

Chapter 20

Standing near the grand entrance was Beatrice Snow, Harding's sister-in-law and Connor's mother. Her face was a mask of polite welcome, but her eyes were cold with a venomous hatred. And lurking in the shadows near a marble pillar was Connor himself. He had changed into a clean suit, but he couldn't hide the dark circles under his eyes or the subtle, professional wrapping around his wrist.

His eyes locked on Anissa, and the look in them was pure poison.

"Anissa, darling," Beatrice cooed, gliding toward them, her smile as sharp as glass. "Welcome to the family. We are all so... surprised to have you."

Anissa smiled back, her own smile just as bright and just as false. The rubies on her neck felt like a warm shield against the woman's icy hostility. "Thank you for the warm welcome, Beatrice. I do hope I can be a more... valuable asset to the family than your son was."

The jab hit its mark. Beatrice's face tightened, her polite facade cracking for a split second before being plastered back into place.

Before she could retort, a commanding voice cut through the tension. "She is not an asset. She is the future."

Aurthur Snow, the family patriarch, was being wheeled toward them by an attendant. The crowd parted before him like the Red Sea. He stopped in front of Anissa, his old, shrewd eyes filled with a surprising warmth. He took her hand in his frail, spotted one.

"You," he declared, his voice ringing with authority, "are the finest matriarch this family has seen in a generation. Let it be known," he said, his gaze sweeping the silent, stunned crowd, "that any disrespect shown to my granddaughter-in-law is a direct insult to me."

The public declaration was a death blow to any plans Beatrice and Connor had for humiliating her. Her position was now unassailable, cemented by the one man whose word was law.

The dinner was a blur of veiled questions and sycophantic praise. Anissa handled it all with a cool, detached grace, with Harding a silent, formidable presence at her side. Every time a distant cousin or a rival CEO tried to probe for weakness, Harding's quiet, unwavering gaze would

shut them down instantly.

Connor watched her from across the vast diningroom, his eyes burning holes in her back. He drank glass after glass of wine, his resentment simmering, his face growing darker with each toast made in Anissa's honor.

Finally, he saw his chance. Harding was pulled into a conversation with a senator. Anissa was momentarily alone at their table. Connor pushed himself to his feet and swayed toward her, his movements unsteady.

Anissa saw him coming. She calmly placed her fork down, dabbed her lips with her napkin and waited.

He loomed over her, his eyes red-rimmed, his breath sour with wine.

"Anissa," he slurred, his voice a low, pleading whisper that was meant only for her but was loud enough for the nearby tables to hear. "How can you be so cruel? After everything? Won't you just give me one more chance?"

She picked up her wine glass, swirling the deep red liquid, the color matching her dress. She looked up at him, her expression one of profound boredom.

"Chances are for people, Connor," she said, her voice clear and cutting in the relative quiet. "Not for discarded trash."

She took a slow, deliberate sip of her wine, her eyes never leaving his.

"But don't look so sad. After all, we're family now. You should be happy for your aunt, shouldn't you?"