

Chapter 43

The torn black paper fluttered to the gray pavement.

The contents of the bag spilled out like a detonated bomb. A tiny, practically nonexistent scrap of burgundy lace underwear landed flat on the concrete. A heavy glass bottle of expensive strawberry-flavored personal lubricant rolled loudly across the sidewalk. Three brightly colored, silicone adult toys bounced and scattered across the pavement, coming to a dead stop right in the middle of the pedestrian walkway.

Two businessmen in tailored suits stopped walking. A woman holding a poodle gasped loudly.

Anissa stared at the pavement.

For one full second, her brain completely shut down. All the oxygen vanished from her lungs. A wave of heat so intense it felt like a physical sunburn rushed up her neck and exploded across her cheeks. She was standing in the middle of Fifth Avenue, and her most intimate, humiliating secrets were lying on the dirty ground for the entire city to see.

Connor stared at the scattered items. He blinked once. Twice.

Then, a loud, ugly, barking laugh erupted from his chest.

He pointed his good hand at the pavement, bending over as he laughed hysterically. It was the laugh of a drowning man who had just found a piece of driftwood. He thought he had finally found her weak spot.

"Oh my god!" Connor yelled, his voice carrying over the traffic. "Is this what the great Mrs. Snow buys on Fifth Avenue? Toys?"

He looked at Anissa, his eyes filled with malicious triumph. "Looks like my powerful uncle can't actually satisfy you in bed! You have to buy plastic to do a real man's job!"

Melody stood behind him, covering her mouth with her hand, giggling loudly at the slut-shaming.

Anissa's hands curled into tight fists. Her fingernails dug into her palms. The embarrassment was instantly incinerated by a surge of pure, violent anger.

Before Anissa could even take a breath to speak, Clara moved.

Clara stepped forward in her red trench coat like a gladiator entering an arena. She moved swiftly, using the side of her stiletto-clad foot to block the rolling bottle of lubricant, stopping it dead against the curb.

She pointed a perfectly manicured finger directly at the center of Connor's face.

"What are you laughing at, you pathetic little boy?" Clara shouted, her voice echoing off the buildings.

She gestured aggressively to the items on the ground. "These are top-tier intimacy accessories. They are designed for a real man who actually has the stamina to go for three hours in bed and wants to add some variety!"

Clara looked Connor up and down, her face twisting into a mask of absolute disgust.

"Of course you wouldn't understand," Clara sneered, her voice dripping with lethal volume. "A three-minute quickie like you doesn't need accessories. You barely have enough time to take your pants off before you're crying and apologizing! You only need your left hand!"

The phrase three-minute quickie rang out crystal clear over the noise of the street.

The two businessmen standing nearby burst into loud, uncontrollable laughter. The woman with the poodle snickered, trying to hide her smile behind her hand.

Connor's hysterical laughter died instantly in his throat.

The malicious triumph vanished from his face, replaced by a look of absolute, soul-crushing horror. He looked around at the laughing strangers. He had tried to shame Anissa, and Clara had just publicly castrated him in the middle of Manhattan.

Melody stopped giggling. She looked at Connor, her eyes widening slightly as she mentally calculated the truth of Clara's words. Connor saw her look. It was the final nail in the coffin.

Anissa didn't say a word. The anger drained out of her, replaced by cold efficiency.

She bent down, moving with slow, deliberate grace. She picked up the burgundy lace and the silicone toys, her face a mask of absolute indifference, and shoved them back into the torn paper bag.

She stood up and looked at Connor.

"Connor," Anissa said, her voice quiet but carrying the weight of an anvil.

"Only an incompetent man views a woman's needs as shameful. Harding's power is something you will never comprehend in this lifetime."

It was the ultimate dismissal. She was defending Harding's masculinity while simultaneously erasing Connor's.

Connor lost his mind. The humiliation broke his final thread of sanity. He let out a feral scream, raised his good fist, and lunged forward, trying to punch Clara in the face.

Caleb didn't even draw a weapon.

He stepped forward, planted his left foot, and delivered a brutal, perfectly executed front kick directly into the center of Connor's stomach.

The physical impact sounded like a baseball bat hitting a sack of wet meat.

Connor's feet actually left the ground. He flew backward through the air and crashed heavily into a deep, filthy puddle of stagnant street water near the curb. Mud and dirty water splashed over his face and ruined suit.

He curled into a tight fetal position, clutching his stomach, gasping desperately for air.

"Twitch," Caleb warned, his voice dead flat, "and I break your spine."

Anissa didn't look at Connor again. She grabbed Clara's arm, pulled her into the back of the armored SUV, and slammed the heavy door shut.

The vehicle accelerated smoothly into the traffic. Through the tinted glass, Anissa saw Melody standing on the sidewalk, looking down at Connor in the puddle with absolute disgust, making no move to help him.

Inside the quiet cabin, Anissa threw the torn black bag onto the leather seat next to her. She pressed her fingers against her temples. Her head was pounding.

Clara bit her lower lip, looking slightly guilty. "Sorry about the drop, babe. But watching you defend your husband's honor? Absolutely badass."

Anissa closed her eyes. She just wanted to go home. She prayed that giving Harding the cufflinks tonight would go smoothly, without any more disasters.

