

Chapter 57

Just as Anissa was placing her M1911 back into its case, the main door to the firing range swung open.

Harding stood there, a tall, imposing silhouette against the bright lights of the hallway. He was wearing a dark grey cashmere overcoat, looking like he had just stepped off a private jet. His sharp eyes scanned the room, taking in the scene—the stunned faces of his security team, the shredded target, the pistol in Anissa's hand. His gaze finally settled on her.

Alex immediately stepped forward. "Sir," he reported, his voice tight with an excitement he couldn't quite conceal. "Mrs. Snow's marksmanship is... exceptional."

A single dark eyebrow rose on Harding's forehead. A slow, intrigued smile spread across his face. He looked at Anissa, a new light of appreciation—and something darker, more possessive—igniting in his eyes.

He waved a hand, dismissing his men. "Leave us."

The security team vanished, leaving the two of them alone in the echoing space.

Harding walked toward her, his expensive leather shoes silent on the concrete floor. He stopped directly in front of her, so close she had to tilt her head back to meet his gaze. He leaned down, inhaling deeply.

"Gunpowder," he murmured, his voice a low, gravelly rumble. "It suits you more than any perfume. This is how I want you. Real. Without the armor."

A genuine laugh escaped Anissa's lips. The tension of the last few days, the lingering ghosts of the confrontation, all of it began to melt away under his intense, appreciative gaze. She reached out and playfully tugged on the lapel of his coat.

He took that as an invitation. His large hand covered hers, and he gently pulled her forward until her body was flush against his. He rested his chin

on the top of her head.

"You've had quite the day," he said, his voice vibrating through her. "Watching you command that boardroom... you were magnificent."

Anissa relaxed into his embrace, a feeling of safety and belonging washing over her. "Mmmhmm," she confirmed, her voice muffled against his chest. "And establishing a nine-hundred-million-dollar charitable instrument of vengeance right in front of you was just the beginning. Though making sure Connor's absolute exile to Zurich was finalized this evening took some extra effort. I wanted to be certain he was left with absolutely nothing."

A deep, rumbling laugh shook his chest. He tilted her chin up with his thumb and forefinger. "Good girl," he said, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "But you didn't have to oversee those final details yourself. You should let Alex handle the rest of the garbage disposal. I don't want you getting your hands dirty."

Anissa looked up at him, her expression turning serious. "I needed to make sure it was done properly, Harding. I needed them to see me. To know, without a doubt, that the girl they knew is gone forever."

His smile faded. He looked at her, truly looked at her, and saw the steel in her spine, the scars behind her eyes. He saw the warrior she had been forced to become.

He lowered his head and pressed his lips to hers. It wasn't a kiss of passion, but one of profound understanding and acceptance. It was soft, gentle, and it healed a part of her she didn't even know was broken.

"I know," he whispered against her mouth. "That's why I married you."

Her heart swelled. She deepened the kiss, her arms wrapping around his neck, pulling him closer.

When they finally broke apart, they stood forehead to forehead, their breath mingling in the cool air. He took her hand, his fingers lacing through hers, and led her out of the firing range.

"I've given a new directive to the security team," he said as they walked toward the waiting Maybach. "Your safety is their absolute priority. Your orders are to be followed without question, even if they contradict my

own."

Anissa stopped walking, staring at him in shock. That was an unprecedented level of trust. It meant he was giving her ultimate authority, even over himself.

He gently squeezed her hand. "You are my wife, Anissa. Your life is more important than the company, more important than the money. More important than me."

Tears pricked her eyes. For the first time, she felt the staggering, terrifying, beautiful weight of being unconditionally loved.

They slid into the back of the Maybach. Alex, in the driver's seat, discreetly raised the privacy partition.

Anissa leaned her head on Harding's shoulder, the cashmere of his coat soft against her cheek. She told him everything that had been running through her mind. About the adrenaline of the asset seizure, the deep satisfaction of launching the foundation right in front of his eyes, and the quiet, unnerving feeling that it was all too easy.

He listened, a low, appreciative chuckle rumbling in his chest as she described the raw emotion she had felt during the boardroom takeover he had witnessed. When she told him about her long-term plans for the foundation, he turned his head and looked at her, his eyes filled with a fierce, burning pride.

He tightened his grip on her hand. "You never have to prove anything to anyone ever again, Anissa," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "Just be you. That's all I want."

She nodded, a single tear tracing a hot path down her cheek. The last of the ice around her heart melted away.

As the car sped toward the glittering lights of their penthouse, Anissa made a silent vow. She would not only destroy her enemies. She would protect this man, and this fragile, powerful thing they were building together, with her life.