

Chapter 34

"Wait!"

Brendan's furious shout echoed across the garage. He was kneeling on the concrete, holding a remarkably pale and trembling Ashlee against his chest.

Anissa stopped, but she didn't turn around. She simply tilted her head slightly, offering him a profile carved from ice.

"She's having a panic attack because of you!" Brendan roared, pointing an accusing finger at Anissa's back. "You come in here, you assault me, you terrify your sister! You are going to turn around and apologize to her right now!"

Ashlee buried her face in Brendan's jacket, letting out a soft, pathetic sob. "It's okay, Brendan... she hates me. Let her go."

The classic manipulation tactic made Anissa's stomach churn. She slowly turned around.

She looked at Brendan, her eyes devoid of any human warmth.

"My sister?" Anissa repeated, a dark, humorless laugh escaping her lips. "I don't have a sister. And from the moment you threw me out of that house, I don't have a family."

Brendan scowled, his jaw tight. "You brought that on yourself with your disgusting behavior. You disgraced the Roy name!"

Anissa took three slow, deliberate steps toward him. The sheer force of her presence made Brendan instinctively pull Ashlee closer, as if bracing for another physical blow.

"Disgraced the name?" Anissa whispered, her voice a lethal hiss. "Why don't you ask the fragile little victim in your arms to check her trust fund accounts? Let's see who the real thief in this family is."

The word thief hit Ashlee like a physical bullet.

Her fake panic attack vanished. Her body went completely rigid. The color drained from her face so fast she looked like a corpse. Her eyes darted frantically around the room. That was her darkest secret. How did Anissa know?

Brendan frowned, looking down at Ashlee in confusion. "What is she talking about?"

Anissa didn't give Ashlee a chance to spin a lie. She reached into the inner pocket of her leather jacket and pulled out a folded piece of heavy, watermarked paper.

She walked right up to Brendan and slapped the paper directly against his chest.

"Read it," Anissa commanded.

Brendan instinctively grabbed the paper. He unfolded it. At the top of the page, stamped in bold, terrifying red ink, was the official seal of the Snow Empire's Legal Department.

His eyes scanned the text. His pupils dilated rapidly. The legal jargon was dense, but the core words jumped off the page like fire: Federal Fraud. Forgery. Embezzlement. Grand Larceny.

It was an official notice of a federal lawsuit against the Roy family for stealing Anissa's trust fund.

"From this exact second forward," Anissa declared, her voice ringing with absolute finality, "I, Anissa Snow, sever all ties with the Roy family. I will see you in federal court."

Brendan's hands began to shake. The paper rattled loudly in the quiet garage. He looked from the document to Ashlee's terrified face. For the first time in his life, a crack of genuine doubt appeared in his eyes.

"Ashlee..." Brendan's voice trembled. "Is this true? Did you forge her signature?"

Ashlee burst into violent, hysterical tears. She shook her head frantically, her blonde hair whipping around her face.

"No! No, Brendan, you know me!" Ashlee sobbed, digging her nails into his arm. "She forged this! She's using her new husband's lawyers to frame me because she's jealous! My heart... my heart hurts so much!"

She clutched her chest again, gasping for air with terrifying realism.

Brendan looked at the legal document, then at the weeping, hyperventilating girl in his arms. The lifetime of conditioning and blind favoritism won. He couldn't accept that his perfect little sister was a federal criminal.

He crumpled the Snow legal document into a tight ball and shoved it into his pocket. He scooped Ashlee up into his arms.

"Medic!" Brendan screamed, running toward the back of the garage. "I need a doctor over here!"

Anissa watched him run away, choosing a comfortable lie over a brutal truth. She felt absolutely nothing. The last rotting thread connecting her to that family had just been severed.

Forrest walked up beside her. He watched Brendan disappear into the medical tent, his face twisted in disgust.

"Are you really going to sue them?" Forrest asked quietly.

Anissa turned to him. The ice in her eyes melted instantly. She reached out and gently touched his arm. "They aren't my family, Forrest. Only you are."

Forrest's chest heaved. He reached out and aggressively ruffled her hair, a huge relieved smile breaking across his face. "Whatever you do, kid, I'm in your corner."

"Good," Anissa said, her tone shifting back to absolute seriousness. "Because we have a problem."

She gestured to Blaze, who was already dragging his heavy black tool chest toward the red and white stock car.

Anissa looked up at the massive digital clock hanging from the garage ceiling.

00:45:00

Forty-five minutes until the green flag dropped.

Blaze didn't wait for permission. He threw a mechanic's creeper board onto the concrete, lay flat on his back, and slid directly underneath the heavy chassis of the race car.

Anissa crossed her arms tightly over her chest, her heart beginning to pound a frantic rhythm against her ribs. The real war was just beginning.