

Chapter 41

Anissa pushed her weight against the heavy, gold-handled glass door of the Harry Winston flagship store.

A blast of heavily air-conditioned, floral-scented air hit her face instantly. The interior of the store was silent, insulated from the chaotic noise of Fifth Avenue. The glass display cases glowed with harsh, brilliant white light, refracting off millions of dollars' worth of diamonds.

The moment her stiletto heel clicked against the polished marble floor, the senior sales manager practically sprinted across the room.

He didn't look at her clothes. He looked straight at her face, recognizing her immediately from the heavily circulated society photos. He stopped three feet away and bowed at a perfect ninety-degree angle.

"Mrs. Snow," the manager said, his voice trembling slightly with professional reverence. "It is an absolute honor to have you in our store. Please, come this way."

Clara walked in right behind Anissa. She was swinging the unmarked black shopping bag from her fingertips. She paused, looking over her shoulder through the glass door, a wicked smirk playing on her lips.

Outside on the pavement, half a block down from where Trent and his girlfriend had just been left completely humiliated, Connor Snow was standing frozen.

He had been watching the entire exchange from the shadows of an awning, making sure to stay completely out of sight. He had secretly slipped back into New York on a commercial flight just two days ago, defying Aurthur Snow's initial exile decree, a reckless gamble that cost his mother the last of her hidden assets and put them both on a countdown clock before Harding's security inevitably found them. His return was a secret kept even from his most loyal sycophants, a fact that would have mortified Trent Vance had he spotted him on the street.

His face was flushed a dull, angry red. He had seen the manager bow. His male ego, already bruised and battered from his exile, flared with toxic pride. He gritted his teeth, grabbed Lexi's arm—an aspiring socialite he had recently picked up to stroke his fragile ego—and dragged her through the heavy glass doors right after them.

The manager straightened up. He saw Connor enter.

A microsecond of pure, unfiltered disdain flashed in the manager's eyes. The retail world of the Upper East Side was brutally realistic. Connor was a disgraced exile with frozen accounts. But professional courtesy demanded a response. The manager snapped his fingers, summoning a junior associate from the back.

"Assist this gentleman," the manager ordered coldly, before turning his back entirely on Connor to focus on Anissa.

Lexi didn't notice the insult. She was vibrating with excitement. She practically threw herself against the nearest glass display case.

"Oh my god, Connor," Lexi gasped. She pointed a manicured finger at a thick, blindingly bright diamond collar. "I want this one. It's perfect for the charity gala."

Connor stepped up behind her. He looked down at the tiny white price tag resting on the black velvet.

\$150,000

A cold bead of sweat broke out on the back of Connor's neck. His stomach dropped. His family had cut him off. His personal credit cards were maxed out. He barely had enough liquid cash left to pay his hotel bill.

He reached up, his fingers nervously tugging at the collar of his shirt. He cleared his throat loudly.

"It's too flashy, Lex," Connor lied, trying to sound authoritative. "The design is incredibly tacky. Let's look at something more understated. Maybe some entry-level crushed diamonds."

Lexi's excited smile instantly collapsed. Her face went completely flat.

She looked at the \$150,000 necklace, then looked at Connor's sweating face. She wasn't stupid. She knew exactly what "understated" meant. It meant he was broke. But she desperately needed to hold onto the illusion of being a billionaire's girlfriend. She forced a stiff, painful smile onto her face.

"You're right, baby," Lexi lied through her teeth. "It is a little tacky."

Across the store, Anissa didn't even look at them.

The manager had escorted her into the ultra-exclusive VIP suite in the back. The walls were lined with dark mahogany. Anissa sank into a plush velvet sofa. A waitress immediately placed a crystal flute of vintage

champagne on the glass table in front of her.

"I am not looking for women's jewelry today," Anissa said, her voice calm and flat. "I want to see your highest-grade men's accessories. Cufflinks and watches."

The manager nodded frantically. "Right away, Mrs. Snow."

He disappeared into the vault. Two minutes later, he returned carrying a black velvet tray with both hands. He set it down gently on the glass table.

Resting in the center of the tray was a pair of custom-cut, deep ocean-blue sapphire cufflinks, set in heavy platinum.

Anissa reached out and picked one up. The metal was cold against her skin. The blue stone caught the light. Instantly, an image flashed in her mind. She saw Harding standing in the penthouse wearing a sharp, dark charcoal suit. The blue of the sapphire perfectly matched the cold, calculating depth of his eyes.

Her chest gave a strange, tight flutter. It was exactly what he would wear.

"I'll take them," Anissa said without hesitation. "And add a matching black diamond platinum bracelet of the same tier."

The manager's hands began to shake. "Excellent choices, Madam. The total for both pieces comes to four million, five hundred thousand dollars."

Before the manager could even pull out his tablet, the heavy wooden door of the VIP suite was pushed open.

Connor stood in the doorway. He had abandoned Lexi at the cheap counters. He had seen the tray of sapphires through the glass partition.

"What are you doing, Anissa?" Connor sneered, his voice dripping with ugly mockery. "Buying men's jewelry? Are you planning to pawn it for cash later?"

Anissa didn't move. She didn't even blink.

Connor stepped fully into the room, his chest puffed out. "Don't pretend you have that kind of money. Harding is a businessman. He is never going to give a charity case like you a five-million-dollar allowance. Your card is going to decline, and you are going to embarrass yourself."

Anissa slowly turned her head. She looked at him with absolute, freezing boredom.

She reached into her Hermes bag. She pinched a thick, matte-black piece of metal between her index and middle fingers.

She flicked her wrist.

The Black Centurion card hit the thick glass coffee table with a sharp, heavy clack. The sound echoed loudly in the quiet room.

"Run it," Anissa told the manager, her eyes never leaving Connor's face. "No PIN required."

The manager picked up the heavy metal card with both hands. He slid it into the wireless terminal.

Connor stared at the machine. He held his breath. He waited for the red light. He waited for the machine to reject her.

Beep.

The screen flashed a bright, solid green. The receipt printer instantly buzzed to life. Four and a half million dollars, deducted in a single second.

Connor flinched backward as if he had been physically struck. His shoulder slammed hard into the wooden doorframe. His eyes bulged out of his skull. He grew up in the Snow family. He knew exactly what that specific black card meant. It meant infinite, unrestricted access to the empire's core accounts.

Clara leaned against the back of the velvet sofa. She let out a loud, theatrical sigh.

"Oh, wow," Clara mocked, her voice dripping with venom. "Four and a half million for a little welcome-home gift. And to think your pathetic ex is out there practically drooling on the glass because his credit cards are frozen dust. Tragic."

Out in the main store, Lexi heard every single word. She stared at Connor's pale, humiliated face. A wave of pure, toxic resentment washed over her.

Anissa stood up. She smoothed the front of her white suit. The manager handed her the beautifully wrapped shopping bag, bowing so low his nose almost touched his knees.

Anissa walked toward the door. Connor was blocking her path.

She didn't ask him to move. She stepped right up to him, forcing him to press his back flat against the doorframe to avoid touching her.

As she passed him, Anissa leaned in.



"You aren't even qualified to be his stand-in," Anissa whispered, her voice a lethal, freezing blade.

The words surgically removed Connor's last shred of male dignity. His face turned the color of bruised liver. His entire body began to shake with impotent rage.

Anissa walked out the front doors of the store, the security guards holding the glass open for her. The bright afternoon sun hit her face. She looked down at the Harry Winston bag in her hand. She was going back to the penthouse tonight. It was time to end this ridiculous cold war.