

Chapter 26

The chaotic aftermath of the confrontation dissolved into the highly orchestrated rhythm of the formal dinner.

Anissa was guided to the very center of the main table, seated at the right hand of the patriarch's empty chair, with Harding a solid, immovable presence beside her.

The dynamic of the room had violently shifted. The guests who had been whispering insults thirty minutes ago were now lining up to approach the table. They held their wine glasses with trembling hands, their faces stretched into grotesque masks of flattery.

Anissa maintained a flawless, porcelain smile. She took tiny sips of her champagne, her sharp eyes cataloging every fake compliment and forced laugh.

Beside her, Harding was playing the role of the devoted husband with terrifying perfection.

When the main course was served, Harding didn't touch his own food. He picked up his heavy silver knife and fork, reached over, and began cutting Anissa's portion of the Beef Wellington.

"You burned a lot of energy earlier," Harding murmured, his voice a low, intimate hum meant only for her. He placed a perfectly cut piece of beef on her plate. "Eat."

Anissa turned her head. Their eyes locked. To the dozens of people watching them, it looked like a moment of profound, sickeningly sweet romance. Only Anissa knew the dangerous, electric tension vibrating beneath the surface.

Deciding to play the game, Anissa picked up her silver fork. She pierced a small, dark slice of black truffle from her plate.

Instead of eating it, she slowly raised the fork and offered it to Harding's lips.

Harding's eyes darkened instantly. The gray-blue irises seemed to swallow the light. He didn't hesitate. He leaned forward, his gaze fixed intensely on her mouth, and parted his lips.

He took the truffle, his teeth lightly scraping against the metal tines of her fork.

The gesture was so intensely intimate, so saturated with raw sexual tension, that several Wall Street executives sitting across the table

suddenly found their own plates fascinating, awkwardly clearing their throats and looking away.

Just then, Pippa and Sterling Snow—two cousins from a minor branch of the family—approached the table.

Pippa, a notorious social climber, leaned in with a dazzling smile. Her eyes were glued to Anissa's chest.

"Oh, Anissa, darling!" Pippa gushed, clasping her hands together. "That necklace! The Phoenix is absolutely breathtaking on you. It's so much better than letting it gather dust in the vault. It was literally made for you."

Anissa smiled politely, her eyes cold. "Thank you, Pippa. Beautiful things require an owner who knows how to carry their weight."

The subtle warning hit its mark. Pippa blinked rapidly and took a step back.

Sterling, heavily flushed from too much wine, leaned heavily on the back of a chair. He let out a loud, braying laugh.

"God, Connor is such a blind idiot," Sterling slurred, shaking his head. "Throwing away a diamond to pick up a piece of trash. Did you hear? That actress of his, Seraphina? She's already texting half the guys at my country club, looking for a new sugar daddy now that Connor's broke."

A ripple of cruel laughter moved through the nearby tables. Connor was no longer a tragedy; he was a punchline.

Anissa listened to the mockery, her stomach churning slightly. She knew these people. Today they were laughing at Connor. Tomorrow, if she showed a single moment of weakness, they would tear her apart just as gleefully.

She felt a sudden pressure on her left hand, which was resting on her lap.

Harding's large, warm hand enveloped hers beneath the heavy tablecloth. He intertwined their fingers, his grip firm and grounding. His thumb began to slowly, rhythmically stroke the sensitive skin on the back of her hand.

The skin-on-skin contact sent a jolt of electricity straight to her chest. Her breath hitched. She stared straight ahead, trying to decipher if this touch was part of the performance, or something dangerously real.

Before she could pull away, a prominent New York Senator approached the table. He bowed slightly and handed Anissa a thick, gold-embossed card.

"Mrs. Snow," the Senator said smoothly. "My charity foundation is hosting a gala next week. We would be incredibly honored if you would join the board of directors."

Anissa took the card. She replied in flawless, unaccented French, discussing the foundation's recent work in Paris. "My grandmother was



Parisian, and she was quite strict about my education," Anissa added with a polite, measured smile, seamlessly covering her tracks. Anissa effortlessly deployed the elegant backstory, a social armor she had learned to craft in her previous life by observing countless high society women. A fabricated past was often more useful than a real one. The Senator's eyes widened in pleasant surprise.

Harding watched the exchange. His jaw tightened. The possessive beast inside him flared to life. He didn't like the way the Senator was looking at her, and he didn't like sharing her attention.

Harding stood up abruptly, his chair scraping against the marble. He placed a heavy hand on Anissa's waist.

"My wife is exhausted," Harding announced to the table, his tone leaving absolutely no room for argument. "We are retiring for the evening."

The guests immediately scrambled to their feet, bowing and offering a chorus of "Goodnights."

Anissa let Harding lead her away. As they walked toward the exit, she cast one final glance over her shoulder.

The spot where Connor had crashed into the cocktail table was completely spotless. The glass was swept away, the floor mopped dry. It was as if he had never existed. The first phase of her revenge was flawlessly complete.

