

Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 181:

Dallas walked Eliza toward her, their fingers firmly interlaced.

“Grandmother,” he called out.

Gigi looked up from the plush interior. Her eyes widened. “Dallas? And... Eliza?”

She took in their joined hands. She took in the way Dallas was standing — angled slightly in front of Eliza, shielding her without appearing to.

“I took your advice,” Dallas said smoothly. “I stole her.”

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He turned, cupped Eliza's face in both hands, and kissed her. There in the garage, unhurried and deliberate, a kiss that left absolutely no room for interpretation.

Gigi's eyes went wide. Then she settled back into her seat, a slow, triumphant smile spreading across her face. She clapped her gloved hands together once.

"Finally! A Koch with initiative! Bring her to tea on Sunday. Don't be late." The Rolls Royce pulled away.

Eliza buried her face in Dallas's chest. "She thinks you just stole me from a fictional accountant named Ben."

"Let her think that," Dallas said, kissing the top of her head. "The secret is half out. That's enough for now."

The penthouse was quiet that evening. They ate the reheated steak from the bento box sitting on the floor by the coffee table. It felt intimate. Domestic.

"Gigi invites us to tea on Sunday," Dallas said, refilling their wine glasses. The tension of the business day had drained from him visibly, leaving something easier in its place.

"She thinks you're a pirate who stole me," Eliza laughed, poking him with her fork.

“I am,” Dallas smirked. “I plunder. I conquer.”

Eliza’s phone rang.

The sound cut through the room like a blade. She looked at the screen. Unknown number. Area code 516. Havenport.

Her stomach dropped.

“Hello?”

“Eliza? It’s Uncle Buck.”

The voice was gravelly, roughened by years of cigarettes. Eliza went still. She hadn’t spoken to Buck Solomon in years — not since he had signed her guardianship papers over to Anson.

“Uncle Buck?” she said quietly. “Is everything okay?”

“No. It’s the estate. It’s gone, Eliza. The bank is foreclosing on Monday.” He sounded desperate. Cornered.

“What? But Mom’s studio – the archives –” She stood up, nearly upsetting the bento box.

“Everything. They’re auctioning the contents. Your mother’s paintings. The family silver. The furniture.” He broke into a hacking cough. “We need you to sign off on the trust release. Or we lose it all. We lose your heritage.”

“I’ll come,” Eliza said, before she had finished the thought. The idea of her mother’s artwork sold off to strangers and scattered to the wind was unbearable.

“Good girl. Come tomorrow. Alone. We have paperwork,” Buck said quickly, and hung up.

Eliza lowered the phone. Her hands were trembling.

Dallas was watching her. He had gone completely still, his instincts quietly activated.

“Who was that?”

“My uncle. Solomon Industries is bankrupt. They’re foreclosing on my childhood home on Monday,” Eliza said, tears gathering in her eyes. “They’re selling everything.”

“I can buy it,” Dallas said immediately, without a flicker of hesitation. “How much? Ten million? Twenty? I’ll wire it tonight.”

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“No.” Eliza shook her head. “I can’t let you. It’s my family’s mess.”

“I am your family,” Dallas said, rising to face her.

“But they are my blood. And they despise charity. If you buy it, they’ll only resent me more. I need to go there myself. Face them. Make sure they don’t burn my mother’s work,” Eliza said, her voice firm but gentle. “I need closure, Dallas.”

He clenched his jaw. She could see it in the set of his shoulders — he wanted to fix this with a single phone call, to wrap her in something impenetrable and not let her leave.

“I’ll come with you,” he offered.

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“No. If you come, all they’ll see is a checkbook. Or they’ll see the Koch name and try to leverage it. I need them to see me.” She held his gaze. “I’ll take the train. I need time to think. I’ll be back in two days. Trust me.”

“Eliza,” he warned, his voice low.

She kissed him. “I love you. I’ll be fine.”

She went to the bedroom to pack. At the dresser, she opened her jewelry box and looked at the engagement ring. The diamond caught the light – a declaration, a beacon. Where she was going, it was also a target.

With a quiet pang of regret, she slid it from her finger and tucked it carefully into the velvet lining of the box.

In the living room, Dallas sat with his phone in his hand. His expression had settled into something dark and unreadable.

He typed a message to Zane.

She goes to Havenport. By train. She thinks she’s alone. Watch her. If anyone touches her, break them.

