

Chapter 25

The crowd parted like the Red Sea before Moses.

Harding Snow strode through the gap, flanked by Alex Stone and four massive men in black tactical suits. The gold rims of Harding's glasses caught the light of the chandeliers, flashing with a deadly, icy glare. The ambient temperature in the room plummeted.

He didn't even glance at Connor, who was still bleeding and shivering in the puddle of vodka.

Harding walked straight to Anissa. He reached out and gently took her right hand—the hand she had just used to strike Connor.

He turned her palm upward. He frowned, his dark eyebrows pulling together as he inspected the angry red skin.

"Does your hand hurt?" Harding asked. His voice was a low, intimate rumble, completely ignoring the hundreds of people watching them. The tone was laced with a dark, possessive tenderness.

The crowd sucked in a collective breath. He wasn't angry that she had caused a scene. He was angry that hitting his nephew had bruised her skin.

Anissa looked up at him, momentarily disarmed by the raw heat in his eyes. She shook her head. "It doesn't hurt. It just feels... dirty."

Harding reached into the breast pocket of his tuxedo. He pulled out a square of pristine white silk. With slow, meticulous movements, he wiped her palm and each of her fingers, as if cleaning away a toxic substance.

When he was finished, he didn't put the handkerchief back. He let it drop from his fingers.

The silk square fluttered down and landed directly on Connor's face.

Connor let out a muffled sound of pure humiliation. He snatched the silk off his face, his hands shaking violently. He looked up, his eyes burning with tears of rage.

"Uncle," Connor choked out, his voice trembling.

Harding finally looked down at him. His eyes were devoid of any human warmth. "You will apologize to your Aunt for your vulgar behavior. Now."

Connor's jaw locked. The veins in his neck bulged. He stared at Anissa's cold face. He would rather swallow broken glass than bow to her. He remained stubbornly silent.

Harding didn't raise his voice. He didn't repeat the demand. He simply turned his head slightly toward his head of security.

"Alex," Harding said softly. "Break his legs and throw him out."

The casual, businesslike tone of the order sent a shockwave of terror through the room.

Two of the massive bodyguards instantly stepped forward. They grabbed Connor by the armpits and hauled him to his feet, ignoring his panicked struggles.

"No! Wait!"

Beatrice burst from the crowd, having run back when she heard the commotion. She threw herself onto the marble floor, landing hard on her knees right at Harding's feet. Her makeup was smeared, her dignity completely gone.

"Please, Harding! Please!" Beatrice sobbed hysterically, clawing at the hem of his trousers. "He's just drunk! He doesn't know what he's doing! Have mercy, he's your own blood!"

Harding looked down at his sister-in-law. His expression was carved from granite. "The Snow family has no use for rabid dogs that cannot control their temper."

Anissa watched the pathetic scene. Her heart felt nothing but the cold, satisfying thrill of absolute vengeance.

Harding flicked his wrist. The bodyguards dragged Connor backward. Connor screamed, his heels dragging across the marble, while Beatrice wailed on the floor. They hauled him out the heavy oak doors, and the heavy thud of the doors closing severed his existence from the room.

The ballroom was as silent as a graveyard. The guests looked at Anissa with a mixture of profound awe and absolute terror.

Harding turned his back to the doors. He reached into the inner pocket of his tuxedo jacket and pulled out a flat, black velvet box.

He pressed the hidden latch. The box popped open.

A collective gasp, louder than any before, ripped through the room.

Resting on the black velvet was a necklace composed of dozens of massive, flawless Burmese pigeon blood rubies, connected by intricate webs of diamonds. It pulsed under the lights like a living bleeding heart.

It was "The Phoenix." The legendary crown jewel of the Snow empire. It had been locked in a vault for thirty years, waiting for a woman powerful enough to bear its weight.

Harding stepped behind Anissa. He gently swept her heavy dark hair over her shoulder, exposing the bare, pale skin of her neck.

He lowered the necklace. The cold, heavy stones settled against her collarbones. Harding fastened the clasp. As he did, the warm pads of his fingers brushed against the sensitive skin of her nape, sending a violent shiver down her spine.

Harding placed both of his large hands on her bare shoulders. He looked out at the sea of terrified, silent faces.

"Anissa Snow is my only wife," Harding's voice boomed, carrying the weight of an absolute decree. "She is the sole, legitimate Matriarch of this family. To look at her is to look at me. To disrespect her is to declare war on me."

For three seconds, nobody moved.

Then, someone started clapping. Within seconds, the entire ballroom erupted into thunderous, desperate applause. They were bowing to their new queen.

Anissa reached up and touched the cold, heavy rubies at her throat. A breathtaking predatory smile curved her lips. She had reached the absolute summit.