

Chapter 30

At three in the morning the sky above Manhattan split open.

A massive thunderstorm rolled off the Atlantic, hammering the glass windows of the penthouse with violent sheets of rain. Thunder rattled the floorboards, and jagged flashes of lightning illuminated the dark rooms in strobe-like bursts.

Inside the locked master bedroom, Anissa was drowning.

She was tangled in the heavy duvet, her body thrashing violently from side to side. Her skin was slick with cold sweat, her hair plastered to her forehead.

The sound of the freezing rain had dragged her subconscious straight back to the alleyway where she had died.

The snow was piling up over her legs. She couldn't feel her fingers. The cold was a physical blade slicing through her lungs. She tried to scream for help, but her throat was frozen shut. She was dying alone in the dark.

"No... please..." Anissa whimpered in her sleep, her voice a broken, raspy sob. Tears streamed from her tightly shut eyes, soaking the silk pillowcase.

Down the hall, in the guest room, Harding was lying wide awake, staring at the ceiling his body still tight with unresolved tension.

A loud crack of thunder masked the sound at first, but in the silence that followed, he heard it. A high-pitched, desperate cry coming from the master suite.

Harding threw off the covers. He didn't bother with a shirt or shoes. He sprinted down the dark hallway.

He grabbed the handle of the master bedroom door and shoved. It was locked.

Panic, cold and sharp, pierced his chest. He slammed his thumb against the biometric scanner hidden in the doorframe. The system recognized his master override print. The deadbolt clicked open.

Harding burst into the room.

A flash of lightning illuminated the bed. Anissa was curled into a tight fetal position, sobbing hysterically, her fingers clawing at her own throat as if she were suffocating.

Harding's heart physically ached. He crossed the room in two strides, climbed onto the mattress, and pulled her entire trembling body into his arms.

"Anissa. Wake up. You're safe," Harding commanded softly, wrapping his large frame around her, crushing her against his bare chest.

She fought him for a second, her fists weakly hitting his shoulders, still trapped in the nightmare.

Harding buried his face in her damp hair, inhaling deeply. He tightened his grip, rocking her slowly. "I've got you. I'm right here. Nobody is going to hurt you."

The deep, vibrating rumble of his voice and the familiar, grounding scent of cedarwood finally pierced through the terror. Anissa let out a long, shuddering breath. Her rigid muscles collapsed. Acting on pure, exhausted instinct, she buried her face into the crook of his neck and wrapped her arms around his torso, clinging to him like a lifeline.

Harding let out a heavy sigh. He knew he should leave, but he couldn't. He leaned back against the headboard, pulling the duvet over both of them, and let her sleep on his chest.

Hours later, the storm passed. The soft, golden light of dawn crept through the gaps in the curtains.

Anissa slowly drifted awake. She felt incredibly warm.

She blinked her eyes open. The first thing she saw was the smooth, tanned skin of a muscular chest.

But as she shifted her weight, her thigh dragged directly across the hard ridge.

Harding's eyes snapped open.

"I have an emergency board meeting in London," Harding said, his voice completely devoid of emotion, sounding like a machine. "I am leaving immediately. I will be gone for a week."

He walked straight into the en-suite bathroom. A second later, the sound of the shower turning on blasted through the room. It wasn't warm water. She could hear the sharp hiss of the pipes that only happened when the water was turned to freezing cold.



Anissa sat up in the empty bed, pulling the sheets to her chest.

The cold water. The sudden, unannounced trip to another continent.

The tiny spark of hope that had ignited when he held her during the storm was instantly snuffed out. He was so disgusted by her touch, so repulsed by the physical reality of waking up with her, that he had to physically flee the country to get away from her.

Anissa closed her eyes, a bitter, painful lump forming in her throat.