

Chapter 44

The private elevator doors slid open with a soft chime, depositing Anissa directly into the foyer of the penthouse.

It was early evening. The massive apartment was dead silent. The only light came from the floor-to-ceiling windows, casting long, orange shadows across the Italian marble floors.

Anissa stepped out. She was holding the pristine Harry Winston shopping bag in one hand, and the crumpled, torn black paper bag hidden under her white suit jacket in the other.

She looked around nervously. She didn't want Eleanor, the housekeeper, to see the adult toys. She quickly opened a discreet, dark wood storage cabinet built into the entryway wall and shoved the torn black bag onto the bottom shelf, pushing it out of sight.

She took a deep breath, smoothing her jacket, and walked into the main living room.

Harding was standing by the glass wall.

He was facing the Manhattan skyline, holding a heavy crystal glass of amber whiskey. He was wearing a dark charcoal, custom-tailored suit, but the jacket was unbuttoned, and his silk tie had been pulled loose. His broad shoulders looked tense, carrying the physical exhaustion of a transatlantic flight.

Hearing her heels click on the marble, Harding turned around.

The moment his eyes locked onto Anissa, the sharp line of his jaw instantly clenched. The muscle feathered under his skin.

They stood fifteen feet apart. The air in the room instantly thickened, heavy with the weight of three days of absolute silence, suffocating pride, and a desperate, unacknowledged physical craving.

Harding lowered his whiskey glass. His voice was rough, scraping against the silence like sandpaper.

"You went out."

It wasn't a question. It was an observation of her flawless white suit and perfect makeup.

Anissa swallowed the hard lump of pride in her throat. She took a deep, steadying breath, forcing down the lingering sting of Trent Vance's malicious provocations from the past three days. The dark insecurities that had gnawed at her during Harding's silence threatened to choke her right now, but she aggressively pushed them aside. Regardless of the rumors or the fear, Harding was her only true ally. He was the family she had chosen. This ridiculous suffocating cold war had to end tonight, and she would be the one to break the ice. She wasn't going to fight.

She walked forward, closing the physical distance between them until she was standing only three feet away.

She held out the dark blue velvet Harry Winston box.

"I was on Fifth Avenue," Anissa said, keeping her voice soft. "I saw these. I thought they would suit you. Consider it... a welcome home gift."

The words welcome home hit Harding physically. His chest expanded as he sucked in a sharp breath. He stared at the velvet box in her hand as if it were a loaded gun.

He slowly reached out. As his large fingers took the box, his knuckles intentionally brushed against the sensitive skin of her wrist.

A jolt of pure electricity shot up Anissa's arm. She suppressed a shiver.

Harding popped the lid open with his thumb. The deep ocean-blue sapphires caught the dim light of the room. The cold, defensive wall behind his eyes instantly shattered, replaced by a dark, overwhelming wave of heat.

He set his whiskey glass down on a side table.

"Put them on me," Harding said. His voice was a low, vibrating command. "Please."

Anissa's heart slammed against her ribs. It was an incredibly intimate request. She nodded slowly.

Harding shrugged off his charcoal suit jacket, tossing it carelessly onto the white leather sofa. He stood in front of her in his crisp white dress shirt. The fabric pulled tight across the heavy muscles of his chest.

He took a half-step forward. The physical distance between them vanished.

Anissa was instantly enveloped in his scent—a sharp, intoxicating mix of cold cedarwood and dark tobacco. She looked down, her fingers trembling slightly as she reached for his left wrist.

She unbuttoned the cuff of his shirt. Her fingertips brushed against the hot, pulse-pounding skin of his inner wrist. His skin was burning. She carefully threaded the heavy platinum post of the sapphire through the buttonholes, snapping it securely into place.

Harding didn't look at his wrist. He was looking down at the top of her head, tracking the rapid rise and fall of her chest. His Adam's apple bobbed sharply as he swallowed.

Anissa moved to his right wrist. As she secured the second sapphire, she looked up.

Her eyes crashed directly into his. They were inches apart. She could feel the heat of his breath brushing against her forehead.

Harding didn't step back.

"I was in London for three days," Harding whispered, his voice incredibly thick. "And I couldn't focus on a single goddamn number. I thought about you the entire time."

The brutal honesty of his confession cracked Anissa's heart wide open. All the anger, all the feelings of rejection, evaporated instantly.

Her eyes burned. She reached into the box and pulled out the matching black diamond bracelet.

Harding saw it. He immediately held out his wrist, offering it to her, surrendering completely to her touch.

Anissa wrapped the cold platinum chain around his hot skin and clicked the clasp shut. It felt like locking a physical tether between them.

Harding turned his hand over. He laced his long fingers through hers. His rough thumb slowly, deliberately stroked the back of her hand. The friction sent a wave of heat straight to her core.

"Thank you for the gift," Harding murmured, leaning his face down until his lips were hovering a fraction of an inch above hers. "But I need you to stop acting like a guest in this house."

Anissa's breath hitched. She tilted her chin up, her eyelids fluttering shut, waiting for the impact of his mouth.

"Master Harding?"

The sharp, polite voice of Eleanor the housekeeper echoed from the hallway. "Dinner is served in the dining room."

Anissa and Harding jumped apart as if they had been struck by lightning.

Harding cursed under his breath, dragging a hand through his dark hair. Anissa turned her face away, her cheeks burning with intense heat. But as she walked toward the dining room, a small, genuine smile touched her lips. The ice was finally broken.



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