

Chapter 21

The dark red wine slid down Anissa's throat, tasting like victory and cold ash.

Connor stared at her, his face draining of color until his skin matched the white linen tablecloth. The words discarded trash seemed to physically strike him. His mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. He took a stumbling step backward, his expensive shoes catching on the edge of the Persian rug.

Before he could muster a response, the heavy, imposing presence of Harding Snow materialized behind Anissa's chair. The air temperature in the room seemed to drop ten degrees. Harding didn't even look at his nephew. He simply placed a large, warm hand on the bare skin of Anissa's shoulder.

"The car is waiting," Harding said, his voice a low rumble that vibrated through her collarbone.

Anissa set her wine glass down with a sharp clink. She didn't spare Connor another glance as she stood up, allowing Harding to guide her out of the dining room.

The drive back to Manhattan was a silent blur of highway lights and heavy exhaustion. By the time they reached the penthouse on Billionaire's Row, the adrenaline that had fueled Anissa all evening completely evaporated, leaving behind a hollow, restless energy.

Harding went straight to his study to take an international call. Anissa wandered the massive, silent apartment. Her bare feet sank into the plush carpets, making no sound.

Without realizing it, her feet carried her down the long, dimly lit corridor that led to the west wing. She stopped.

Right in front of her was the closed oak door.

It was the only room in the penthouse she had been explicitly told never to enter. The wood was dark, heavy, and completely out of place among the modern glass and steel of the rest of the apartment.

Anissa stood there, her chest rising and falling in shallow breaths. Her fingertips hovered just half an inch from the cold metal of the doorknob. The silence in the hallway was absolute.

Click.

A microscopic, electronic mechanical sound echoed from inside the lock.

It was a sound of disengagement. It was as if the room itself was responding to her presence, inviting her in.

Anissa snatched her hand back as if the metal had burned her. Her heart hammered against her ribs.

A rumor she had overheard in her past life, whispered among the high-society wives during a lavish charity gala, suddenly echoed in her mind. Harding Snow has a woman hidden in his past, they had sneered behind their champagne flutes, completely unaware that Anissa was listening. A ghost he can't let go of. The untouchable Matriarch is nothing but a shield. The chilling memory screamed a warning in her head: Don't fall for him.

She stared at her trembling fingers. If she pushed that door open, she would cross a line. She would shatter the fragile, safe equilibrium of their contract. She would see the face of the woman Harding truly loved, the "white moon" he kept locked away in the dark.

She couldn't handle that humiliation. Not tonight.

Anissa forced herself to take three steps back. The fog in her eyes cleared, replaced by a cold, hard rationality. She turned on her heel and walked quickly back to the master bedroom.

Inside the security monitoring room down the hall, Harding sat in the dark. The blue light from the screens illuminated the sharp angles of his face. He watched the feed from the hallway camera, his eyes tracking Anissa's retreating back.

His jaw muscle ticked. The tight line of his shoulders dropped a fraction of an inch. A heavy, suffocating disappointment settled in his chest.

He reached out and pressed a button on the console, turning off the monitor. The room plunged into total darkness.

"Not yet," Harding whispered to the empty room. "It's not time yet."

Back in the master bedroom, Anissa threw herself onto the massive, soft bed. Her pulse was still racing. The image of that oak door was burned into her mind. She needed a distraction. She needed an anchor to the real world.

She grabbed her phone from the nightstand and dialed Morgan's private number.

The phone rang for a long time. She was about to hang up when the line finally clicked open.

"Hello?" Morgan's voice came through the speaker. It was thick, heavy, and laced with a profound exhaustion that made Anissa sit up straight. He sounded like he had a severe cold.

"Morgan? Are you okay?" Anissa asked, her grip tightening on the phone. "You sound terrible. Did something happen?"

A forced, hollow laugh crackled through the receiver. "I'm fine, Nissa. Just... partied a little too hard at the club last night. You know how it is. The champagne was flowing."

He was using his signature playboy tone, but the pitch was completely wrong. It was flat. Dead.

