

## Chapter 4 No.4

The Bronx tenement smelled of boiled cabbage and damp plaster. It was a smell Aurora hadn't encountered in years, yet it triggered a wave of nostalgia so potent it nearly brought her to her knees.

She dragged her suitcase up the four flights of narrow, creaking stairs. The graffiti on the walls had changed, but the peeling paint was the same shade of depressing beige.

She reached door 4B. She hesitated, her hand hovering over the tarnished brass knocker.

Inside, she heard a cough. A dry, rattling sound.

Aurora's heart clenched. Grandpa.

In her first life, the one that had ended in betrayal and a flatlining heart monitor, Arthur Vance had died just six months after her wedding. He had died alone because Sterling had forbidden her from visiting "that dangerous neighborhood" during an important merger week. She had obeyed. She had sent flowers.

She unlocked the door with the spare key she kept hidden under the loose molding of the doorframe. It was still there.

The doors swung open.

The apartment was small, cluttered with books and old newspapers. Sitting in a worn velvet armchair by the window was Arthur. He looked older than she remembered, his frame frail, wrapped in a knitted cardigan.

He looked up, his glasses sliding down his nose. "Aurora?"

His voice was weak, but his eyes lit up.

Grandpa, Aurora choked out. She dropped her suitcase and ran to him, falling to her knees beside his chair. She buried her face in his lap, inhaling the scent of peppermint tea and old tobacco.

Arthur stroked her hair with a trembling hand. "Child, what's wrong? Why are you here so early? Is... is it him?"

Aurora lifted her head. She wiped her eyes. "I left him, Grandpa. I signed the papers. It's over."

Arthur didn't look sad. He didn't ask about the money or the penthouse. He let out a long, shuddering sigh of relief.

Thank God, he whispered. "I never liked his eyes. Too shiny. Like a shark."

Aurora laughed through her tears. "Yeah. Like a shark."

She stood up and went to the small kitchenette. She automatically filled the kettle. "I need to crash here for a bit. Just until I get on my feet."

This is your home, Rory, Arthur said. "Always."

She brought him a cup of tea. As she handed it to him, she casually checked his pulse. Weak but steady. He was just old and tired. And cold.

The apartment was freezing.

The heater broken? she asked.

Oil is expensive this year, Arthur mumbled, looking away.

Aurora's jaw tightened. She looked around the dimly lit room. This man had raised her when her parents died. He had sold his car to pay for her coding camp when she was twelve. And she had let him freeze while she bought Sterling's silk ties.

Never again, she vowed.

I need to work, Aurora said.

There's... there's some money, Arthur said. He pointed to a loose floorboard near the radiator. "My burial fund. About five thousand."


Aurora froze. "Grandpa, no."

Take it, he insisted. "You need a start. Don't argue with me."

Aurora looked at him. She saw the pride in his eyes. He wanted to help.

I'll take it, she said. "But consider it an investment. I'll pay you back with interest."

She retrieved the tin box. Inside were stacks of wrinkled twenty-dollar bills. Five thousand dollars.

She took out three hundred dollars and placed it on the kitchen table. 

This is for oil, she commanded. "I'm calling the delivery company right now. Do not argue."

Arthur opened his mouth to protest, but the look in her eyes stopped him.

Aurora took the remaining cash—four thousand seven hundred dollars. It wasn't much. To Sterling, it was a dinner bill. To her, it was a seed.

I'm going out for an hour, she said. "I need to visit the bank."

She walked six blocks to the nearest branch with a cash deposit ATM. She deposited the money into an old, dormant account she had kept hidden from Sterling. As soon as the digital balance updated, she pulled out her phone.

She navigated to a trading platform app she had just downloaded.

She pulled up the stock market data. The trends were cascading down the screen.

She remembered this week. In her past life, she had watched these numbers from the sidelines. She knew exactly which pharmaceutical company was about to fail its FDA trial tomorrow morning.

Vanguard Pharma.

She didn't just short the stock. That wouldn't yield enough with her limited capital. She navigated to the Options chain.

She bought deep out-of-the-money Put options expiring tomorrow. They were dirt cheap because the market expected the drug trial to succeed. The leverage was insane. If the stock crashed as she knew it would, these options would explode in value by 1000% or more.

She hit Execute.

Order Filled.

She walked back to the apartment, her heart racing not from fear, but from the thrill of the hunt.

What did you do? Arthur asked when she returned, seeing the fierce look on her face.

I'm robbing the rich, Grandpa, Aurora said, opening her laptop to secure the neighbor's Wi-Fi. "Legally."

By tomorrow afternoon, that \$4,700 wouldn't just be doubled. It would be a war chest.

You look scary when you type, Arthur noted, sipping his tea.

I'm not scary, Aurora said. "I'm just... focused."

She pulled a sleeping bag out of the closet and unrolled it on the floor.

Take the bed, Rory, Arthur protested.

No. I like the floor. It keeps me grounded.

She lay down, staring at the cracked ceiling.

Sterling was probably popping champagne right now. Elias Thorne was probably running a background check on her.

Let them come.

Aurora Vance was back online.

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