

## Chapter 23

The moment Anissa and Harding stepped fully into the ballroom, the crowd parted like the Red Sea. People bowed their heads in respectful greetings, but their eyes darted up, filled with naked curiosity and barely concealed malice.

Harding guided her toward the center of the room before stopping. He looked down at her, adjusting his gold-rimmed glasses.

"Aurthur wants to see me in the study regarding the European merger," Harding said, his voice low enough that only she could hear. He leaned in, his lips brushing the shell of her ear. "The floor is yours, Mrs. Snow. Do whatever you please."

He gave her waist a final, reassuring squeeze and walked away, flanked by two bodyguards.

The second Harding disappeared into the crowd, the atmospheric pressure in the room shifted. The fearful respect vanished, replaced by the hungry, predatory stares of the elite. They smelled blood in the water.

Anissa ignored them. She walked gracefully toward the towering crystal champagne pyramid. She picked up a flute, leaned her back against the marble bar, and watched the room with half-lidded eyes.

A few yards away, Sybil Snow, Connor's aunt, was aggressively fanning herself with a lace hand fan. She swayed her hips as she walked right up to Beatrice.

"Well, Beatrice," Sybil said, her voice intentionally loud enough to carry over the music. "It seems you haven't just lost a son to the gutters. You've gained a lovely, penniless commoner for a sister-in-law. How does it feel to be replaced by the help?"

Beatrice's face flushed a violent, ugly shade of purple. The stem of her wine glass groaned under the pressure of her grip. The surrounding women covered their mouths, letting out high-pitched, mocking giggles.

Humiliated and backed into a corner, Beatrice needed a target. Her eyes snapped to Anissa, standing alone by the bar.

Beatrice marched across the floor, her high heels clicking furiously against the marble. She stopped inches from Anissa, her chest heaving.

"You shameless little gold digger," Beatrice hissed, pointing a manicured finger directly at Anissa's face. "You think you've won? You used your filthy, cheap tricks to crawl into Harding's bed and ruin my son's life!"

The string quartet in the corner seemed to fade away. The entire ballroom held its collective breath. Everyone waited for the fragile, former fiancée to burst into tears and run away.

Anissa didn't blink. She didn't even lower her champagne glass. She looked at Beatrice the way one might look at a cockroach on a clean floor.

When Beatrice finally stopped to take a breath, Anissa let out a soft, melodic laugh. The sound cut through the silent room like a razor blade.

"I didn't ruin Connor," Anissa said slowly, her voice perfectly modulated, yet carrying to every corner of the room. "His own pathetic lack of impulse control ruined him. That, and a mother who raised a weak, spineless boy instead of a man."

A collective gasp echoed through the crowd.

Beatrice's eyes bulged. Her entire body began to shake with uncontrollable rage. "What did you say to me? You piece of trash! How dare you speak to me like that!"

Anissa took a step forward. The lazy indifference vanished from her eyes, replaced by a terrifying, lethal sharpness. Her aura exploded, forcing Beatrice to physically stumble backward.

"According to the laws of this family," Anissa said, her voice dropping to a freezing whisper, "I am the Matriarch. I am your superior. You will address me with respect, Beatrice, or you will not address me at all."

Sybil, standing nearby, couldn't resist fanning the flames. She let out a cruel laugh. "Oh, Beatrice! Look at you, getting put in your place by a little girl!"

The mockery snapped the last thread of Beatrice's sanity. With a feral shriek, she raised her right hand high into the air, aiming a vicious slap directly at Anissa's face.

Several women screamed.

The slap never landed.

Anissa's left hand shot up with blinding speed. Her fingers clamped down around Beatrice's wrist like a steel vice. She squeezed hard, digging her thumb into the nerve.

Beatrice let out a sharp cry of pain, her knees buckling slightly.

Anissa leaned in, bringing her lips inches from Beatrice's ear.

A flash of memory, a vicious rumor she'd overheard in her past life, surfaced in Anissa's mind. At the time, she'd dismissed it as bitter gossip. Now, it was the sharpest blade in her arsenal. "If that hand touches my face," Anissa whispered, her voice laced with pure poison, "I guarantee that by tomorrow morning the front page of the Wall Street Journal will

be running a very interesting exposé on a certain Snow family member's offshore accounts in the Cayman Islands. Do you really think your husband's fragile little house of cards can survive an SEC audit?"

Beatrice froze. All the blood instantly drained from her face, leaving her looking like a corpse. Her pupils dilated in absolute terror. That was her husband's deepest, darkest secret. If it got out, they wouldn't just be poor; they would die in federal prison.

Anissa shoved Beatrice's arm away as if she were discarding a dirty rag.

She turned to a passing waiter, picked up a white linen napkin from his tray, and meticulously wiped the fingers that had touched Beatrice.

Anissa threw the napkin onto the floor. She swept her cold gaze over the terrified faces of the surrounding guests.

"From this moment on," Anissa announced, her voice echoing off the vaulted ceiling, "keep your pathetic superiority complexes to yourselves."

The ballroom was dead silent. Sybil's fan had stopped moving.

Beatrice clutched her bruised wrist, her chest heaving in panic. Without saying another word, she turned and practically sprinted toward the exit, pushing blindly through the crowd.

Anissa picked up her champagne flute and drained it in one smooth motion. The first battle was won.