The train rattled along in a steady, hypnotic rhythm that did nothing to calm Eliza’s nerves. The city skyline had long since disappeared, replaced by grey sprawling suburbs and, eventually, the desolate coastline of Long Island.

She scrolled through the photos on her phone. The Solomon Estate. It had once been beautiful. In the low-resolution images Buck had sent, it looked like a corpse.

Her phone rang.

An unknown number — the same 516 area code as her uncle's call. She assumed it was Buck or his lawyer and answered.

“Hello?”

“Don't go to Havenport,” Anson said. No greeting. No apology.

Eliza looked around the car instinctively. It was mostly empty. A businessman asleep against the window. A teenager lost in headphones. A man in a nondescript dark jacket with a cap pulled low over his eyes, seemingly absorbed in his phone two rows back.

“How do you know where I'm going?”

“I know Buck,” Anson said, his voice taut with urgency. “He's desperate. He's in debt to bad people — not banks. Loan sharks. A man named Dante Luna.”

“You would know about bad people,” Eliza said.

“Eliza, listen to me for once! Get off at the next stop. Turn around. I sold my watch – the last thing of value I had. I have cash. I can give it to you to pay them off. Let me handle it.”

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“I don’t need your money. And I don’t need your permission,” Eliza said. “I have a husband for that.”

She hung up and blocked his number again.

But the warning settled in her chest like cold water. Dante Luna.

Two rows behind her, the man in the baseball cap lowered his phone slightly.

It was Zane Sterling. He wasn't wearing his usual suit. He looked exactly like any other commuter – utterly forgettable. Eliza's mind was too consumed by the storm she was heading into to pay any real attention to the people around her.

He typed quickly.

Target en route. Anson contacted her. She rejected him.

Dallas replied within seconds. Good. Keep distance. Intervene only if life threat.

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The train screeched into Havenport Station. It was raining – a cold, miserable drizzle that rendered everything in shades of grey.

The town looked depressed. Boarded-up storefronts. Empty streets. No taxis.

Eliza stood under a leaking awning, shivering.

A black SUV pulled up. Tinted windows. Mud caked along the lower panels. The window rolled down to reveal a driver with a thick neck and a scar cutting through one eyebrow.

“Miss Solomon? Mr. Solomon sent me,” he said.

Eliza hesitated. The car smelled of stale smoke even from the street. But she had no other way to reach the cliffs.

She got in.

Zane watched from the rental car he had collected from the station lot. He waited for the SUV to turn the corner, then pulled out behind it, maintaining a careful distance.

Eliza texted Dallas: Arrived safely. Uncle sent a car.

She didn't mention the unease coiling in her gut. She didn't want him to worry.

The SUV wound away from town and climbed the narrow coastal road toward the cliffs. The sea churned far below, violent and grey.

The Solomon Estate emerged from the rain ahead.

It was a gothic nightmare. The exterior paint was peeling away in long, white strips like dead skin. Ivy had gone unchecked for years, choking the windows, swallowing the stone. The iron gates were eaten through with rust.

It looked like a haunted house.

Eliza steadied herself. For Mom, she told herself. Just get the paintings and leave.

The gates swung open with a metallic shriek.

The foyer smelled of dust, old wax, and desperation.

“Eliza! Look at you!”

Margo Solomon descended the grand staircase wearing too much jewelry — chunky gold necklaces that looked cheap — and a smile that stopped well short of her eyes.

“Aunt Margo,” Eliza said, nodding politely.

Buck followed close behind. He looked haggard. His skin was grey and faintly damp, despite the chill that had settled throughout the house. His suit was expensive but ill-fitting, as though he had shed twenty pounds in a hurry.

“Uncle Buck,” Eliza said.

A girl leaned against the doorframe of the parlor — Sienna Solomon, Eliza’s cousin — scrolling her phone and snapping gum with practiced indifference.

“So the prodigal orphan returns,” Sienna said, without looking up.

“Sienna! Be nice,” Margo said, with the conviction of someone who didn’t particularly mean it.

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“Where is my room?” Eliza asked, ignoring Sienna. “I’d like to put my bag down.”

“Your old room. We kept it... mostly the same,” Buck said, patting his forehead with a handkerchief.

Eliza climbed the stairs. The carpet was threadbare underfoot. The house felt heavy — as if the walls themselves were holding their breath.

Her room was cold. The wallpaper was peeling away at the corners, and the air smelled of damp and neglect. She set her bag on the bed and sat still for a moment.

Then she heard voices in the hallway.

She crossed to the door and eased it open a crack.

