

Chapter 36

The roar of forty stock car engines revving simultaneously was a physical force that vibrated deep in Anissa's chest.

She stood behind the thick, soundproof glass of the Thunder Speedway's VIP skybox, looking down at the starting grid. Caleb stood two paces behind her, a silent, lethal shadow.

The skybox was luxurious, filled with catered food and leather sofas, but the air inside was completely toxic.

Sitting on the prime center sofa, holding a crystal flute of champagne, was Brendan. Next to him was Ashlee. Her miraculous recovery from her "heart condition" was complete. She was glowing, her cheeks flushed with excitement as she looked down at the track.

Brendan refused to look at Anissa. He was staring rigidly at the television monitors, still hiding from the reality of the legal document burning a hole in his pocket.

Ashlee, however, couldn't resist. She saw Anissa standing alone by the glass. Like a shark smelling blood, she stood up, smoothed her Chanel skirt, and walked over.

Ashlee stood next to Anissa, looking down at Forrest's red and white car on the grid.

"It's so dangerous out there, isn't it?" Ashlee murmured, her voice dripping with fake concern. She leaned closer, dropping her voice to a venomous whisper meant only for Anissa. "Especially that hairpin turn. I heard the brakes take a terrible beating there. Forrest always pushes so hard... it would be such a shame if something went wrong. Can you imagine? You'd be so devastated, sister."

Anissa's blood froze.

Ashlee's words weren't a guess. They were a gloat. Ashlee knew about the brake line. She might not have cut it herself, but she absolutely knew the hit had been ordered.

A wave of pure, violent rage washed over Anissa. She wanted to wrap her hands around Ashlee's throat and squeeze until her eyes popped out. She rubbed her thumb hard against her index knuckle, suppressing the

urge to commit murder in a VIP box.

Anissa didn't look at her. She kept her eyes on the track.

"You're going to be very disappointed," Anissa said, her voice dropping to a temperature that could freeze nitrogen. "His car is in perfect condition. But you should be worrying about your own brakes, Ashlee. Because you're about to crash."

Ashlee let out a soft, mocking laugh. "Please. Mom hired the best crisis PR firm in Manhattan this morning. That stupid piece of paper you gave Brendan? It's a clerical error. Nobody can prove I forged your signature. I'm untouchable."

To prove her point, Ashlee reached up and touched the heavy diamond necklace resting on her collarbone. It was a cheap replica of Anissa's grandmother's necklace, but Ashlee wore it like a crown.

"Next week is the Manhattan Elite Charity Ball," Ashlee smirked. "I'll be walking the red carpet. And you? You'll be sitting in some hotel room, waiting for your old man to finish using you. You can't even get an invitation."

Anissa slowly turned her head. She looked at Ashlee's smug, triumphant face.

Anissa smiled. It was a terrifying, predatory smile that made the hairs on the back of Ashlee's neck stand up.

Anissa leaned in, her lips hovering inches from Ashlee's ear.

"If you dare show your face at that ball," Anissa whispered, her voice vibrating with dark promise, "I will buy the entire event. I will have the DJ cut the music. And I will project the forensic handwriting analysis of your forgery, along with the bank transfer records of the stolen money, onto the walls of the ballroom in fifty-foot high letters."

Ashlee's breath hitched.

"I will strip you naked in front of every single person you have ever tried to impress," Anissa continued, her tone merciless. "I will make sure you leave that building in police handcuffs."

Absolute, paralyzing terror flooded Ashlee's eyes. She stared at Anissa, realizing with sickening clarity that the woman in front of her wasn't bluffing. Anissa had the Snow Empire's wealth behind her. She could absolutely do it.

Ashlee's hand began to shake violently. The crystal flute tilted.

A splash of cold champagne spilled over the rim, soaking directly into the front of her expensive Chanel jacket.

Down on the track, the green flag dropped.

The deafening roar of the race began. The cars shot forward like bullets.

Anissa turned her attention to the massive television monitor hanging from the ceiling. The camera tracked Forrest's red car as it approached the notorious hairpin turn—the exact spot where he had died in the previous timeline.

Ashlee held her breath, her wet dress forgotten, staring at the screen with desperate, manic hope. Crash. Please crash.

On the screen, Forrest didn't brake early. He drove deep into the corner, waiting until the absolute last millisecond.

He slammed on the brakes. The liquid metal patch held flawlessly.

The car's rear end kicked out. Forrest executed a violently aggressive, perfectly controlled drift, sliding the car within an inch of the concrete wall. He used the momentum to slingshot past the lead car, stealing first place in a move of pure, arrogant brilliance.

The crowd in the grandstands went absolutely insane.

Ashlee's face turned the color of wet cement. Her mouth fell open. The plan had failed. Forrest was alive, and Anissa held her life in her hands.

Anissa looked at the red car pulling away from the pack. A fierce, proud smile lit up her face.

She turned her head slightly, looking at the trembling, champagne-soaked girl beside her.

"Enjoy your last few days of freedom, Ashlee," Anissa said softly. "The countdown has started."

Anissa walked away, leaving Ashlee suffocating in her own terror. She walked to the leather sofa, took a glass of sparkling water from Caleb, and sat down to watch her brother win.

