

Chapter 27

Before they could leave the hotel, Harding guided Anissa to the private elevator, taking them up to the penthouse level. They walked down a quiet, heavily guarded corridor and stopped before a set of thick mahogany doors.

This was Aurthur Snow's private VIP suite for the evening.

Harding pushed the doors open. The room smelled of old paper, expensive leather, and burning cedar. The patriarch sat in a wingback chair by the roaring fireplace, a crystal glass of aged cognac resting in his liver-spotted hand.

Aurthur waved his hand, dismissing the two silent attendants in the corner. His sharp, ancient eyes immediately locked onto the heavy red stones resting against Anissa's collarbone.

A slow, satisfied nod moved his head. "That stone has slept in the dark for far too long," Aurthur rasped, his voice like grinding stones. "It has finally found a neck strong enough to bear its fire."

Anissa dipped her head in a graceful, measured nod. "Thank you for your trust, Grandfather. I will not let the family down."

Aurthur let out a heavy sigh, taking a slow sip of his cognac. "That spectacle downstairs... Beatrice has failed this family. She raised a fool, and fools are dangerous."

He set his glass down on the side table with a sharp thud. He looked directly at Anissa, his expression hardening into absolute ruthlessness.

"I have made my decision," Aurthur declared. "Connor and his parents are to be relocated to the European branch. Immediately. They are permanently exiled from the New York power center. They will never set foot in this city again."

Anissa's heart gave a fierce, triumphant leap. Exile. It was the ultimate death sentence in the world of high society. Connor was officially erased.

"I will have the aviation team prepare the jet for tomorrow morning," Harding said smoothly, stepping slightly in front of Anissa. "They will be gone before noon."

With the final judgment passed, they bid the old man goodnight.

To avoid the lingering guests and the paparazzi swarming the main foyer, Harding led Anissa toward the secure, private VIP exit at the rear of the hotel.

As they approached the heavy service doors, the sound of harsh, hysterical whispering echoed from the shadows of the loading dock corridor.

Harding stopped, putting a hand out to halt Anissa.

In the dim light of the service corridor, they saw Connor pinned against the cold concrete wall by two of Harding's security guards, waiting for his transport. Standing in front of him, having clearly slipped away from the ballroom to twist the knife, her face twisted into a mask of pure malice, was Sybil.

Sybil was shoving her glowing smartphone screen directly into Connor's bruised, swollen face.

"Look at it!" Sybil hissed venomously. "Look at your precious true love!"

On the screen was a fresh Instagram post. It was Seraphina, wearing a tiny bikini draped over the lap of a famous, billionaire Hollywood producer on a yacht in St. Barts. The caption read: New beginnings with the best.

"She blocked your number the second she heard your accounts were frozen," Sybil laughed, a cruel, grating sound. "You threw away a billion-dollar empire for a cheap escort who couldn't even wait twenty-four hours to replace you. You are a pathetic, homeless dog."

Connor stared at the screen. His eyes widened until the whites showed all the way around. A sound tore from his throat—a wet, ragged, animalistic howl of total despair.

He thrashed violently against the guards, trying to lunge at the phone. One of the guards simply drove a heavy fist directly into Connor's stomach.

Connor collapsed to the floor, curling into a tight ball, gasping and retching dryly.

Standing in the shadows, Anissa watched the man who had destroyed her past life writhe in agony. She felt no pity. She felt no joy. She only felt the cold, hard satisfaction of karma balancing its scales.

Harding stood behind her, his hands casually tucked into his trouser pockets. His eyes were dead, watching his nephew suffer with absolute indifference.

As Connor gasped for air on the carpet, his bloodshot eyes rolled upward. He saw them standing in the shadows.

A fresh wave of manic desperation seized him. He dragged his body forward, his fingers clawing at the carpet, trying to crawl toward Anissa.

"Anissa..." Connor wheezed, spit dripping from his chin. "Help me... please..."

He reached his hand out, his bloody fingers stretching toward the hem of

her emerald dress.

Harding moved with terrifying, lethal speed. His gaze locked onto Connor's trembling, bloodied fingers as they stretched toward the emerald velvet of Anissa's dress. He didn't hesitate. He took one long, calculated stride forward, his towering frame casting a long, dark shadow over the broken man on the floor.

He brought his heavy, polished leather Oxford shoe down, not on Connor's forearm, but directly onto his bandaged, broken hand, pinning it to the cold concrete. He didn't stomp. He simply applied pressure, slowly, deliberately, grinding his heel into the already shattered bones.

A muffled, wet crunch was followed by a choked, agonized scream that was half-swallowed by Connor himself. The pain was clearly immense, but the visible damage was minimal, a private act of torture performed in public.

Sybil gasped, clapping her hands over her mouth, and scurried away down the hall like a frightened rat.

Harding looked down at the weeping broken man beneath his foot. His voice was the sound of a closing coffin.

"That is the last time you will ever speak her name," Harding said softly. "If you ever try to contact her, if you ever look in her direction again... Europe will not be your exile. It will be your graveyard."

Connor stared up into the bottomless, murderous gray eyes of his uncle. The last shred of his delusion shattered. He yanked his broken hand back, curling it against his chest, and buried his face in the carpet, sobbing uncontrollably.

Harding turned away. He placed a protective hand on the small of Anissa's back and guided her out the side door.

The cool night air hit Anissa's face as she slid into the back seat of the waiting armored Maybach. She didn't look back. The heavy door slammed shut, sealing away the noise, the blood, and the ghosts of her past.

The Maybach accelerated smoothly into the darkness, heading for Manhattan. But as the silence of the cabin settled around them, the air grew thick with a new, suffocating tension.