“Is she pretty enough? Dante likes them pretty,” Margo whispered. Her voice carried easily through the empty corridor.

“She’s a Hyde foster. That adds value. She has class,” Buck replied.

“Just get the signature. Then we get the check.” A pause. “Make sure she doesn’t leave.”

Eliza closed the door without a sound. Her heart was hammering.

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They weren't selling the house.

They were selling her.

Every instinct told her to climb out the window and run. But the paintings were still here. Her mother's work was somewhere on this property, and she couldn't leave without securing it.

She crossed to the window and looked down at the overgrown garden below. Near the cliff edge stood a separate stone building — the art studio. It was boarded up.

She needed to get inside, check the inventory, and then call Dallas to get her out.

The dinner bell rang — a hollow, gloomy sound that echoed through the empty rooms.

She went down. The dining table was set with chipped china, the silverware tarnished, the soup that Margo ladled out thin and watery.

“So, Eliza,” Margo said pleasantly, settling into her chair. “No husband? No boyfriend?”

“I’m seeing someone,” Eliza said.

“A waiter? A driver?” Sienna suggested, stabbing a potato.

“A businessman,” Eliza replied, and took a sip of water. It tasted metallic.

“Good.” Buck smiled. It was a shark’s smile — all teeth, no warmth. “You understand business, then.” He set down his spoon. “We have a business partner joining us tomorrow evening. A Mr. Luna. Dante Luna.” He dropped the name with the deliberate weight of someone placing a card on a table. “You should meet him. He’s very interested in art.”

The air in the study was stifling, thick with the smell of cheap brandy and impending disaster.

“I’m married,” Eliza said. Her voice rang in the silence — a desperate gambit, a shield she hoped would deflect their greed.

Margo burst out laughing. It was a harsh, cackling sound. “Married? To whom? The invisible man?”

“Show us the ring,” Buck demanded, his eyes narrowing. “Show us the certificate.”

Eliza’s hand flew instinctively to her bare finger. The diamond Dallas had given her – the one she had tucked safely into her jewelry box back in the city – was miles away. Her sensible precaution had just become a catastrophic mistake.

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“I left the ring in the city. For safety,” Eliza said, her voice faltering. “But he is Dallas Koch.”

Buck slammed his hand on the desk hard enough to make the lamp rattle. “Dallas Koch? The billionaire? Come now, Eliza. If you’re going to lie, at least make it convincing. If you were married to a Koch, you wouldn’t be here in a hired car wearing last season’s boots.”

“It’s the truth!” Eliza said, reaching for her phone. “I can call him right now.”

“No phones.” Buck moved with surprising speed for a man of his size. He snatched the device from her hand before she could unlock it. “Bad manners.” He tossed it onto a high shelf behind his desk, well beyond her reach.

“Mr. Luna is on his way,” Margo said, checking her watch, her expression hardening. “He likes privacy. And he specifically asked to see the artistic assets.”

“I am not an asset,” Eliza said sharply.

“You are today.” Buck gripped her upper arm. His hand was clammy and tight. “You’re going to the studio. That’s where the meeting is.”

“Why the studio?” Eliza planted her feet against the threadbare carpet.

“Because it’s secluded,” Margo said, pushing the French doors open. “And because sound doesn’t carry from there to the road. We wouldn’t want the neighbors to misinterpret anything.”

The implication turned Eliza’s blood cold. She twisted against Buck’s grip.

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“Let go of me! You’re selling me to a gangster to cover your gambling debts!” she screamed.

Buck slapped her.

It wasn’t a hard blow, but it was shocking enough to stun her into silence.

“It’s business,” he said quietly. “And you will behave.”

He didn’t give her time to recover. He dragged her through the French doors and marched her across the dark lawn without a word, without stopping, until the stone building at the cliff’s edge loomed before them.

The art studio looked like a tomb in the twilight. Its windows were boarded from the inside – a precaution taken years ago to protect the canvases, now repurposed for something far darker.

Buck drew a heavy iron key from his pocket, unlocked the door, and shoved it open.

“Get in,” he said.

“Uncle Buck, please,” Eliza said, bracing herself against the doorframe. “Don’t do this. Mom wouldn’t want this.”

Buck flinched at the mention of his sister. For a moment, something like shame flickered in his watery eyes. Then greed washed it away.

“Your mother is dead,” he said roughly, and pushed Eliza inside with a hard shove.

She stumbled into the darkness, tripping over a drop cloth, and caught herself against an old easel. Dust billowed up around her.

