

Chapter 39

It was 3:00 AM. The freezing mist had turned into a steady, icy rain.

The party was finally over. Forrest had been poured into the back of a team van, snoring loudly, clutching his silver trophy to his chest.

Anissa pulled her leather jacket tight around her body. Caleb walked half a step ahead of her, his eyes scanning the shadows as they exited through the heavy steel doors of the Elysian Club's private back alley.

The armored SUV was idling twenty yards away, its headlights cutting through the rain.

As they stepped into the alley, a dark shape suddenly lunged out from behind a row of industrial dumpsters.

Caleb reacted with terrifying speed.

Before Anissa could even blink, Caleb had shoved her behind him. His right hand blurred. The harsh glare of a streetlamp caught the wicked, serrated edge of a matte-black tactical knife. Caleb dropped into a combat stance, the blade pointed directly at the throat of the attacker.

"Move and you die," Caleb growled, his voice a low, mechanical threat.

The attacker froze, throwing his hands up in the air.

It was Brendan.

He was completely soaked. His expensive suit was ruined, plastered to his shivering body. He had been standing in the freezing rain for three hours, waiting for her. His eyes were bloodshot, his hair plastered to his forehead. He looked manic.

Anissa stepped out from behind Caleb. She placed a hand on his arm, gently pushing the knife down.

"It's fine, Caleb," Anissa said coldly. "He's not a threat. He's just a nuisance."

Brendan lowered his hands, his chest heaving. The arrogant, lecturing older brother was completely gone. He looked broken.

"Anissa," Brendan pleaded, his voice cracking, rain dripping from his chin.

"Please. I just... I need to know. Where did you get that kind of power? Is

it real? Is Harding really letting you do this?"

He was still searching for a loophole, a reason to believe she was faking it.

Anissa stared at him, feeling a profound sense of exhaustion. "You still don't get it, do you? You think I'm playing dress-up."

"If you have that kind of money," Brendan cried out, his voice echoing off the brick walls, "why are you letting us drown? The company is bankrupt! The feds are freezing everything! Dad had a heart attack, he's in the hospital! How can you just watch your family die?"

The words watch your family die triggered a violent physical reaction in Anissa.

The temperature in the alley seemed to drop ten degrees. The air around her turned to ice.

She took a step toward him. Caleb tensed, but stayed back.

"Watch you die?" Anissa whispered. Her voice was so cold it burned. "You ask me why? Because when I was a child, sick and burning with fever in the attic, you were all downstairs at a party. When my future was stolen from me, you all watched. When I was forced to my knees in humiliation, you told me to apologize. The Roy family had a thousand chances to be my family. You chose to be my cage. This isn't revenge, Brendan. This is a debt being collected."

Brendan opened his mouth to speak, to offer some pathetic excuse, but Anissa raised her hand, silencing him instantly.

"I am not your sister," Anissa declared, her voice echoing with the finality of a judge passing a death sentence. "I am your executioner."

She leaned in close, the rain running down her face.

"This is my final warning to you, Brendan. If you, Ashlee, Lorraine, or anyone carrying the Roy name comes within ten feet of me ever again..." Anissa paused, letting the silence stretch. "I won't just sue you. I will have Harding's lawyers bury you in federal prison. You will rot in a concrete box until you forget what the sky looks like."

The threat was absolute. Brendan's knees finally gave out.

He slid down the wet brick wall, collapsing into a puddle of filthy alley water. He covered his face with his hands, letting out a wretched, pathetic sob. He finally realized that the monster destroying his family was the one they had created.

Anissa didn't look back. She turned and walked to the SUV.

Caleb opened the heavy armored door. She climbed inside. Caleb shut the door, cutting off the sound of Brendan's crying and got into the driver's seat.

The SUV accelerated down the alley. The heavy rear tire drove directly through a massive, muddy puddle, violently splashing a wave of filthy water over Brendan's ruined suit.

Anissa sat in the back seat, staring out the tinted window as they drove into the Manhattan night.

She had won. The Roy family was completely, utterly destroyed.

She had thought that completely destroying the Roy family would bring her a profound sense of satisfaction. But as the adrenaline faded, a hollow, aching emptiness bloomed in her chest. The silence left by Harding's absence amplified it a thousand times over. She had let Forrest's team pour her a few too many glasses of champagne, desperately trying to drown out the pathetic realization that she actually cared that he was gone. She looked down at her phone. The screen was black.

No messages. No missed calls.

Harding had been gone for three days. The penthouse was going to be completely empty. The victory tasted like ash.

