

Chapter 42

The heavy glass doors of Harry Winston shut behind them, cutting off the suffocating tension of the store.

Anissa and Clara walked down the busy sidewalk of Fifth Avenue. The massive, matte-black armored SUV was idling at the corner, its engine a low, vibrating hum.

Before they could reach the vehicle, the sound of frantic, heavy footsteps slapped against the pavement behind them.

"Anissa!"

Connor burst out of the jewelry store. He pushed violently through a group of tourists, ignoring their angry shouts. His eyes were bloodshot. His chest was heaving. He looked like a desperate gambler who had just watched his last chip get swept off the table.

He lunged forward, reaching his good hand out to grab Anissa's shoulder. He never made it.

Caleb stepped out from the blind spot behind the SUV. He moved with terrifying, mechanical speed. Caleb's massive hand clamped down on Connor's shoulder. He twisted his body, using Connor's own momentum against him, and slammed him face-first into the brick wall of the adjacent building.

Connor let out a choked gasp as the air was forced from his lungs. The heavy plaster cast on his broken wrist scraped violently against the rough brick.

"Move a muscle and I break your collarbone," Caleb growled, his voice a low, gravelly threat.

Connor was pinned flat against the wall, but he twisted his neck, his wild eyes locking onto Anissa. He was breathing hard, his mind completely fractured by the reality of her wealth.

"You did that on purpose!" Connor shouted, spit flying from his lips. "You bought that men's jewelry just to rub it in my face! You're trying to make me jealous!"

Anissa stopped walking. She turned around slowly.

She stared at him. Her stomach gave a slow, sickening churn. The sheer magnitude of his delusion was actually difficult to process. He genuinely believed that every move she made, every dollar she spent, was somehow centered around him.

Anissa let out a short, dry laugh. She raised her hand, signaling Caleb to ease his grip just enough so Connor could speak.

Connor took a ragged breath. He straightened his ruined suit jacket, incredibly trying to adopt a posture of superiority while pinned to a wall.

"Listen to me," Connor said, his voice dropping to a desperate, bargaining tone. "If you take those sapphires back right now... if you refund the money and give the cash to me, I can fix my accounts. Do that, and I will seriously consider letting you come back to me."

Clara stood next to Anissa. She opened her mouth, stuck her finger down her throat, and made a loud, aggressive gagging noise.

"Is his brain leaking out of his ears?" Clara asked loudly. "Is it filled with Manhattan sewer water?"

Anissa ignored Clara. She took one step forward. Her white stiletto heel clicked sharply against the asphalt. She looked at Connor with eyes so cold they could freeze boiling water.

"Connor," Anissa said, her voice perfectly level. "Did the doctor who set your wrist forget to scan your brain for severe trauma?"

She reached out with her left hand. The massive, flawless diamond of her wedding ring caught the sunlight, flashing brilliantly in his face. She gently, mockingly patted his cheek. The physical contact was an act of absolute degradation.

"Look at me," Anissa commanded, her voice dropping an octave. "I am the Matriarch of the Snow Empire. According to the family tree, you are required to address me as Auntie."

The word Auntie hit Connor like a baseball bat to the stomach.

It was a brutal, undeniable reminder of his new reality. He wasn't the heir anymore. He was the exiled nephew.

"You don't even have a keycard to the Snow estate anymore," Anissa continued, twisting the knife. "What exactly are you offering me? A life on the run with a man who can't even afford a necklace for his mistress? Are you going to protect me with your broken arm?"

All the blood drained from Connor's face. His lips trembled, but no sound came out.

Just then, Melody came jogging out of the jewelry store. She was carrying three cheap shoppingbags, her highheels clickingfrantically.

She saw Connor pinned to the wall, beingverbally eviscerated by his ex-fiancée. A massive wave of panic hit Melody. Connorwas a hollow shell, but he was the only shell she had. If he completely lost his mind over Anissa, Melody would be back to auditioningfor dog food commercials.

Melody instantly plastered a look of deep concern on her face. She ran up and grabbed Connor's good arm, pulling him away from the wall.

"Come on, baby," Melody cooed, shooting a venomous glare at Anissa. "Let's go. Don't waste your breath on this crazy woman."

Connor felt Melody's hands on him. It made him feel pathetic. He violently yanked his arm out of her grip.

"Get off me!" Connorroared, his face twisting in humiliation.

Melody stumbled backward, her heel catching on a crack in the pavement. She barely caught her balance. Her fingernails dug so hard into her palms that they drew blood. She looked at Connor's back, her eyes narrowing into slits of pure calculation.

Fine, Melody thought to herself. I'm throwing my birth control pills down the toilet tonight. Once I'm pregnant with a Snow baby, the old man will have to pay me off.

Anissa watched the two of them turn on each other like starving rats. It made her skin crawl.

She turned around and reached for the heavy door of the SUV.

"If you ever step into my line of sight again, Connor," Anissa said over her shoulder, "I will tell Harding to break your other hand."

At the sound of Harding's name, Connor flinched violently. Pure, instinctual terror flashed in his eyes. He took a physical step backward.

Clara followed Anissa toward the car. As she turned to follow Anissa, Clara let her heavy leather handbag swing 'accidentally', catching Connor squarely in the ribs.

"Oops," Clara sneered, not bothering to look back.

Connor's face twisted with humiliated rage. The physical impact knocked him back a step, but his bruised ego couldn't take another hit. He reached out and aggressively shoved Clara's shoulder with his good hand. "Watch it, bitch!" he snapped. Clara stumbled backward, her arms flailing wildly to catch her balance. The sudden, violent scuffle caused the unmarked

black paper bag in Clara's hand to slip from her trembling fingers.

The bag fell. It hit the heavy metal cap of a red fire hydrant. The force of the impact against the hydrant's metal cap was too much; the paper bag ripped wide open.

Anissa turned her head just in time to see the bag explode.

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