

Chapter 31

The massive kitchen island in the penthouse was made of cold, imported Italian marble. Anissa stood in front of it, staring down at the plate of traditional English breakfast the staff had prepared.

The eggs had congealed. The bacon was stiff. The food was completely, irreversibly cold.

Her chest felt incredibly tight, as if a heavy iron band was wrapped around her ribs, restricting her lungs. Her mind played the morning's events on a brutal, endless loop. She saw the absolute panic in Harding's eyes. She heard the cold, robotic sound of his voice announcing his sudden escape to London. She felt the phantom chill of the freezing shower he had taken just to wash away the feeling of her skin against his.

I have an emergency board meeting in London.

The excuse tasted like ash in her mouth. He had looked at her as if she were a disease.

Anissa sucked in a sharp breath. Her fingernails dug so hard into her palms that the skin broke.

She reached out and grabbed the edge of the expensive porcelain plate. She didn't hesitate. She walked over to the stainless steel sink, turned on the garbage disposal, and scraped the entire meal down the drain.

The machine roared to life, a violent, grinding noise that chewed through the cold food.

As she listened to the mechanical destruction, the heavy, suffocating lump in her throat dissolved. The pathetic, hollow ache of rejection was instantly replaced by a surge of absolute, freezing clarity.

She was Anissa Snow. She had crawled back from the dead. She absolutely refused to spend another second of her second life crying over a man who treated her like a mistake. She had actual lives to save.

Anissa turned on her heel and marched into the master closet.

She stripped off the silver silk slip dress—the same dress that had caused the humiliating disaster in the master bedroom—and threw it violently into the laundry hamper. She didn't want to look at it.

She pulled on a pair of dark, heavy cargo pants and a tight black tank top. She shrugged into a fitted black leather motorcycle jacket, the stiff material acting like physical armor. She laced up a pair of heavy combat boots and pulled her long, dark hair into a severe, tight high ponytail.

She grabbed a black baseball cap, pulling the brim down low over her eyes.

Avoiding the private garage where Harding's dedicated driver was waiting, Anissa slipped out of the penthouse through the discreet service elevator.

An hour later, a faded yellow cab dropped her off on the edge of a decaying industrial street in Brooklyn.

A fine, freezing mist was falling from the gray sky. Anissa popped the collar of her leather jacket. She didn't look around. She walked with purpose down a narrow, trash-littered alleyway, her boots splashing through oily puddles.

At the dead end of the alley stood an abandoned meatpacking plant. Heavy, rusted chains hung over the main loading doors.

Anissa walked straight to a corroded electrical box mounted on the brick wall. She flipped the metal cover open. Inside was a pristine, glowing digital keypad. Her fingers flew across the keys, punching in a complex sixteen-digit alphanumeric code.

A deep, heavy hydraulic hiss echoed from the brick wall. A section of the rusted iron door slid inward, revealing a narrow, pitch-black gap.

Anissa slipped inside.

She walked down a steep, narrow concrete staircase. With every step, the heavy, pulsating bass of electronic music grew louder, vibrating through the soles of her boots. The air grew thick with the smell of expensive Cuban cigars and spilled bourbon.

This was The Crypt. It was the most exclusive black-market intelligence hub in New York, run entirely by ex-intelligence operatives.

Anissa pushed through the soundproof curtain at the bottom of the stairs. She ignored the crowded dance floor and the dangerous-looking men eyeing her from the VIP booths. She walked straight to the darkest corner of the main bar.

The bartender, a massive man with a neck tattoo, didn't ask for her order. He took one look at her face, reached under the mahogany counter, and pressed a hidden red button.

The towering liquor shelf behind the bar split down the middle, sliding

open to reveal a soundproof, dimly lit VIP room.

Anissa walked in. The heavy shelves closed behind her, cutting off the music instantly.

Sitting on a black leather sofa in the center of the room was Caleb Wright. A jagged scar ran through his left eyebrow.

The moment he saw her, Caleb shot to his feet. He bowed his head respectfully. "Boss."

Anissa didn't waste a single breath on pleasantries. She reached into the inner pocket of her leather jacket, pulled out a silver, temperature-controlled metal cylinder, and tossed it onto the glass coffee table.

It landed with a heavy clink.

"That's the custom-synthesized biologic," Anissa said, her voice completely flat. "It's an experimental Swiss treatment. It's enough to suppress your sister's rare autoimmune flare-ups for the next six months."

Caleb stared at the metal tube. His chest heaved. The hardened ex-mercenary's eyes instantly filled with a desperate, raw gratitude. The edges of his eyes turned red. He dropped to one knee right there on the Persian rug.

"Thank you," Caleb choked out.

Anissa held up a gloved hand, stopping him. "It's a transaction, Caleb. Now it's time for you to honor your end."

She walked over to the electronic whiteboard on the wall. She uncapped a marker and wrote a single name in bold, jagged letters: Blaze Jankowski.

Caleb stood up, wiping his jaw. He frowned at the board. "The mechanic? The lunatic who got permanently banned by all four major racing teams for illegal modifications?"

"Yes," Anissa said, her eyes locking onto his. "I need him. I need him to pack his best diagnostic equipment and get to the Thunder Speedway in upstate New York. Immediately."

She pulled back the sleeve of her jacket, checking her heavy steel watch. Her stomach gave a violent, sickening lurch.

"Forrest's qualifying race starts in exactly three hours," Anissa said, her voice dropping to a deadly whisper. He wasn't a Roy by blood. He was an orphan who had grown up in the estate's shadow. Morgan was the only friend who had ever shown her kindness, a confidant in the darkness. But

Forrest... Forrest was the only one in that cold, sprawling estate who had ever taken a punch for her. He wasn't a friend; he was her shield. In her heart, he was the only family she had ever truly known. "Someone is going to try to kill him on that track today."

Caleb's posture instantly shifted from grateful brother to lethal operative. He pulled a heavily encrypted satellite phone from his belt and started dialing. "I'll have him located and secured in ten minutes."

Anissa turned to look at the red digital clock glowing on the wall. The numbers ticked down mercilessly.

A flash of her past life burned behind her eyes—the horrific image of Forrest's red race car exploding into a massive fireball against the concrete wall.

She ground her teeth together, her jaw aching. She had lost everything in her past life. Today, death was going to have to get out of her way.

