

Chapter 22

The air inside the exclusive Midtown Manhattan club smelled of expensive chalk, stale beer, and desperation. It was ten in the morning.

Anissa walked through the heavy oak doors wearing a low-profile beige trench coat. She bypassed the bar and headed straight for the private billiards room in the back.

She found Morgan standing by the corner pool table. He was holding a cue stick, staring blankly at the green felt. The dark circles under his eyes were so deep they looked like bruises. His skin was a sickly, pale gray.

When he heard her footsteps, Morgan snapped his head up. He instantly forced a wide, reckless grin onto his face.

"Well, look who it is," Morgan said, letting out a sharp whistle. "Mrs. Snow gracing us with her presence. You look stunning today, Nissa."

Anissa didn't smile. She walked right up to him, grabbed the pool cue out of his hand, and tossed it onto the table. It landed with a loud clatter.

"Is Bell Telecom's cash flow broken?" Anissa asked, her voice flat and direct. "Are the creditors calling in the loans?"

Morgan's fake smile froze. A flash of pure, naked panic widened his eyes. He quickly masked it with a scowl of defensive anger.

He took a step back, crossing his arms. "What kind of garbage gossip rags are you reading? Bell is fine. We're restructuring that's all."

Anissa looked at his rigid posture, the way his knuckles turned white as he gripped his own biceps. Her chest ached. She knew exactly what this was. It was the fragile, pathetic pride of the American Old Money class. They would rather drown in secret than ask for a life preserver.

She reached into her designer bag and pulled out a checkbook. She signed her name at the bottom of a blank check, tore it out, and pushed it across the edge of the pool table.

"Take it," Anissa said softly. "Write whatever number you need. I can cover it."

Morgan stared down at the crisp piece of paper. His throat moved as he swallowed hard. For a second, Anissa saw genuine tears shining in his eyes, a mix of overwhelming gratitude and agonizing humiliation.

Slowly, Morgan shook his head. He reached out and pushed the check back toward her.

"Nissa," he said, his voice cracking. "If I sink so low that I have to take a woman's secret stash to bail out my father's mistakes... I might as well just jump off the Empire State Building right now."

The words jump off hit Anissa like a physical blow to the stomach. Her breath caught in her throat. The image of the freezing East River water rushing up to meet him flashed behind her eyes.

She realized instantly that handing him cash was useless. His pride would kill him before he accepted it.

Anissa smoothly picked up the check and slid it back into her bag. Her expression turned to stone.

"Suit yourself," she said coldly, turning her back on him. "Don't come crying to me when the banks lock your doors."

She walked out of the billiards room without looking back. The moment the heavy club doors closed behind her, she pulled out her encrypted phone and shoved an earpiece into her ear.

"Start buying," she commanded her dark web broker. "Absorb every piece of Bell Telecom debt you can find on the secondary market. Do it quietly. I want to be their biggest creditor by sunset."

By two o'clock that afternoon, Anissa was back at the penthouse.

Harding's personal styling team had taken over the massive living room. Racks of haute couture gowns and trays of blinding jewelry were scattered everywhere.

Tonight was the Snow Empire's Global Shareholder Summit Gala, held at the historic Plaza Hotel in the heart of Manhattan. It was a massive, public coronation before the entire financial world, completely different from the private, intimate family dinner they had attended at the Hamptons estate a week ago. Tonight, hundreds of the most powerful people in the country would be there. It was her official coronation before the entire empire.

The head stylist zipped Anissa into a custom, emerald green velvet gown. It was entirely backless, the heavy fabric clinging to every curve of her body before pooling on the floor.

Anissa sat at the vanity as they pinned her dark hair up and secured a pair of heavy diamond chandelier earrings to her lobes.

When she finally stood up and walked out of the dressing area, Harding was sitting on the leather sofa, reviewing a stack of legal documents.

He looked up.

Harding's hands went completely still. His gaze locked onto the expanse of bare, pale skin at her back, tracing the line of her spine up to her long, elegant neck. His throat bobbed. He stared for a full five seconds, the silence in the room growing thick and heavy.

He slowly closed the folder and stood up. He walked toward her, his towering frame casting a shadow over her.

"That dress," Harding murmured, his voice a full octave lower than normal. "It is very fitting for a battlefield."

At six o'clock, they descended to the underground garage and slipped into the back of the armored Maybach.

The drive through the bustling streets of Manhattan was a blur of neon lights and heavy evening traffic. When the car pulled up to the grand entrance of the Plaza Hotel, the sheer scale of the event became visible. Hundreds of luxury cars clogged Fifth Avenue, and paparazzi swarmed the barricades, their camera flashes creating a blinding chaotic storm. Security personnel in black suits swarmed the perimeter, holding back the aggressive press.

The Maybach stopped smoothly at the edge of the red carpet. The moment the door opened, the deafening roar of the city and the frantic shouting of reporters washed over them. The violent autumn wind whipped Anissa's velvet skirt into a frenzy.

Before the biting chill of the city could bite her skin, Harding stepped out of the car and wrapped his heavy wool overcoat around her shoulders. The heat radiating from his body instantly enveloped her. He kept his arm firmly around her waist as they walked toward the grand entrance.

Inside the massive ballroom, the air was thick with expensive perfume and venomous gossip.

Every guest was whispering behind their champagne flutes. The core of the rumors was the same: Connor's discarded, useless fiancée had somehow manipulated her way into the bed of the Emperor of Wall Street.

Standing in the center of the room, surrounded by a circle of sycophantic socialites, was Beatrice Snow. Her face was tight with fury as she muttered curses about Anissa's manipulative witchcraft.

Suddenly, the heavy, double mahogany doors of the ballroom began to open.

The loud chatter in the room died instantly. A suffocating silence fell over the hundreds of guests. Every single head snapped toward the entrance.

Harding Snow stepped into the light. He wore a perfectly tailored black tuxedo that made him look like a god of war.

Resting her hand lightly on his arm was Anissa.

She lifted her chin. Her eyes swept over the crowd with absolute, freezing disdain. The emerald velvet of her gown dragged across the marble floor, cutting a path of power through the room. The bloodbath was about to

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