

Chapter 13 No.13

The transition from the electric energy of the Pulse server room to the stifling atmosphere of Uncle Dennis's Westchester mansion was jarring.

Aurora sat in the passenger seat of her grandfather's rusted sedan. Arthur drove with both hands gripping the wheel, his knuckles white. ③

You don't have to do this, Rory, Arthur said softly. "I can go alone. They just want to gloat."

We're family, Grandpa. I'll go, Aurora lied. She wasn't going for family. She was going for damage control. ④

They pulled into the driveway, parking next to a pristine white Range Rover. Their car looked like a stain on the immaculate pavement.

The house was a monument to new money—too many columns, too much gold leaf, and absolutely no taste. It was the kind of house Sterling would have admired.

The front door opened before they even knocked. Aunt Heather stood there, wearing a dress that was too tight and a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

Aurora! So good to see you! Heather chirped, peering over Aurora's shoulder. Her eyes darted to the driveway, searching.

Where's Sterling? Working late again? Heather asked loudly, her voice carrying to the neighbors.

Aurora stepped inside the foyer, smelling of lilies and expensive furniture polish. "He couldn't make it."

Oh. Heather's face fell instantly. "Well, that's a shame. We had business to discuss."

They moved into the living room. Cousin Tiffany was sprawled on the beige sectional, scrolling through TikTok. She didn't look up.

Uncle Dennis came down the stairs. He was a heavyset man with a red face and a handshake that was always slightly damp.

Arthur, Dennis said, shaking his father's hand loosely. "Still driving that

rust bucket? I told you, appearances matter."


It gets me from A to B, Arthur said, his voice shrinking

Aurora felt a spike of cold anger in her gut. She noted the new Ming vase on the hall table. It was positioned to be the first thing guests saw.

Dinner was served in the formal dining room. The portions were microscopic "gourmet," Heather called it.

For twenty minutes, Aurora focused on cutting her asparagus into geometric shapes. She tuned out the conversation until she heard her name.

So, Aurora, Heather said, pouring herself a third glass of wine. "I heard Sterling is acquiring a tech firm. Maybe he can hire Tiffany? She's very good with... computers."

Tiffany perked up. "Yeah. I could be, like, VP of Social Media. I have three thousand followers." 

Aurora placed her knife and fork down. They clicked against the china.

I don't think that's possible, she said calmly.

Dennis slammed his wine glass down. Wine sloshed onto the tablecloth.

Why not? You're his wife. Pull some strings. Don't be selfish, Aurora.

Arthur tried to intervene. "Let the girl eat, Dennis."

We're just asking for a favor! Heather snapped at Arthur. "We're family! We need this connection. Dennis's business is... leveraging on Sterling's name."

Aurora froze.

Leveraging.

She looked at Dennis. He was sweating.

You took out loans using Sterling as a guarantor? Aurora asked. Her voice was ice.

It's just a formality! Dennis blustered. "Once the deal closes, I'll pay it back."

You forged his signature?

I... I implied his backing Dennis yelled. "Why do you care? You're sitting on a gold mine!"

Aurora wiped her mouth with a napkin. She did it slowly, deliberately.

Sterling can't hire Tiffany, she said.

Why? Dennis demanded, his face turning purple.

Because I don't have any influence over him anymore.

She looked Dennis in the eye.

And neither do you.
