

Chapter 4 4

Manhattan at noon was a beast of noise and concrete.

Analia dragged her suitcase down 5th Avenue. The adrenaline from the confrontation was fading, replaced by a dull, aching exhaustion. Her head throbbed beneath the bandage.

Her stomach growled, a loud, undignified reminder that she hadn't eaten since yesterday's lunch.

She spotted a deli on the corner. Just a regular, nondescript place with sandwiches in the window. She went inside, the smell of curing meat and vinegar making her mouth water.

She ordered a turkey sub and a bottle of water.

"That'll be \$14.50," the guy behind the counter said, not looking up from his phone.

Analia pulled out her black Amex. The heavy titanium card that used to open every door in the city.

She tapped it.

BEEP.

"Declined," the guy said, popping his gum.

Analia frowned. "Try it again. It's probably the chip."

He swiped it this time.

BEEP.

"Declined, lady. Do you have another one?"

Analia's face burned. She felt the eyes of the people in line behind her, impatience, judgment. She dug through her wallet. The Visa. The Mastercard.

BEEP, BEEP.

"Look, if you can't pay, move aside," the guy said, annoyed now.

Analia's hands were shaking. She opened the small zipper pocket of her purse where she kept loose change. She counted three crumpled dollar bills and a handful of quarters.

"I... I'll just take the water," she whispered.

She put the cash on the counter. It was humiliating. It was the kind of small, petty cruelty that hurt more than the shouting.

She walked out with just the water bottle, her stomach cramping with hunger.

Her phone buzzed. A notification from the bank app.

ALERT: Supplementary Card Ending in 8890 has been suspended by the Primary Account Holder.

Followed by a voice message.

She played it, holding the phone to her ear as traffic roared by.

Clive's voice was calm, almost bored. "Hungry yet? Come home, apologize, and I'll unlock them. Don't be stubborn, Analia. It doesn't suit you."

Analia deleted the message.

She opened a different app on her phone. One hidden in a folder labeled "Utilities." It required a retinal scan and a thumbprint.

The app opened. Cayman Islands Offshore Banking.

Account Name: Lyra LLC.

Balance: \$1,450,000.00

She wasn't broke. She was rich. She had saved every penny from her voice acting royalties before the marriage, and the residuals that had trickled in secretly over the last four years.

But she couldn't touch it.

Not yet. If she transferred money now, Clive's forensic accountants would see it in the divorce discovery. They would claim it was marital assets. They would freeze this too.

She had to be poor. For a little while longer.

A horn honked. Zoe's Ford Fiesta pulled up to the curb, double-parked illegally.

"Get in, loser!" Zoe yelled out the window, grinning. "We're going shopping. By shopping I mean we're going to eat my leftovers."

Analia got in. As she buckled her seatbelt, she let out a laugh. It was a jagged, rusty sound, but it was real.

"He froze the cards," Analia said.

"Of course he did," Zoe merged into traffic, cutting off a taxi. "Micro-penis energy."

"Zoe!" Analia giggled. "He doesn't have a micro-penis."

"Well, his soul does," Zoe declared.

They drove past the Apex Media tower. It was a glass monolith piercing the sky. A massive digital billboard wrapped around the building.

advertising the upcoming epic, *The Pantheon Saga*.

Angelena Stuart's face wasn't on the poster yet, but her name was rumored in every blog.

Analia stared at the building. Her eyes narrowed. The sadness in her chest began to harden into something colder, something useful. Ambition.

"Zoe," she said. "Does your closet still have that soundproofing foam we put up?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Because Starfall is coming out of retirement," Analia said. "And I'm going to take that role from her."

Zoe glanced at her, eyes wide. "The Pantheon Saga? But everyone says Angelena is a lock."

"She's a lock because of politics," Analia said, watching the tower disappear in the rearview mirror. "I'm going to beat her with talent. Clive thinks I'm starving? Good. I act better when I'm hungry."



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