

Chapter 32

Caleb lowered the satellite phone. He looked at Anissa, his expression grim.

"He's hiding out in an abandoned auto body shop in Queens," Caleb reported.

"Get the car," Anissa ordered, not wasting a single second. "The armored SUV. Bring it to the back alley."

They moved fast. They bypassed the crowded club entirely, taking a service corridor that led straight into a subterranean parking garage.

Caleb jumped into the driver's seat of a massive, matte-black SUV. Anissa slid into the passenger side. The engine roared, a deep, guttural sound that echoed off the concrete walls. The tires shrieked as Caleb slammed the gas pedal, launching the heavy vehicle up the ramp and out into the freezing Brooklyn rain.

The drive to Queens was a blur of gray skies and frantic windshield wipers.

Anissa leaned her head back against the cold leather headrest. She closed her eyes, trying to steady her breathing.

But the rhythmic thwack-thwack of the wipers against the glass acted like a metronome, hypnotizing her, dragging her consciousness violently backward.

The memory hit her with the physical force of a sledgehammer.

It was raining in her past life, too. She was sitting in the Roy family's massive living room. The television was broadcasting the Thunder Speedway finals live.

She saw Forrest's red and white car approaching the hairpin turn. She saw the exact moment the vehicle stopped responding.

The car didn't turn. It launched forward like a missile, hitting the solid concrete retaining wall at two hundred miles per hour. The sound of the impact was a deafening crunch of metal and fiberglass. A massive ball of orange fire erupted on the screen, sending burning debris raining down on the track.

Anissa's stomach violently convulsed. She remembered watching the paramedics drag Forrest's limp, smoking body from the crushed cockpit. His legs were completely pulverized. His career, his spirit, his entire life—destroyed in a fraction of a second.

And then, the memory shifted to that same night Ashlee had thrown a lavish, champagne-soaked party in the mansion. Anissa remembered standing in the hallway, listening to Ashlee complain to her friends that Forrest's "stupid little accident" had ruined her mood and stolen her spotlight.

Anissa's eyes snapped open.

Her pupils were dilated, the whites of her eyes threaded with angry red veins. She looked down at her hands. Her fingernails had bitten so deeply into her palms that tiny drops of blood were welling up against her skin.

The SUV slammed on its brakes, throwing Anissa forward against the seatbelt.

They were parked in front of a rusted, graffiti-covered rolling garage door in a desolate industrial park in Queens. Caleb honked the horn twice—a specific, rhythmic pattern.

The metal door groaned and slowly rolled upward.

The heavy stench of motor oil, burning rubber, and welding sparks flooded the SUV's cabin. A man walked out of the shadows.

He was covered in dark grease from his elbows to his fingertips. He had wild, unkempt hair and an unlit cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. He let his eyes drag over the armored SUV, letting out a low, mocking whistle.

"Military-grade chassis, civilian shell. Nice hide," Blaze said, his voice raspy from years of inhaling exhaust fumes. "But your tire wear is uneven. You need a four-wheel alignment before you kill someone." His arrogance wasn't directed at their wealth; it was the absolute disdain of a mechanical genius who could spot a flaw from ten yards away.

This was Blaze Jankowski.

Blaze walked up to the passenger window and tapped the glass with a heavy wrench.

"Caleb," Blaze said. "I don't care if you brought a million bucks in cash. I don't touch official league cars anymore. It's a headache I don't need."

Anissa pressed the button. The tinted window rolled down, exposing her to the freezing rain.

She didn't blink. She reached into her jacket, pulled out a crisp, watermarked piece of paper, and slapped it flat against the wet glass of the window frame.

"It's not a million," Anissa said, her voice carrying the absolute, freezing authority of the Snow Matriarch. "It's a five million dollar Swiss bank draft. And it buys three hours of your time."

Blaze's eyes dropped to the paper. He saw the string of zeros. He stopped chewing on his cigarette. He sucked in a sharp breath, his arrogant posture instantly stiffening.

He looked back at Anissa, his eyes narrowing with deep suspicion. "What kind of highly illegal suicide mission are you dragging me into?"

"I need you to inspect a fully regulated, official race car," Anissa said, her gaze drilling into his skull. "I need you to find a fatal modification that is designed to bypass every single piece of official league diagnostic equipment."

The words bypass official equipment hit Blaze like a shot of adrenaline. The greed in his eyes vanished, replaced by the manic, obsessive spark of a technical genius who had just been handed an impossible puzzle.

He didn't say another word. He spun around, marched to his workbench, and grabbed the handle of a massive, black metal tool chest. He dragged it across the concrete and heaved it into the trunk of the SUV.

Blaze ripped open the back door and threw himself onto the leather seat. "Step on it!" he yelled.

Caleb floored the accelerator. The SUV shot onto the northbound highway.

In the backseat, Blaze popped open his chest. It was filled with custom-built micro-endoscopes and non-destructive ultrasonic scanners.

Anissa handed him a tablet. "This is the exact schematic of the Apex team's braking system."

Blaze swiped through the blueprints, his eyes tracking the lines of the hydraulic system, his brow furrowed in concentration. "Standard sabotage—cutting the line, tampering with the fluid—it all leaves a trace the pre-race diagnostics would catch. This is smarter," he muttered, more to himself than to them. He zoomed in on one section. "So if I wanted to kill a driver and make it look like an accident, I'd attack a blind spot in the diagnostic system. Let's see... Aha. Here," Blaze said, tapping a specific junction on the screen. "The brake pump has a pressure sensor blind spot right behind the primary manifold. If someone used a micro-

laser to score the inside wall of this hydraulic line... it would look flawless from the outside."

Anissa's blood ran cold.

"But?" she prompted, her heart hammering.

"But," Blaze said grimly, "the second the driver hits the brakes hard at two hundred miles an hour, the pressure will blow that weakened wall wide open. Total brake failure."

Anissa closed her eyes. The autopsy report of the car from her past life flashed in her mind. Catastrophic brake failure. He was exactly right.

An hour later, the SUV tore off the highway exit. The deafening, high-pitched scream of V12 engines ripped through the air. They had reached the outer perimeter of Thunder Speedway.

The security at the VIP entrance was absolute. Heavily armed guards stood behind a thick metal barricade.

Anissa didn't panic. She pulled out the military-grade, encrypted tablet Harding had given her. She connected a physical cable to the gate's external intercom box.

Her fingers flew across the glass screen. She bypassed the track's civilian firewall in less than thirty seconds, using the Snow Empire's backdoor access codes.

A loud beep echoed from the gate. The red light turned solid green. The heavy metal barricade automatically swung open.

Anissa pulled her baseball cap lower. Like a ghost slipping through a locked door, she led Caleb and Blaze into the heart of the racetrack.

