

Chapter 45

The dinner was quiet, but the heavy, suffocating tension from the past seven days was gone. It was replaced by a thick, magnetic pull that made Anissa hyper-aware of every time Harding's knee brushed against hers under the table.

After dessert, Harding stood up. He checked his watch, his jaw tightening slightly.

"I have to review the London acquisition files," Harding said, his voice carrying a trace of reluctance. "I'll be in the study for an hour."

Anissa nodded. "I'm going to take a shower."

Harding walked down the hall and closed the heavy oak door of his study.

Anissa walked to the master bedroom. She stripped off her white suit and slipped into a pair of loose, emerald-green silk pajamas and soft-soled slippers.

She walked back out to the foyer. The apartment was quiet. She opened the dark wood cabinet and pulled out the torn black paper bag she had hidden earlier. The paper was barely holding together.

She cradled the bag carefully against her chest. She needed to get this radioactive garbage up to her bedroom closet and bury it in the trash before anyone saw it.

She walked toward the grand spiral staircase that connected the main floor to the upper bedrooms. The stairs were made of polished hardwood, covered by a thick, expensive wool runner.

Anissa started climbing. She was halfway up the stairs, her mind completely focused on balancing the torn bag.

Click.

The heavy oak door of the study swung open. Harding stepped out into the hallway, holding a file folder, looking directly at the staircase.

Anissa froze, her heart leaping into her throat. She instinctively tried to shove the incriminating bag behind her back before he could get a clear look at it. Just as she turned, Harding's voice cut through the silence,

"Anissa?"

The unexpected sound made her flinch, her grip faltering for a fraction of a second. It was enough. The black bag slipped from her grasp.

Gravity took over. The torn paper completely disintegrated in mid-air.

The contents spilled out in a horrific, slow-motion cascade. A bright pink silicone vibrator hit the wooden step with a loud thwack and bounced downward. A glass bottle of strawberry lube rolled end-over-end, thumping heavily down the stairs.

The bottle hit the marble floor at the bottom of the stairs and rolled to a dead stop right against the toe of Harding's black leather shoe.

A second later, the scrap of burgundy lace underwear floated down like a parachute and landed directly on top of his shoe.

The penthouse fell into a silence so absolute it felt like a vacuum.

Anissa clung to the banister. Her knuckles were white. The blood drained entirely from her face, only to rush back a second later in a wave of burning catastrophic humiliation. She couldn't breathe. Her lungs refused to work. She wished the floor would open up and swallow her whole.

At the bottom of the stairs, Harding stood perfectly still.

He looked down at his shoe. He looked at the burgundy lace. He looked at the bottle of lube. He looked at the pink silicone toy resting on the third step.

His face went completely blank. The warmth that had been in his eyes during dinner vanished, replaced by a dark, terrifying storm.

Harding slowly bent down. He pinched the burgundy lace between his index finger and thumb and lifted it into the air.

He tilted his head back, his piercing eyes locking onto Anissa, who was trembling on the stairs.

"Harding..." Anissa stammered, her voice cracking. "Listen to me... that's not... Clara gave me that as a joke..."

The panic in her voice made it sound exactly like a desperate lie.

Anissa watched his face closely, her heart hammering against her ribs. She saw the exact moment his expression shifted from shock to a dark, agonizing realization. His jaw clenched so hard the muscle feathered under his taut skin. It wasn't just anger in his eyes; it was a profound, twisted pain. She could almost see the chaotic gears turning behind his dark gaze—his deep-seated insecurities amplified by three days of sexual

frustration and his own perceived failure to be there for her, colliding into the most logical, agonizing conclusion. He looked at the items as if they were a physical manifestation of his own inadequacy. She realized with a sickening jolt that he thought she had gone out and bought these things because she was desperate for physical release, and he was too broken to give it to her.

A violent surge of pure, irrational jealousy and wounded male pride exploded in his chest.

His grip on the lace tightened until his knuckles turned white.

"You need these so badly?" Harding asked. His voice wasn't loud, but it was laced with a cold, vicious anger that made Anissa flinch.

Anissa shook her head frantically, tears welling up in her eyes. "No! I didn't buy them! I swear!"

Harding didn't listen. He looked at the silicone toy on the stairs. It felt like a physical mockery of his masculinity.

He threw the lace underwear onto the stairs.

"If you find plastic more satisfying than your husband," Harding said, his voice dripping with cruel, freezing contempt, "then you can sleep with them tonight."

He turned on his heel, walked straight to the guest bedroom down the hall, and slammed the door shut behind him. The sound echoed like a gunshot.

Anissa collapsed onto the stairs. She pulled her knees to her chest, burying her face in her hands. The tears finally spilled over, hot and bitter against her skin. She had completely ruined everything.

