.

He lay there, pathetic and broken, staring up at the sharp, cruel point of her designer heel. The eyes that looked down on him were filled with a terrifying mixture of disgust and utter indifference.

Without another glance, Anissa turned and slid back into the cool, quiet sanctuary of the Maybach. Harding followed, closing the door behind them. The partition slid up, sealing them in silence as the car pulled smoothly into traffic. The adrenaline began to fade, leaving a tremor in Anissa's hands. She stared out the window, her own reflection a cold, unfamiliar mask.

Harding didn't speak for a long moment. He simply watched her, his gaze intense. Finally, he broke the silence, his voice a low rumble. "That wrist lock," he said, his tone more curious than accusatory. "Where did you learn it?"

Anissa's fingers tightened on her clutch. She didn't turn to face him, keeping her eyes on the blur of the city. "Self-defense classes," she said, the lie smooth and well-rehearsed. "A woman living in New York has to be careful."

She could feel his skepticism, a palpable force in the small space. He didn't push, but a new, unspoken question now hung in the air between them. The motorcade pulled away from the curb as smoothly as it had arrived, leaving Connor Snow alone in the middle of Fifth Avenue, a piece of human wreckage in the dust.