

Chapter 29

Anissa locked the velvet box inside the heavy steel safe hidden behind the mirror in her closet. Her hands were still shaking slightly from the encounter in the study.

She stripped off the heavy velvet gown and stepped into the shower. She turned the water to scalding hot, letting it beat down on her tense muscles, trying to wash away the lingering scent of Harding's cedarwood cologne and the phantom heat of his fingers on her chin.

When she stepped out, she dried off and slipped into a soft, pale silver cotton robe, tying the belt securely around her waist. The heavy fabric provided a comforting barrier against the lingering tension of the evening.

Her throat was parched. The champagne and the adrenaline had left her completely dehydrated.

She walked out of the master suite and padded barefoot down the long, silent hallway toward the kitchen. The penthouse was completely dark, save for the faint, amber glow of the floor-level nightlights. The only sound was the soft, rhythmic hum of the central air conditioning.

Anissa filled a tall crystal glass with ice water from the refrigerator. She took a long drink, the freezing liquid soothing her dry throat.

Holding the half-full glass, she turned and walked back out of the kitchen, her mind still replaying the dangerous, hungry look in Harding's eyes.

She turned the sharp corner of the hallway.

She didn't even see the massive shadow moving toward her until it was too late.

Thud.

Anissa slammed face-first into a wall of solid, unyielding muscle.

She let out a sharp gasp as the glass slipped from her fingers. The ice water splashed violently upward, soaking the front of her robe and splashing across the chest of the man she had just hit.

She stumbled backward, losing her balance.

A thick, powerful arm shot out of the darkness and wrapped tightly around her waist, jerking her forward and saving her from a nasty fall.

Anissa's hands flew up, pressing flat against Harding's chest to steady herself.

Her breath caught in her throat. Harding had clearly just come from his own shower. He was wearing a pair of loose, gray sweatpants and a dark, fitted t-shirt. The cold water she had just spilled clung to the dark fabric, but he didn't seem to care.

The heat radiating from his skin was intense, a stark contrast to the freezing water soaking her robe.

Anissa looked down, flustered by the sudden mess. "I'm so sorry, I didn't see you," she stammered, the shock of the collision leaving her breathless and disoriented.

Harding's arm was still locked around her waist, holding her flush against his body. He looked down at her.

His eyes darted across her surprised expression, his grip on her waist remaining firm as if the sudden proximity had momentarily frozen him in place.

The air in the hallway evaporated.

Anissa felt the muscles in Harding's arm instantly turn to iron. His breathing hitched, becoming ragged and shallow. She could feel the heavy, rapid thud of his heart pounding against her own palms.

She slowly tilted her head up.

Harding's gray-blue eyes were dark, clouded with a sudden, overwhelming emotional intensity that made Anissa's heart race. The guarded wall he usually kept up was entirely gone, replaced by a deep, conflicted yearning that seemed to pull her in.

"Harding..." Anissa whispered, her voice trembling.

He didn't speak. He lowered his head, his face coming inches from hers. She could feel his hot breath ghosting over her lips. The scent of his clean skin and sharp mint toothpaste filled her senses.

Driven by a sudden, overwhelming instinct, Anissa let her eyes flutter shut. She tilted her chin up, her lips parting slightly, waiting for the impact of his mouth.

For one agonizing second, nothing happened.

Then, Harding's entire body went rigid. His jaw locked with a sickening pop.

He ripped his arm away from her waist as if the contact had burned him, his jaw set so tight a muscle pulsed violently in his cheek. He didn't stumble back; he took one deliberate, forceful step away, creating a chasm between them. His breathing was harsh, controlled.

Anissa stumbled slightly, her bare feet slipping on the hardwood floor, her back hitting the hallway wall as her eyes snapped open in shock. A sharp, stinging pain flared in her chest, a sudden rejection that cut deeper than any physical blow. What did I do wrong? her mind screamed, a wave of profound humiliation crashing over her as she stared at the empty space where his warmth had just been.

Harding was already taking three massive steps backward, putting a huge, desperate distance between them. His chest was heaving, his breathing ragged and uneven. He looked at her—and then down at his own trembling hands—with an expression that looked terrifyingly like panic and intense, agonizing self-loathing.

"Go to sleep," Harding ground out, his voice harsh and scraping like sandpaper.

Before she could say a word, he turned on his heel and walked—swiftly, powerfully—down the hallway toward the guest bedroom, his stride radiating a desperate need for distance.

SLAM.

The heavy door shut with a violent force that rattled the picture frames on the wall.

Anissa stood frozen in the dark, shivering violently as the cold air conditioning hit her damp robe.

A crushing wave of humiliation washed over her. Her face burned with shame. She had literally thrown herself at him, closed her eyes for a kiss, and he had pushed her away like she was a disease.

Morgan's voice echoed in her head again. He has a woman in his past... a ghost he can't let go of.

Tears of mortification pricked Anissa's eyes. Of course. He had almost allowed himself to be swept up in the vulnerability of the moment, but his heart had violently rejected her because stepping forward meant letting go of his past. She wasn't the woman in the secret room.

Anissa wrapped her arms around her shivering body. She walked back to the master bedroom, shut the door, and for the first time since she moved in, she turned the deadbolt, locking him out.