“Wait here,” Buck said from the doorway, his silhouette blocking out the last of the grey light. “Dante will be here in five minutes. Be pleasant. If you are, maybe he’ll let you keep the house.”

“Buck!” Eliza lunged toward the door.

He slammed it shut in her face.

The lock turned. A heavy, final sound. Click-thunk.

“No!” She pounded the wood with both fists. “Let me out! You can’t do this!”

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“It’s for your own good!” Buck shouted from the other side. “Sit tight.”

His footsteps crunched away over the gravel, retreating steadily back toward the main house.

Then silence.

Eliza turned slowly, her eyes adjusting to the gloom. The studio was exactly as her mother had left it — frozen in time, buried under a decade of neglect. Covered canvases stood along the walls like draped figures, ghostly in the shadows. The smell of turpentine and old oil paint was nostalgic and suffocating in equal measure.

She ran to the windows. Boarded up from the inside. She threw her weight against one of the planks and pulled. It held. Nailed tight.

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She was trapped.

The silence in the art studio was oppressive, broken only by Eliza's ragged breathing and the wind threading through cracks in the stone walls. She had backed up until her spine pressed flat against the cold plaster, her eyes fixed on the heavy wooden door. Behind her back, both hands gripped the neck of a glass Mason jar packed with dried paintbrushes and turpentine. It was a pathetic weapon against a man like Dante Luna. It was all she had.

The lock rattled.

Not the fumbling of someone searching for the right key – the confident, unhurried turn of someone who owned the place.

The door creaked open on rusted hinges.

Dante Luna stepped inside. He was a mountain of a man, his presence instantly consuming the air in the small room. He wore a suit that cost more than the building he was standing in, but it did nothing to conceal the brutality beneath his posture. He smelled of expensive cigars and something underneath – cloying, rotten – that turned Eliza's stomach.

He pulled the door shut behind him. The latch clicked with the finality of a prison sentence.

“So,” Dante said, his voice a low rumble that seemed to travel through the floorboards. His eyes moved over her in the dim light, lingering on the fear in hers. “This is the little artist.”

“Stay back,” Eliza said. Her voice trembled, but it held. She tightened her grip on the jar. “I’ve reviewed the proposal for the land transfer. The zoning laws in Havenport won’t permit a commercial casino. The deal is dead, Mr. Luna. There’s nothing for you here.”

Dante laughed — a wet, ugly sound that bounced off the high ceiling. He took a step closer, his boots grinding against the grit on the floor.

“You think this is about land, princess?” He shook his head, a cruel smirk settling onto his lips. “The deal isn’t about zoning permits or square footage. It’s about leverage. And right now, you are the leverage.” Another step. He was too large for the room. “Buck owes me considerably more than a plot of dirt. Since he’s short on cash, he offered collateral.”

“I am not property,” Eliza said.

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“Everything is property if you have enough debt.” He reached out, his hand massive, fingers weighted with a gaudy gold ring that caught what little light filtered through the grimy window. “You look like your mother. I saw photographs. She looked proud.” His hand hovered inches from Eliza’s face. “You look scared. I like scared.”

Eliza stopped breathing. She calculated the distance. If she swung the jar now, she might break his nose. She might buy herself three seconds.

BZZZZZT.

The intercom at the main garden gate screamed through the silence – a harsh, electric sound loud enough to wake the dead, reverberating off the stone walls of the estate and straight into the studio.

Dante's hand froze in the air. His head snapped toward the window.

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“Dad! Dad, pick up!” Sienna's voice shrieked over the ancient speaker system, distorted by static but unmistakable in its panic. “Anson Hyde is here! He's at the gate! He's driving through! Open it!”

The name landed in the room like a physical blow.

Dante's eyes narrowed to slits. He pulled his hand back as if something had burned him. He looked toward the main house, visible as a dim shape through the grime of the window.

“Hyde?” He spat the name like something foul. “Why is he here?”

The studio door rattled again – frantic knocking, from outside this time. Buck's voice came through the wood, high and breathless.

“Dante! We have to move,” Buck hissed through the crack. “Anson’s buzzing the gate. If he sees you here — with her — if he sees your car — the deal with Hyde Corp is finished. He’ll bury us in litigation. He’s unhinged, Dante. He’s obsessed with her.”

Dante looked at Eliza. He looked at the defiance in her eyes, then at the shape of something she was hiding behind her back. He weighed it. He was a predator, but he was also a businessman. Anson Hyde was an unstable man with deep pockets and a legal team capable of tying Luna Enterprises up for decades.