That single, strained laugh triggered a violent physical reaction in Anissa. A cold sweat broke out across her forehead, instantly soaking the collar of her silk pajamas. Her stomach plummeted.

A memory from her past life violently tore through her mind.

New York was buried under a massive blizzard. The television in her tiny, freezing apartment was playing the local news. The ticker at the bottom of the screen flashed in bright red letters: BELL TELECOM FILES FOR BANKRUPTCY.

And then, the anchor's voice, sterile and detached: "Authorities have recovered the body of Morgan Bell, heir to the Bell fortune, who jumped from the Brooklyn Bridge early this morning..."

Anissa's knuckles turned stark white as she gripped the phone. She couldn't breathe. The phantom cold of that blizzard seemed to seep into her bones.

"Morgan," she said, her voice dropping to a fierce, urgent whisper. She sucked in a sharp breath. "Listen to me very carefully. Whatever is happening right now, whatever mess you are in, do not do anything stupid. Do you hear me?"

The line went dead silent. For five agonizing seconds, all she could hear was Morgan's shallow breathing.

"You worry too much, Nissa," he finally whispered. His voice cracked on the last syllable.

The call disconnected.

Anissa stared at the screen, her eyes burning with unshed tears. In her past life, she had been a helpless victim, unable to save herself, let alone the only friend who had ever shown her genuine kindness. She had watched him die, crushed by the ruthless machinery of Wall Street.

But she wasn't that girl anymore. She was the Matriarch of the Snow family. More importantly, she was a woman armed with the exact financial memory of the next decade.

Anissa threw the covers off and jumped out of bed. She walked to the heavy oak desk in the corner of the room. She reached underneath, her fingers finding the hidden latch. A secret compartment dropped open.

She pulled out a matte black laptop with no logos or markings. It was the military-grade device Jax Valer had configured for her.

She flipped it open. The screen glowed an eerie blue in the dark room. She typed in a twenty-character dynamic password.

She didn't need to be a master hacker; she just needed the flawless memory of the future. She opened a secure, encrypted financial terminal that Jax Valer had configured for her, bypassing the need to hack through complex corporate firewalls. She typed in the ticker symbol for Bell Telecom, alongside the specific, obscure codes of three offshore hedge funds she vividly remembered from the news reports of her past life.

The screen populated with dense, real-time trading volumes and price charts. To anyone else, it was just standard market fluctuations and noise. To Anissa, it was a confirmation of her darkest memories. Her heart pounded against her ribs as she stared at the glowing numbers, the phantom cold of the blizzard from her previous life threatening to consume her again. I won't let them win this time, she vowed silently, her jaw clenching. Her eyes darted across the data, cross-referencing the numbers with the timeline etched into her brain. Within two minutes, she found the exact anomaly she was looking for.

Three offshore hedge funds were executing a massive, coordinated short squeeze on Morgan's family company.

It was a vicious, invisible attack. They were dumping synthetic shares into the dark pools, driving the price down artificially, specifically designed to trigger margin calls and completely strangle Bell Telecom's cash flow. It was an execution.

Anissa let out a sharp, cold laugh. Her eyes turned into chips of polar ice.

She was not going to let him jump off that bridge again.

She opened a heavily encrypted communication app on the dark web. She typed in a specific address, reaching out to a financial broker known only as 'C'. This was her hidden asset management channel, a network she had built using the knowledge from her previous life, completely separate from Harding's empire. 

Prepare to mobilize thirty million dollars from the Cayman accounts, Anissa typed. Target: Bell Telecom. We are going to counter-snipe the shorts at the opening bell.

Less than ten seconds later, a reply popped up on the screen.

Received. Your timing is terrifyingly precise. By the way, the European tech stock you pointed to last month has already yielded a nine-figure return. Your funds are ready.

Anissa closed the laptop with a soft click. She stood up and walked to the floor-to-ceiling window. The Manhattan skyline was just beginning to turn a bruised purple with the approaching dawn.

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+120 Points at most

A silent, bloodless war was about to begin and she was holding the trigger.



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