

# Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

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Chapter 131:

Eliza buried her face in her hands. She had failed again. She had tried to be noble and only managed to sound indifferent.

In the hallway, Augustina pulled out her phone and dialed.

“She’s confused, Dallas,” she said, her voice tight. “She thinks you want to leave.”

“Does she love me, Auggie?” Dallas’s voice came through the line, raspy and weak.

Augustina hesitated. She glanced back at the closed door.

“She didn’t say yes,” she admitted honestly. “She said she doesn’t want to be a burden. She thinks it might be better if you were free.”

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A long silence followed. Heavy and still.

“Then I’ll make the decision for her,” Dallas said. His tone was dark, possessive, and final.

Dallas hung up the phone. He stood at the floor-to-ceiling window, looking out at the city — a circuit board of lights stretching to the horizon.

“She wants to let me go,” he muttered.

He pressed a hand to his chest. It hurt to breathe. The pneumonia was a dull, persistent ache, but the pain in his heart was sharp and jagged.

“Weston,” he called out. His voice was a gravelly rasp.

Weston appeared instantly. “Sir?”

“Prepare the discharge papers for Eliza,” Dallas ordered. “Have the car ready in an hour.”

“Is she going back to the Hydes?” Weston asked carefully.

Dallas turned. His eyes were dark, burning with a feverish intensity. “No,” he said. “She’s coming here. This place is a fortress.”

“Sir?”

“If she won’t choose to love me,” Dallas said, his voice dropping to a raw whisper more unsettling than a shout, “then I will keep her safe until she remembers how.”

He walked to his closet to get dressed, his movements stiff with pain and resolve. I won’t lose her. Not to Hyde, not to her own misplaced nobility. I bought her life back from the Hudson. It’s mine to protect — even from herself.

At the hospital, the door opened again. Eliza looked up, hoping.

It was Anson.

He walked in carrying a bouquet of lilies. “I spoke to the doctors. You can be discharged tomorrow.”

“I’m not going to your house, Anson,” she said, her voice flat with exhaustion. She turned her head away.

“You have nowhere else to go,” Anson said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a velvet box, snapping it open.

A massive diamond ring sat inside. Gaudy. Cold.

“Marry me,” Anson said. “Properly this time. I helped save you. We are family. We belong together.”

He pressed on when she didn’t react. “Dallas is reckless. He got himself sick and then vanished. He doesn’t protect you – he creates chaos around you.”

Eliza looked at the ring. It represented safety. It represented the past. It represented a cage she had spent her entire life trying to escape.

“No,” she said.

Anson looked stunned. “Why?”

“Because he jumped, Anson,” she said, meeting his eyes. “You didn’t.”

She drew a breath. “And because I love him. Even if he hates me. Even if he never wants to see me again — I love him.”

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Anson snapped the box shut. His face twisted into something ugly.

“He will destroy you,” Anson spat.

“Then let him,” she said.

Anson turned and stormed out. In the hallway, he pulled out his phone and dialed.

“This is Anson Hyde,” he hissed. “It’s time to call in that favor with the SEC. I want a full investigation into Koch Industries’ recent acquisitions. Start with S&D Restoration.”

Eliza was alone again. She waited. The sun went down. The room grew dark.

Then the door opened.

Dallas entered.

He looked like death barely warmed over — pale, unshaven, dark circles carved beneath his eyes. He wore a heavy wool coat and still shivered slightly. But his eyes burned with an intensity that cut through the dim room.

“Dallas,” she breathed, sitting up.

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He didn't smile. He didn't come to the bed. He stood at the foot of it, both hands gripping the rail.

“Pack,” he said. His voice was raw and damaged.

“Where are we going?” she asked, her heart hammering.

“Home,” he said. “And you aren't leaving. Ever.”

Eliza shivered. It sounded like a threat. It sounded like a sentence.

But she nodded. “Okay.”

The ride to the apartment was silent. Dallas sat on the far side of the seat, staring out the window, radiating a cold and impenetrable distance.

When they arrived, he didn’t carry her to the master bedroom. He led her to the guest suite down the hall.

“Stay here,” Dallas said, without looking at her. “Rest.”

He turned and walked out, closing the door behind him.

Eliza sat on the edge of the bed. It felt like a gilded cage — the luxury was intact, but the warmth was gone.

An hour later, a quiet knock. Mrs. Gable, the housekeeper Dallas had introduced once in passing, entered with a tray.

“Soup, dear,” she said gently. “Mr. Koch insisted. Chicken broth and vegetables.”

“Is he eating?” Eliza asked, taking the tray.

“He’s in the study,” Mrs. Gable sighed. “Working. He hasn’t slept in days. Running on coffee and stubbornness.”

Eliza ate. She needed the strength. She couldn’t fight for him if she passed out.

When the bowl was empty, she stood. A wave of dizziness rose and passed; she steadied herself against the wall and walked down the hallway to the study.

The door was ajar.

Dallas sat behind his desk, surrounded by monitors casting a cold blue glow across his face. He was typing furiously. He coughed — a dry, painful sound — and reached for a glass of water.

“You should be in bed,” he said, without looking up.

Eliza walked into the room. “Thank you.”

He stopped typing. He swiveled his chair around. “For what? The soup?”

“For saving my life,” she said, stepping closer. “For jumping. For everything.”

Dallas stood. He came around the desk, his presence overwhelming even in his weakened state.

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“I didn’t do it for thanks,” he said coldly. He was terrified to hope, terrified to let her see the wound still open in his chest. So he reached for the only armor he had left. “I did it because you are my responsibility.”

The word hung in the air.

Responsibility.

He was lying. She could see it in the tension of his jaw, in the way his hands clenched at his sides. He was trying to push her away – trying to make her pull back before she could hurt him again.