The greasy smirk returned — slow, terrifying, a promise rather than a conclusion.

“You got lucky, princess.” He straightened his jacket and smoothed the lapels with practiced calm. “But the debt stands. You belong to the deal. One way or another.” He leaned in close, his breath hot against her face. “Tell your uncle to fix this. Or I take the payment in blood.”

He turned and slipped out of the studio, disappearing into the shadows of the garden, moving toward the back service road just as the sound of the iron gates grinding open echoed from the far end of the property.

Eliza didn’t release the jar until his heavy footsteps had faded entirely into the grass.

Then her legs gave out.

She slid down the wall slowly, the Mason jar clattering to the floor, turpentine splashing cold against her jeans. She pulled her knees to her chest and pressed her face into her arms, her whole body shaking with the aftershock of adrenaline.

She was safe from Dante — for now. But Anson was somewhere on the other side of those gates.

In the dark of the studio, she couldn't decide whether that was a rescue or a different kind of trap.

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Inside the main house, the foyer had the feeling of a stage set for a tragedy. The crystal chandelier was dim, half its bulbs burnt out, casting long skeletal shadows across wallpaper that had once been silk and was now peeling from the walls in slow, defeated curls.

The heavy oak front door swung open with a violent bang.

Anson Hyde stepped over the threshold.

He didn't look like a man paying a social call. He looked like an executioner who had run out of patience. His charcoal suit was immaculate, tailored to perfection, but his physical state betrayed everything beneath it. His eyes were hollowed out, dark circles bruising the skin beneath them, and his face was gaunt. He vibrated with a barely contained, manic energy.

"Anson!" Sienna spun away from the hallway mirror, where she had been pinching color into her cheeks. She plastered a bright, desperate smile onto her face and stepped toward him, arms beginning to open. "I knew you'd come back for —"

Anson sidestepped her without breaking stride. He didn't look at her. To him, she was furniture.

“Where is she?”

His voice was flat. Dead. It carried a weight that made the air in the foyer feel thin.

Margo descended the grand staircase, wiping her hands on her skirt. She took in the desperation in Anson’s posture, the way his hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. She didn’t see a threat. She saw an ATM machine walking into her hall.

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“Mr. Hyde. Welcome,” Margo said, her voice thick with false warmth. “It’s been a long time.”

“I’m not here for pleasantries, Margo,” Anson said, scanning the house. “I know she’s here. I know Buck brought her here.”

“She came to visit,” Margo corrected, reaching the bottom step. “Family matters.”

“I want to see her,” Anson said, moving toward the stairs. “Now.”

“Of course. We all want what’s best for Eliza.” Margo stepped smoothly into his path. She gestured toward the study door to her right. “But first, we should talk. About the price of admission.”

Anson stopped. His eyes narrowed. “Excuse me?”

“Come in, Anson,” Buck called from the study. “We have business.”

Anson glared at Margo, then pushed through into the study. The room smelled of old paper, mildew, and cheap brandy. Buck stood behind the desk, pouring a drink with hands that weren’t entirely steady. He looked pale and sweaty, but his eyes held the same bright, acquisitive gleam as his wife’s.

Margo followed and pulled a thick manila file from the desk drawer. She dropped it onto the mahogany surface with a heavy thud.

“We know you’ve been watching her for years,” Margo said softly, closing the door behind her. “We know about the payments.”

Anson’s posture stiffened. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The tuition payments,” Buck said, taking a long swallow of brandy. “The medical bills. The charitable contributions to her university that kept her enrolled. You paid for her dormitory. You paid off the dean when she missed finals.”

Margo tapped the file. “And we have the photographs. The private investigator you hired to follow her – his clerk was very forthcoming. For a price.”

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Anson looked at them with pure, undisguised contempt. “You people are parasites. You fed off her misery while I paid to keep her alive.”

“Perhaps,” Margo shrugged, entirely unmoved. “But we have the host. And right now, the host is for sale to the highest bidder.”

“Mr. Luna made a very generous offer this evening,” Buck added, his voice gathering confidence now that the leverage was laid out on the table. “He’s willing to clear the estate’s debt entirely. And provide a nest egg. All for Eliza.”

Anson went still. The name Luna was a threat he understood completely. Dante Luna was a thug in a bespoke suit — a man who broke things for amusement.

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“You were going to give her to Luna?” he asked, his voice dropping to something dangerously quiet.

