

Chapter 33

The air inside the pit lane was thick and suffocating. It smelled violently of burning high-octane fuel, melted synthetic rubber, and hot asphalt.

Anissa walked quickly, her combat boots silent against the concrete. She navigated the chaotic maze of mechanics and screaming crew chiefs entirely by memory. She knew exactly where the Apex team's garage was located.

She rounded a stack of fresh tires and stopped.

There it was. Garage number seven.

A massive crowd of sports journalists and sponsors blocked the entrance. Standing in the center of the flashing cameras, leaning casually against the hood of a red and white stock car, was Forrest.

He was wearing his fireproof racing suit, the top half unzipped and tied around his waist. His bright red hair was a messy halo under the harsh garage lights. He was laughing, flashing that bright genuine smile that was the only source of warmth Anissa had ever known in her miserable childhood.

Anissa's throat tightened. Her eyes burned. He was alive. He was standing right there.

She took a step forward, but her boot froze.

Standing just a few feet away from Forrest, holding a cup of lukewarm complimentary coffee and looking desperately for someone important to talk to, was Brendan Roy. His usual smugness was replaced by a tense, hunted look. He was loudly taking credit for the track's recent renovations to a group of sponsors, acting as if he owned the entire VIP section, deliberately trying to steal the media's attention away from the driver he had always treated like dirt. And clinging to Brendan's arm, wearing a Chanel tweed suit that, upon closer inspection, was a season old and slightly frayed at the cuff, was Ashlee. She was looking at the cameras with wide, innocent eyes, making sure she was in every shot.

A wave of pure, acidic disgust washed over Anissa's tongue.

She ignored them. She pushed her way through the outer ring of reporters. She took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the toxic air of the pit lane.

"Forrest!" she shouted.

Her voice wasn't incredibly loud, but it cut through the mechanical roar of the garage like a blade.

Forrest stopped mid-sentence. His head snapped toward the crowd. His eyes scanned the faces until they locked onto the woman in the black leather jacket and baseball cap.

He didn't care about the live television interview. He shoved the microphone out of his face, pushed past his team manager, and sprinted toward her.

"Nissa!"

Forrest grabbed her, wrapping his massive arms around her shoulders, and lifted her completely off the ground. He crushed her against his chest, hugging her so hard her ribs physically ached.

"You finally came to see me, you brat!" Forrest laughed, his voice thick with overwhelming joy.

Anissa buried her face in the heavy, fireproof fabric of his suit. She felt the strong, steady thud of his heart against her cheek. A single, hot tear escaped her eye and soaked into his collar.

"I missed you," she whispered fiercely.

The touching reunion lasted exactly three seconds before the toxic reality of the Roy family intervened.

Brendan's face had turned a dark, ugly shade of red the moment he saw Anissa. He marched through the crowd, his dress shoes clicking angrily on the concrete.

He reached out and grabbed Anissa's wrist, his fingers digging painfully into her skin. He yanked her backward, trying to pull her away from Forrest.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Brendan hissed, his voice trembling with rage. "Haven't you embarrassed this family enough? Get out of front of the cameras!"

He expected her to shrink away. He expected the old Anissa, the girl who would lower her head and apologize for existing.

Anissa's eyes went dead.

She didn't pull back. She stepped into his grip, twisting her wrist sharply against his thumb joint, using the exact leverage technique she had learned in her past life.

Brendan let out a sharp yelp of pain as his grip was instantly broken.

Anissa took a half-step back. She looked at him with absolute, freezing contempt.

"Do not ever touch me," Anissa said, her voice dropping to a lethal frequency.

Brendan stared at his empty hand, completely shocked.

Forrest instantly stepped in front of Anissa, using his broad shoulders to shield her. He glared at Brendan like a territorial tiger.

"Back off, Brendan," Forrest warned, his voice losing all its previous warmth. "She's my guest. You disrespect her in my garage, you deal with me."

Brendan let out a harsh, mocking laugh. He pointed a shaking finger at Anissa. "You're defending her? She's a whore, Forrest! She sold her body to an old man for a black card and ruined our family's reputation!"

The entire pit garage went dead silent. The mechanics stopped turning their wrenches. The reporters stopped talking. The air felt like it had been sucked out of the room.

Smack.

The sound of Anissa's palm hitting Brendan's face was louder than an engine backfiring.

She had stepped around Forrest and delivered a brutal, full-force slap directly to Brendan's left cheek. His head snapped violently to the side. A bright red handprint bloomed instantly on his pale skin.

Brendan staggered backward, holding his face, his eyes wide with absolute, paralyzing shock.

Anissa slowly rubbed her knuckles. She looked directly into the lenses of the surrounding cameras.

"I am the legal Matriarch of the Snow Empire," Anissa announced, her voice echoing off the concrete walls, dripping with absolute authority. "If you ever slander my name again, Brendan, my legal team will bury you so deep in federal court you will never see the sun again."

The reporters gasped. The flashes of their cameras went into a blinding frenzy. Snow Matriarch. The title was a nuclear bomb.

Standing in the background, Ashlee watched Anissa command the room. Her perfectly manicured fingernails dug so hard into her expensive purse that one of them snapped off. She was suffocating with jealousy.

She needed the attention back. Now.

Ashlee suddenly gasped loudly. She clutched her chest, her face contorting into a mask of extreme agony. Her knees buckled, and she swayed heavily to the side.

"Brendan..." Ashlee whimpered weakly.

Brendan, still reeling from the slap, heard the weak cry. His protective instincts overrode his humiliation. He spun around and caught Ashlee just before she hit the floor.

"Ashlee! What's wrong? Are you okay?" Brendan panicked, his face pale.

Anissa looked at Ashlee's fluttering eyelashes and the dramatic heaving of her chest. A cold, cynical smile touched Anissa's lips. It was so pathetic it was almost funny.

She completely dismissed the two of them. She turned her back on her former family and looked at Forrest. The coldness in her eyes vanished, replaced by an intense, terrifying urgency.

"Take me to your car," Anissa commanded. "Right now."

