

Chapter 46

The digital clock on the nightstand glowed a harsh red: 1:15 AM.

Anissa lay flat on her back in the massive master bed. The sheets were cold. She stared at the dark ceiling, her chest aching with a hollow, rhythmic pain. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the look of absolute disgust and betrayal on Harding's face.

She threw the heavy duvet off her body. She sat up, her bare feet hitting the cold hardwood floor.

She couldn't do this. She refused to let a stupid, humiliating misunderstanding destroy the only real connection she had in this life.

Anissa didn't bother putting on a robe. She walked out of the master bedroom, the silk of her pajamas whispering against her legs. She walked down the dark hallway and stopped in front of the guest room door.

She took a deep breath, wrapped her fingers around the cold metal handle, and pushed.

It wasn't locked. The door swung open silently.

The guest room was pitch black, save for a thin sliver of moonlight slicing through the gap in the heavy curtains.

Harding was not asleep. He was sitting up in the center of the bed, his back resting against the headboard. He was wearing dark sweatpants, his chest bare. In his right hand, he held an unlit cigar, rolling it rhythmically between his fingers.

His head snapped toward the door. His eyes caught the moonlight, flashing like a predator in the dark.

"What are you doing here?" Harding demanded, his voice a low, hostile rumble.

Anissa stepped into the room. The cold floor chilled her bare feet, but she didn't stop until she was standing right next to the mattress.

"I came to explain the bag," Anissa said, her voice shaking slightly but holding firm.

Harding let out a harsh, bitter laugh. "Explain what? Which speed setting

you prefer?"

The crude insult hit Anissa like a slap. Her sadness instantly evaporated, replaced by a flash of hot, defensive anger.

She slammed her hands down onto the edge of the mattress, leaning over him.

"Are you an idiot, Harding?" Anissa hissed, her voice a furious whisper. "I told you, Clara bought them! She forced them on me!"

Harding stopped rolling the cigar. His body went completely still. "Why would she do that?"

Anissa's face burned in the dark. The sheer humiliation of the truth made her want to die, but she forced the words out of her throat.

"Because you ignored me for seven days!" Anissa cried out, her voice cracking with raw emotion. "Because you ran away to London like I was a disease! Clara thought... she thought you had lost interest in me. She told me to wear that stupid lace to seduce you, so you would stop hiding from me!"

The words hung in the dark room like a suspended explosive.

Snap.

The thick cigar in Harding's hand broke cleanly in half.

He dropped the pieces onto the nightstand. He shifted his weight, the mattress dipping violently as he moved toward the edge of the bed. The sheer physical presence of the man radiated a sudden, terrifying heat.

"You think I lost interest in you?" Harding asked, his voice dropping to a dangerous, gravelly whisper. "You think I was hiding from you?"

Anissa turned her face away, a tear slipping down her cheek. "Weren't you? You wouldn't even look at me..."

She didn't get to finish the sentence.

Harding's large hand shot out. He grabbed her wrist, his grip iron-tight but incredibly careful not to bruise her. He pulled her forward with a sharp, powerful tug.

Anissa let out a startled gasp as she lost her balance. She tumbled forward, crashing directly onto the mattress.

Before she could even push herself up, Harding flipped her onto her back. He swung his heavy leg over her hips, pinning her beneath him. His large hands bracketed her head, sinking deep into the mattress.

The heat radiating from his bare chest was scorching. She could feel the heavy, frantic pounding of his heart against her ribs.

Harding looked down at her. His eyes were completely black in the shadows, stripped of all control and civilization.

"Anissa," Harding gritted out, his jaw muscles jumping. "You are absolute torture. I didn't go to London because I was disgusted by you. I went to London because I was terrified of myself."

Anissa stopped breathing. She stared up at him, her eyes wide.

"That morning in the hallway," Harding confessed, his voice thick with desperate hunger, "if I had stayed in this apartment for one more second, I would have thrown you onto this bed and kept you here until you couldn't walk. I ran away because I didn't want to break our contract. I didn't want to ruin this."

The confession ripped through Anissa's chest. The heavy, suffocating weight of rejection vanished entirely. She felt the hard, undeniable evidence of his desire pressing against her thigh. He wanted her. He was going crazy for her.

Anissa let out a shaky breath. She lifted her arms, sliding her hands up his chest, feeling the rigid muscles jump under her palms. She wrapped her arms tightly around his neck.

She looked up into his burning eyes.

"Then don't control yourself," Anissa whispered.