“We have to survive, Anson,” Margo sighed, with theatrical resignation. “Unless... there’s a counter-offer?”

Anson looked at the file on the desk. He looked at the greedy, cornered faces of the people who were supposed to be Eliza’s family. He hated them. He wanted to burn this house to the ground.

But more than that, he wanted her. And he realized, with a twisted, lurching sense of relief, that this was the simplest path. He didn't have to convince them of anything. He only had to buy them.

"Name your price," he said. No hesitation. No negotiation.

Buck's eyes went wide. He exchanged a rapid glance with Margo.

"Five million," Buck said quickly, aiming high. "And you clear the title on the estate. You pay off the bank foreclosure."

"Fine," Anson said.

He pulled out his phone. "I'm liquidating the last emergency trust fund. It's the only account Dallas's auditors missed. Every cent I have left." His thumb moved across the screen with controlled fury. "Done. Five million to the Cayman account I know you maintain." He looked up. "Now give me the key."

"The key?" Buck blinked, visibly stunned by the speed of it.

"To wherever you locked her up," Anson said. "I know you. You didn't leave her walking around freely."

“The art studio,” Margo said, gesturing toward the window. “In the garden.”

Anson turned and walked out of the room without another word, leaving the Solomons staring at each other in the sudden quiet. He didn't care about the money. Five million was nothing against getting her back. He had bought her freedom from them. Now he only had to convince her that he was the hero.

He crossed the garden at pace, his shoes slipping on the wet grass. The art studio emerged from the darkness ahead. He saw the heavy padlock on the door.

Rage flared in his chest. He didn't have the key. He didn't need it.

He pulled a multi-tool from his jacket pocket — something he kept in the car for emergencies — and jammed the pry bar beneath the hasp of the lock. With a grunt of effort and a sharp metallic snap, the metal gave way. He threw the broken lock into the bushes.

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He stood still for a moment, smoothing his hair, straightening his tie. He arranged his expression carefully. He needed to look like a savior.

He opened the door.

The door creaked open, pushing a wedge of moonlight across the dusty floorboards.

Eliza scrambled backward, tripping over a drop cloth. She raised the heavy wooden leg she had snapped from a stool, gripping it like a club. Her breath hitched in her throat — a ragged sound of pure terror.

“Dante?” she whispered, every muscle coiled to strike.

“Put that down, Eliza.”

The voice was familiar. Painfully, hauntingly familiar.

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A figure stepped into the shaft of moonlight. Not the hulking form of the gangster. Slimmer. Tailored.

“Anson?” She lowered the wood slightly, confusion wrestling with relief. “How did you —”

“I told you,” Anson said, stepping fully into the room. He looked exhausted, his face pale and drawn, but there was a manic brightness in his eyes. “I told you I would take care of you.” He spread his hands in a gesture of magnanimity. “You’re safe now. I sent him away. I paid them off.”

Eliza stared at him. The relief evaporated, replaced by a slow, cold dread.

“You paid them?”

“Five million,” Anson said, as if the number were nothing. “I cleared the estate’s debt. I paid Buck’s ransom. You’re free of them, Eliza. They can’t touch you anymore.” He took a step toward her, clearly expecting her to step into his arms. He was expecting gratitude. Tears, even. “I bought you back.”

The words hung in the air between them, heavy and toxic.

Eliza took a step backward and tightened her grip on the wood. “You bought me? Like a piece of furniture? Like a horse at auction?”

Anson’s brow furrowed. “I saved you! I did what had to be done! You were trapped, and I freed you!”

“You didn’t free me,” Eliza said, her voice shaking with barely controlled rage. “You just changed the owner. You think because you wrote a check, I belong to you now? That I’ll climb into your car and go back to being your pet?”

“I am trying to protect you!” Anson snapped, his patience giving way all at once. “Look at where you are! You’re locked in a shed, surrounded by people who would sell you for parts! I am the only one who values you!”

“Dallas values me,” Eliza said. “He values me enough to let me fight my own battles. He respects me.”

“Dallas isn’t here!” Anson swept his arm toward the empty room. “Where is your husband now, Eliza? Is he swooping in? No. I am the one standing in the dirt.” His voice cracked. “I am here.”

“He is here,” Eliza said, with a conviction that surprised even her. “He’s always here.”

“You’re delusional.” Anson’s hand shot out toward her arm. “We are leaving. You are coming back to the Manor, and we are going to forget this ever happened.”

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