

Chapter 19

Back in the penthouse, the setting sun painted the sky in shades of orange and bruised purple. Anissa stood in the cavernous walk-in closet, a glass of deep red wine in her hand. The confrontation on Fifth Avenue had left a humming energy under her skin, a mixture of triumph and exhaustion. Tonight was the Snow family's annual summer dinner in the Hamptons—another battlefield, and she needed her armor.

Harding leaned against the doorframe, watching her. He had shed his jacket and tie, and the sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up, revealing his powerful forearms. The question he'd asked in the car still hung between them, unanswered and potent.

He chuckled, a low, dark sound of genuine amusement that seemed to acknowledge her lie without challenging it. "Well," he said. "You're a very fast learner."

He walked into the closet, the space suddenly feeling smaller, more charged. He moved past her and took a gown from the rack. It was a crimson gown, the fabric like liquid fire. The one she had been contemplating, the one that felt like a declaration of war. The color of blood and retribution.

"Wear this one," he said, his voice close to her ear. "It's appropriate for tonight's battlefield."

She took the dress from him, the heavy, soft fabric cool against her fingers. He didn't see her as a victim to be protected. He saw her as a fellow warrior. The realization settled a profound sense of calm in her chest.

When she emerged from the dressing room, she was transformed. The crimson fabric clung to her like a second skin, and her skin seemed to glow against the dark fabric. She looked in the mirror and saw a queen, cold and untouchable.

Harding approached from behind, a familiar velvet box in his hand. He opened it, revealing a magnificent ruby necklace, its stones like frozen drops of blood. He fastened it around her neck himself, his fingers brushing against her skin, sending a shiver down her spine. The air between them grew thick, heavy with unspoken things.

He leaned in, his lips hovering just beside her ear. "Tonight," he whispered, his breath warm against her skin, "no matter what happens, no matter what they say, you remember who you are. You are the matriarch of the Snow family. No one gets to touch you. No one."

She met his eyes in the mirror, their reflections intertwined. She gave a firm, resolute nod.

The drive to the Hamptons was silent, the city lights giving way to the dark, winding roads of Long Island. The Snow family estate was a sprawling beacon of light and power, a fortress on the edge of the dark Atlantic. The driveway was already lined with Bentleys and Rolls-Royces, a testament to the power gathered there tonight.

The moment Anissa stepped out of the car on Harding's arm, a hush fell over the chattering crowd on the grand terrace. Every eye was on them. She could feel the weight of their gazes—a mixture of curiosity, envy, and contempt, all of it held in check by the raw, undisguised fear they had for the man beside her.