

## Chapter 8 No.8

"We need to go out," Julian declared on Saturday.

"I'm fine staying in," Elena said, curling up on the sofa. The world outside felt hostile.

"My doctor says I need Vitamin D," he deadpanned. "Unless you want me to wither away."

She rolled her eyes, but she smiled. "Fine."

They went to Fifth Avenue. It was a production. Silas cleared a path, but people still stared. Elena pushed Julian's chair, feeling fiercely protective every time someone looked at his legs with pity.

"Stop here," Julian pointed to Van Cleef & Arpels.

"Julian, no," she hissed. "We can't afford this. You promised my father five million dollars. We need to save."

"I need to get a stone for that ring," he said, ignoring her. "It's an heirloom, remember? I want to have it properly cleaned and fitted."

He rolled inside. The sales clerk, a woman with a pinched nose, looked them up and down. She saw the wheelchair, Elena's simple jeans, and sniffed.

"Can I help you?" she asked, clearly implying they were lost.

"I'd like to see the manager," Julian said.

"He's busy," she said dismissively.

"Is that so?" Julian's voice dropped. It was that dangerous tone again.

Suddenly, the store manager came rushing out from the back. He took one look at Julian's face and froze. He recognized the Sterling jawline.

"Mr. Sterling!" he gasped. "I didn't know you were coming! Please, forgive the new girl."

"I need to access the private vault," Julian said quietly. "Box 404."

The manager nodded fervently and led them to a private room. He returned with a velvet box. Inside lay a loose pink diamond, radiant and flawless.

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"Mr. Sterling!" he gasped. "I didn't know you were coming! Please, forgive the new girl."

"I need to access the private vault," Julian said quietly. "Box 404."

The manager nodded fervently and led them to a private room. He returned with a velvet box. Inside lay a loose pink diamond, radiant and flawless.

"This was part of the set my mother left me," Julian explained to her as the manager took the gold band from her finger. "I kept the stone here for safekeeping. It belongs in the ring."

"It's beautiful," Elena breathed, unable to help herself.

"Mount it," Julian ordered the manager. "Bill the service to the usual account."

Silas stepped forward and discreetly tapped a standard credit card on the terminal while she was distracted by the diamond.

As they exited the store, the universe decided to play a cruel joke.

Ryan and Miss Chen were walking right past them.

Miss Chen was glowing one hand on her small baby bump. Ryan looked tired, but he was laughing. Until he saw them.

His eyes went to the massive pink diamond on Elena's hand.

"What is this?" Ryan scoffed, stepping in their path. "Spending the last of the trust fund, Uncle? That ring costs more than your legs."

Miss Chen looked at the ring then at her own modest solitaire. Her face soured. "Ryan, why didn't I get a pink one?"

"Because Ryan can't afford it," Julian said calmly. "His archaeology project is over budget, isn't it, Nephew?"

Ryan flushed red. "Shut up. You're a cripple living on scraps."

"And you," Julian looked at Elena, his eyes softening. "You look like a queen."

He turned back to Ryan. "Move out of the way, boy. You're blocking my wife's light."

Ryan stood there, mouth open, as Elena pushed Julian past them. She held her head high the diamond flashing in the sun like a shield.

"That was..." she started, once they were in the car.

"Fun?" Julian smirked.

"Satisfying," she admitted.