

Chapter 9

"Ah." I nodded thoughtfully. "So you do like taking things that belong to other people."

The innocent tone made the words cut deeper. Camila's face flushed red.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Don't you?" I tilted my head. "First my shoes design, now my ring style. Do you always covet what others have, or is it just a hobby?"

"I wasn't—" Camila's voice pitched higher.

"It's a pattern, isn't it? Seeing something someone else has and deciding you want it for yourself."

Darrell finally found his voice. "Take the ring off, Sable."

I tilted my head innocently. "Why?"

"Why are you trying on engagement rings?" His anger was building, each word sharper than the last. "Last night you accepted our... arrangement. Now you're here trying to force my hand? I will never mark you!"

Camila's lips curved in satisfaction. "Sable, Darrell and I are here because Elizabeth asked us to look at rings together."

Elizabeth Hawthorne prefers Camila as a daughter-in-law. Message received.

"Oh." I kept my voice neutral. "I understand."

Both of them seemed taken aback by my lack of reaction.

"Are you doing this on purpose?" Darrell's control snapped completely. "Playing understanding last night, then ambushing me here today? I've told you - we have no future together! Stop trying to manipulate me into something I'll never give you!"

I smiled gently. "Manipulate? But we're still together, aren't we? That would make Miss Ross the other woman. And you the cheating bastard. So who exactly is embarrassing themselves here?"

Darrell's face flushed red. "Take off the fucking ring!"

"No."

"Fine!" His voice shook with rage. "Keep it! I'll never buy you a ring anyway, and I'll never mark you!"

"Mm-hmm."

He glared at me one more time before storming out. Camila hurried after him, her heels clicking against the marble floor.

The saleswoman cleared her throat delicately. "Miss Crawford? The Alpha seemed... upset."

"Yes, but don't worry about it. Just some personal drama."

Darrell never intended to mark me. But it doesn't matter anymore. The old Sable died last night in that bathroom stall.

I looked down at the ring again. The blue moonstone reminded me of summer afternoons spent collecting rocks by the creek behind Crawford Manor. Caelan had always listened patiently while I explained why each one was special.

He remembered that I love blue stones. After all these years, he remembered.

I took several photos of the ring on my finger, selecting the best one before sending it to Caelan with a simple message: *Do you like it?*

Third Person POV

Three hundred miles away, Caelan Blackwood was reviewing territory reports when his phone chimed. The moment he saw Sable's message, his usually stern expression softened into something approaching tenderness.

The photo showed her delicate hand, the blue moonstone catching the light perfectly. She had beautiful hands - he'd always thought so, even when she was a child with dirt under her fingernails from her rock-hunting expeditions.

He typed back immediately: *It's beautiful. Do you like it?*

"I do."

"That's all that matters."

A pause, then: *"Caelan, this ring must have been expensive..."*

"Not expensive at all. You deserve the best."

The warmth spreading through Sable's chest felt foreign after years of emotional isolation.

Caelan's Beta, Edward Wells, approached with a stack of documents requiring signatures. He stopped short when he saw his usually stoic King staring at his phone with what could only be described as a dopey smile.

The papers slipped from Edward's shocked hands, hitting the floor with a loud smack.

Caelan's head snapped up. He immediately schooled his features back into their customary mask of authority.

"The documents are signed." His voice could have frozen blood. "Do you need something else?"

"N-no, Your Majesty." Edward scrambled to collect the scattered papers. "Nothing else."

The moment the door closed behind his Beta, Edward leaned against the wall and muttered to himself: "Did I just see the Lycan King... smile? Like, actually smile?"

Sable's POV

I slipped the ring back into its velvet box. The jeweler would keep it safe until I was ready to leave Moonridge permanently.

"I'll arrange for secure storage," the saleswoman assured me. "Call whenever you're ready for pickup."

Next door, the luxury shopping center housed Prestigious Timepieces. If I was accepting Caelan's generosity, the least I could do was reciprocate.

The watch display cases gleamed under spotlights. I studied each piece carefully, trying to imagine what would suit him.

I thought back to the photos Dad had sent me recently - Caelan at various pack meetings and royal functions. The years had transformed him completely. In his place stood a man with sharp, commanding features. His jawline had become more defined, his cheekbones more prominent. Those dark eyebrows that used to furrow in concentration while he helped me with puzzles now looked almost severe above eyes that could freeze enemies with a single glance.

But in every photo, when I looked closely at those deep blue eyes, I could still catch glimpses of the patient big brother who had never once told me I was bothering him.

A simple black timepiece caught my attention. Understated elegance with

a subtle line of diamonds around the bezel. Masculine but not ostentatious.

"Excellent choice," the salesman said. "That's a limited edition. Very sophisticated."

Perfect for a king who doesn't need to show off.

I was signing the receipt when a familiar voice made me freeze.

"Sable? What are you doing here..."

I turned slowly. Elizabeth Hawthorne stood in the doorway like she owned the place. Her silver hair was styled in that perfectly calculated way that screamed old money.

But it was her eyes that made my blood run cold. Sharp. Calculating. Like a predator sizing up wounded prey.

My mind flashed back to the only time we'd met before. A year ago at Luna's Café. Darrell had gone rigid when he spotted her across the room, introducing me hastily as "a friend" before practically dragging me out the back exit.

Even then, she looked at me like I was something stuck to her shoe.

"Mrs. Hawthorne," I kept my voice neutral. "How nice to see you again."

She glided closer, her gaze dropping to the expensive watch box in my hands. "A timepiece from here? How... ambitious."

The word dripped with condescension.

"Just a gift for someone special." I tucked the box into my purse.

"Special?" She laughed, the sound like breaking glass. "A girl with your... background... shopping here? What are you really doing, Sable? Looking at display models?"

My jaw tightened, but I forced a smile. *Breathe. Don't give her the reaction she wants.*

But memory struck like lightning. That phone call I'd overheard a year ago when Darrell thought I was sleeping.

"You what time will you break up with that low-class woman? She's not worthy of being our pack's Luna."

"Mom, don't worry. I know our difference. I'm just trying something new, definitely won't take it seriously."

7
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