

## Chapter 5 No.5

"Where are we going?" she asked as the car turned off the highway, heading toward Queens instead of Manhattan.

"To get your things," Julian said, looking out the window. "And to settle your debts."

"No," she panicked. "You can't go there. My family... they're..."

"I know what they are," Julian cut her off.

They pulled up to the peeling gray house she grew up in. She could already hear shouting from inside. Her father's voice. Her brother Leo's manic laughter.

She unlocked the door, and the smell of stale beer and desperation hit her.

Her mother, Linda, was in the hallway. When she saw Elena, her face twisted.

"You little slut!" she screamed, raising her hand. "You ruined everything Ryan called. The wedding is off! Who is going to pay Leo's gambling debt now?"

Silas caught her wrist in mid-air. He didn't twist it; he just held it there, an immovable wall.

"Don't touch her," Silas said calmly.

Her father, George, waddled out of the kitchen. He stopped when he saw Julian in the wheelchair.

"Who is this?" George demanded. "The cripple? You brought the cripple to my house?"

"This is my husband," Elena said, her voice shaking but loud. "We got married today."

"Husband?" Leo came down the stairs, looking high. "Does he have money? Because Ryan promised us a million."

"Five million," Julian said.

The room went silent. Her father's eyes bulged.

"What?"

"I will authorize a structured settlement of five million dollars," Julian said, his voice bored, as if he were buying a newspaper. "On one condition."

"Anything" her mother gasped, her anger instantly replaced by greed.

Silas pulled a document from his jacket.

"You sign this," Julian pointed to the paper. "It's a complete severance of parental rights and a restraining order. The payments will be managed by a blind trust. You violate the order, the money stops instantly. She ceases to be your daughter. She becomes a Sterling."

Elena stared at Julian. Five million? He said he was cut off.

"You can't do that," she whispered to him. "That's money you don't have yet."

"Hush" he said. "It's an annuity. I can manage the monthly flow."

Her father didn't even read the document. He snatched the pen. "Where do I sign?"

"Dad?" she choked out. "You're selling me?"

He didn't look at her. He was looking at the financial agreement Silas held. "You were always ungrateful, Elena. At least now you're useful."

He signed Her mother signed Leo signed.

Elena watched them. She watched the people who raised her trade her for a piece of paper without a second of hesitation. Something inside her snapped. The last thread of hope she had for being loved by them withered and died.

Silas collected the papers.

"Like dogs," Julian muttered.

"When do we get the first payment?" her father demanded.

"Let's go, Elena," Julian said, turning his chair. "You don't live here anymore."

She walked out of that house and she didn't look back. She got into the car, and for the first time in her life, she didn't cry. She felt cold. She felt hard.

Julian handed her a handkerchief. She hadn't realized a single tear had escaped.

"It gets better," he said.

"Does it?" she asked.

"No," he admitted. "But you get stronger."

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