

Chapter 28

The black Maybach tore down Fifth Avenue, leaving the Plaza Hotel behind a silent bullet cutting through the night. Inside the cabin, the only sound was the low, powerful hum of the V12 engine.

The privacy partition was fully raised, locking Anissa and Harding in a dark, intimate bubble completely isolated from the driver and the outside world.

Anissa leaned her head against the cool leather headrest. The adrenaline crash hit her hard. Her muscles ached, and the lingering effects of the champagne made her temples throb.

She reached up, her fingers brushing against the heavy, cold stones of the Phoenix necklace. The rubies felt like a chain around her neck, a constant, physical reminder of the astronomical debt she owed the man sitting next to her.

Harding was staring at a tablet, his face illuminated by the harsh blue light of the screen. He was already back to work, his profile sharp and unreadable.

Anissa took a deep breath, breaking the heavy silence. "Thank you for tonight. Your performance was... flawless."

Harding's finger stopped tapping the screen. He didn't turn his head. "It wasn't a performance. It is the reality of our contract."

His voice was flat, devoid of the heat that had burned in his eyes when he fed her the truffle. The sudden shift in his demeanor sent a cold spike of anxiety through her chest.

When the car finally pulled into the underground garage of the Billionaire's Row tower, the silence between them had frozen solid. They rode the private elevator up to the penthouse without exchanging a single word.

The moment the elevator doors opened, Harding stripped off his tuxedo jacket, loosened his bowtie, and walked straight toward his mahogany-paneled study.

Anissa walked into the master suite. She stood in front of the massive vanity mirror. Her fingers fumbled slightly as she found the intricate clasp of the necklace.

With a soft click, the heavy jewelry came loose. She caught it in her hands, feeling the immense weight of the stones. She carefully laid it

into the black velvet box and snapped the lid shut.

She picked up the box, her heart beating a little faster, and walked down the hall to the study.

The heavy door was cracked open. Harding was standing by the floor-to-ceiling window, a crystal glass of amber whiskey in his hand, staring out at the glittering grid of Manhattan.

Anissa pushed the door open and walked in. She set the velvet box down on the center of his massive desk. The soft thud made Harding turn around.

He looked at the box, then up at her. His thick eyebrows pulled together in a dangerous V.

"What is this?" Harding asked, his voice dangerously quiet.

"The play is over," Anissa said, keeping her voice steady, though her palms were beginning to sweat. "This belongs in your vault. It's too valuable for me to keep. I don't want to overstep the boundaries of our arrangement."

She wanted to be clear. She had used his power for her revenge, but she refused to be a gold digger. She refused to blur the lines of their business deal.

Harding's jaw clenched so hard a muscle popped in his cheek. He set his whiskey glass down on the windowsill. The glass hit the wood with a sharp, violent crack.

He closed the distance between them in three long, predatory strides.

"Overstep?" Harding repeated, his voice dropping an octave, vibrating with suppressed fury. "You think you are returning a borrowed prop?"

Anissa took a step back, but her hips hit the edge of the heavy mahogany desk. She was trapped.

Harding stopped mere inches from her. His towering frame blocked out the light from the room, casting her entirely in his shadow. The heat radiating from his body was suffocating.

"I am a business partner," Anissa argued, her breath coming a little faster as she looked up into his stormy eyes. "I cannot accept the true weight of what that necklace means to your family."

Harding let out a dark, humorless laugh. He reached around her, his arm brushing against her bare waist, and picked up the velvet box from the desk.

He popped it open. The red light of the rubies flashed between them.

He stepped even closer, his chest almost brushing against hers. Anissa's heart hammered frantically against her ribs. She was completely caged between his body and the desk.

He looked down at her, his eyes burning with a fierce, terrifying possessiveness.

"You don't get to decide what you can and cannot accept," Harding whispered harshly, his warm breath fanning across her forehead. "As my wife, wearing this necklace, accepting my protection, and standing by my side... that is your duty."

Anissa swallowed hard. The sheer force of his dominant energy was making her dizzy. She tried to turn her head away to break the intense eye contact.

Harding raised his free hand. He gently but firmly caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger, forcing her to look back up at him.

"Do not ever try to return what is yours to me again," Harding warned, his voice a low, dangerous purr. "Unless you want me to start collecting the debt you owe me in... other ways."

The blatant, sexual threat in his words sent a rush of heat straight to Anissa's core. Her face flushed a deep, burning crimson. She bit her lower lip, completely paralyzed by the heavy, thick tension pulling between them.

Seeing her flushed cheeks, Harding's eyes darkened further. He slowly released her chin. He shoved the velvet box hard against her chest, forcing her to take it.

"Take it to your room and lock it up," he commanded.

Anissa clutched the box to her chest. She ducked under his arm and practically sprinted out of the study.

She leaned her back against the cool wall of the hallway, gasping for air. Her legs felt weak. She realized with terrifying clarity that the man she had married was a beast, and the cage she had built around her heart was beginning to crack.



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