

Chapter 24

The heavy oak doors of the ballroom swung open just as Beatrice fled into the hallway.

Connor stood in the doorway. He had just returned from smoking a cigarette in the gardens. He reeked of cheap tobacco and the half-bottle of bourbon he had consumed in the last hour.

He watched his mother run past him, tears streaming down her face, clutching her wrist. He looked up and saw Anissa standing by the bar, looking like an untouchable goddess in emerald velvet, surrounded by a crowd of stunned, silent guests.

The alcohol in Connor's bloodstream ignited. The crushing humiliation of the past few days, the loss of his money, his status, and now the sight of his mother crying—it all boiled over into pure, unadulterated madness.

His eyes turned bloodshot. He let out a guttural roar and shoved his way through the crowd.

"Get out of my way!" Connor screamed, violently pushing a wealthy socialite aside.

He charged across the marble floor like a wounded bull, heading straight for Anissa. The guests scrambled backward, knocking over chairs in their desperation to get out of his path.

Instantly, two of Harding's elite security guards materialized from the shadows, their movements fluid and decisive. They intercepted Connor before he was ten feet from Anissa, each grabbing an arm and slamming him to a halt. He thrashed like a wild animal, but their grips were like iron manacles.

"Let him go," Anissa said, her voice cutting through the chaos like a whip. The guards froze, looking at her, then back at the struggling Connor, their expressions questioning.

"I said, let him go," she repeated, her tone leaving no room for argument. "Some things need to be settled in the light."

Reluctantly, the guards released his arms. Connor stumbled forward, stopping barely three feet away from her, his chest heaving. He pointed a shaking, sweaty finger at her face.

"What kind of sick voodoo are you using?" he bellowed, spit flying from his lips. "How did you bewitch my uncle? Tell them the truth! Tell them you're blackmailing him!"

Anissa calmly placed her empty champagne flute onto the marble bar. The glass made a sharp clack. She looked at his wrinkled suit, his crooked tie, and the wild, pathetic desperation in his eyes.

"Bewitched him?" Anissa repeated, her voice dripping with mockery. "You pushed me away, Connor. You threw away your own life for a cheap thrill. Don't stand there and play the victim when you're the one holding the knife."

The truth hit Connor's fragile ego like a sledgehammer. He jumped as if she had physically burned him.

"It was a mistake!" he shrieked hysterically, his voice cracking. "You were nothing! You were a pathetic little orphan that nobody wanted! I was the only one who pitied you! I gave you everything!"

The surrounding crowd murmured in disgust. To air such dirty, private laundry in the middle of a high-society gala was the ultimate social suicide.

Anissa's eyes narrowed. The air around her grew dangerously still. She was done playing with this insect.

She turned her back on him, preparing to walk away.

Seeing her dismiss him, Connor's rage mutated into violence. He lunged forward. "Don't you walk away from me, you bitch!" he screamed, reaching out with his large hands to grab the bare skin of her back and the delicate velvet of her dress.

He never made contact.

Sensing the shift in the air behind her, Anissa planted her left foot. She pivoted her entire body, using the momentum of her turn to generate maximum torque through her hips and shoulders.

Her right hand whipped through the air.

SMACK.

The sound of the slap was like a gunshot. It echoed off the crystal chandeliers and bounced against the high ceiling.

Anissa had put every ounce of her strength into the blow. The impact caught Connor flush on his left cheek. The sheer physical force snapped his head violently to the side.

He stumbled sideways, his legs tangling together. He crashed heavily into a tall cocktail table.

The table flipped over. A dozen crystal martini glasses shattered against the marble floor. Connor went down in a heap of broken glass, spilled vodka, and crushed olives. The alcohol soaked instantly into his trousers.

The entire ballroom gasped in unison. The silence that followed was so profound you could hear the ice cubes melting on the floor.

Anissa stood over him. She slowly rubbed her right palm, which was stinging and flushed red from the impact. She looked down at him, her eyes as cold and unforgiving as a Siberian winter.

"That," Anissa commanded, her voice slicing through the dead air, "was to remind you of your place."

Connor lay in the puddle of alcohol, completely stunned. He slowly raised his head, his left cheek already swelling into a massive, angry red welt. His lips trembled, trying to form words that wouldn't come.

"I am the Matriarch of the Snow family," Anissa declared, stepping closer so the tip of her heel was inches from his hand. "I am your Aunt. If you ever try to lay a hand on me again, I will have the security team break both of your legs." 📢

The words Aunt and Matriarch crushed the last remaining fragments of Connor's pride.

The crowd began to whisper frantically. They looked at Anissa with a newfound, terrifying respect. She wasn't just a pretty face; she was a predator.

Connor sat in the broken glass, looking up at the faces of the people who used to worship him. Now, they were looking at him with pure disgust. A cold, suffocating despair wrapped around his throat.

Suddenly, a commotion broke out at the edge of the crowd. The guests scrambled out of the way, practically climbing over each other to clear a path.

A wave of crushing dark energy rolled into the center of the room. The true apex predator had arrived.

For you