

## Chapter 6 No.6

The elevator opened directly into the penthouse

Elena stepped out onto marble floors that reflected the city lights of Manhattan like a black mirror. The apartment was massive-cold, modern, and breathtakingly expensive

"I thought you were cut off," she said, spinning in a slow circle. "This place is..."

"I bought this years ago through a holding company," Julian said. "It was a lucky investment I made before the accident. The family thinks it belongs to a foreign diplomat."

He wheeled himself into the living room, which was dominated by a glass wall overlooking Central Park.

"The master suite is yours," he said, pointing to a set of double doors.

"But... the accessibility features," she stammered. "You need the master."

"I don't sleep much," he said shortly. "And I don't share a bed. There's a guest room down the hall I've set up for myself."

He moved toward the kitchen island. "Water?"

"Please."

She watched him. He moved with an efficiency that was mesmerizing. He reached for a glass from the low shelf.

Crash.

The glass slipped from his fingers and shattered on the floor.

"Damn it," Julian hissed. He gripped the edge of the counter, his knuckles white. "Useless hands."

Her heart squeezed. She rushed over. "Don't touch it! You'll cut yourself."

She knelt down, picking up the shards. "It's okay, Julian. It's just a glass."

He looked down at her. His expression was tortured. "I used to run a billion-dollar fund. Now I can't even hold a cup of water."

She remembered the cold, hard braces she had felt earlier. The reality of his struggle hit her. "You're not useless," she said fiercely, looking up at

him. "You saved me today."

He stared at her for a long moment. The air between them crackled. He reached out, his hand hovering over her cheek, then dropped it.

"Go to bed, Elena. It's been a long day."

She nodded, retreating to the master bedroom. The bathroom was like a spa. She stripped off the dress that smelled like the worst day of her life and stepped into the shower. She scrubbed her skin until it was raw, trying to wash away Ryan, her father, and the shame.

Out in the living room, the lights were off.

Julian sat in his wheelchair until he heard the water running

Then, he stood up.

He didn't struggle. He didn't wobble. He stood to his full height of six-foot-three, stretching his back. He winced slightly—the welts from the cane were real enough but his legs were powerful pillars of muscle.

He walked silently to the wall of monitors hidden behind a piece of abstract art. He tapped a key.

Screens flared to life. Stock tickers. Surveillance feeds from the Sterling estate. A live feed of Ryan arguing with Miss Chen.

He picked up his phone.

"Initiate Project Zero," Julian said into the phone. His voice was ice. "And Silas? Find out which teacher at Elena's school is leaking gossip to the press. I want her gone by morning."

"What about the accounts?" Silas asked.

"Just monitor them for now," Julian commanded. "Log every transaction Victoria makes. We build the trap before we spring it."

He hung up and walked to Elena's bedroom door. It was locked.

He smiled, a dark, predatory curve of his lips.

"Good girl," he whispered. "Keep your guard up."

He walked back to his chair and sat down, becoming the cripple once more.