Eliza didn’t flinch. “Is that all I am? A responsibility?”

“Until the contract ends,” he said, his eyes hard.

“About the contract –” she began.

Dallas stiffened visibly.

Here it comes, he thought. The divorce. The 'better' option.

"I told Anson I'm done," she said clearly. "I told him the debt to the Hyde family is paid."

Dallas narrowed his eyes.

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"I don't owe them anything anymore," she continued. "I'm not their sister. I'm not their charity case."

"You told him that?" His voice lost some of its edge.

"Yes." She took a step closer, entering his space. "I chose to be here."

Dallas searched her face. He saw the sincerity in her eyes. But the echo of I love you – spoken in that dim hospital room, reaching for Anson's hand – was still too loud in his head. He couldn't trust it. Not yet.

He put the wall back up.

“Good,” he said, stepping back. “Then you can focus on your duties as Mrs. Koch.” He turned toward his desk. “Go to bed, Eliza.”

Eliza stood there a moment longer. He was cold. He was distant. He was frightened.

“Goodnight, Dallas,” she said softly.

She walked out.

The moment she was gone, Dallas leaned back against the doorframe. He exhaled — a long, shaking breath — and pressed the heels of his hands against his burning eyes.

She chose to be here.

But does she love me? Or does she simply have nowhere else to go?

In the guest room, Eliza lay staring at the ceiling.

He had built a fortress around his heart. But she knew the way in. She had the map.

He saved me, she thought. Now I have to save him.

“Promise me,” his voice echoed in her memory, haunting the silence of the morning.

“What?” she had breathed in the dark, hours ago.

“No matter how scared you get,” Dallas had said, his eyes locking onto hers, “you run to me. Not away from me.”

But in the harsh light of day, that promise felt heavy.

The silence in the dining room was not peaceful. It pressed down on Eliza’s shoulders like a waterlogged blanket, cold and suffocating. She sat at the long, polished marble table, her plate holding a slice of toast she had shredded into small, uneven pieces but hadn’t touched. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows, the city skyline was gray and overcast — a perfect mirror of the atmosphere inside.

Dallas entered the room.

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He didn't move with his usual predatory grace. There was a stiffness to him, a slight hitch in his stride that he tried to conceal with rigid posture. He wore a dark charcoal suit, the jacket tailored to perfection, but his face was pale. The shadows under his eyes were bruises of exhaustion.

He didn't say good morning. He pulled out the chair at the head of the table and sat. The leather creaked.

Weston stepped forward from the hallway, placed a thick manila folder beside Eliza's plate with a quiet thud, and withdrew without meeting her eyes.

Eliza stared at the folder. She didn't touch it.

"Eat," Dallas said softly, without looking at her. He picked up his fork and knife and sliced into his eggs with mechanical precision. The metal scraped against the china — a sharp sound that made her flinch. He brought a bite to his lips, forced himself to chew and swallow, and then a low, rattling cough escaped his chest before he could take another.

"What is this?" Eliza asked. Her voice was steady; her hands were not.

"Compensation," Dallas said. He took another bite. It looked as though eating pained him.

Eliza opened the folder.

The first page was a legal document. Bold letters at the top read: **DEED OF TRANSFER.**

She scanned the lines. Her eyes widened.

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Property: The Gilded Lily Restaurant. 5th Avenue. Transferee: Eliza Solomon Koch.

She dropped the folder as if it had burned her. The Gilded Lily. The crown jewel of the Chapman retail group. Claudine Chapman's personal pride — the place where she had held her high-society court, the place where she had sneered at Eliza a dozen times.

"I can't accept this," Eliza said, pushing the folder back toward him. "This property is worth millions. The real estate alone —"

"It's the price of your fear," Dallas said, his voice flat and devoid of warmth. "Claudine Chapman paid it. I took it as part of her family's asset liquidation — collateral against a debt she could no longer afford."

"I don't want her restaurant. I don't want her money," Eliza said, her chest tightening. "I just want peace, Dallas. I want us to be normal."

Dallas set down his fork. The metal clinked against the plate. He looked at her for the first time — his blue eyes dull and flat.

“You take it,” he said, “or I turn it into a parking lot by noon.”

Eliza stared at him. He wasn't bluffing. He would bulldoze a historic building on 5th Avenue just to make a point. Just to prove he could.

“You're a tyrant,” she whispered.

“I'm a businessman,” he corrected. He slid a heavy Montblanc pen across the marble. It spun and came to rest directly in front of her hand. “Sign.”

Eliza picked it up. She hated this. She hated owing him. She hated that his way of apologizing for the danger she had been in was to throw millions of dollars at her feet. It felt like another contract. Another chain.

She signed. Her signature was jagged, her hand trembling with frustration.

“Happy?” she asked, capping the pen with a snap.

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Dallas reached for the folder. As he extended his arm, his breath hitched — a small, involuntary flicker of pain that crossed his face before he smoothed it away. But Eliza saw it.

She looked at his chest.

On the left side of his crisp white dress shirt, a small dark spot was blooming near his ribs. Red. And spreading.

Eliza stood up immediately, her chair scraping back. “You’re bleeding.”

Dallas glanced down. “It’s nothing. Stitches pulled.”

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“It’s not nothing.” She walked around the table. The anger, the restaurant, the folder – all of it fell away. The caretaker in her, the part that had survived years of thankless service, took over without asking permission. “Sit still. Shirt off. Now.”

Weston stepped forward, hand half-raised.

“Leave us, Weston,” Dallas said.

Weston looked at the blood, gave a short nod, and retreated into the hallway.

Dallas leaned back and began unbuttoning his shirt. His fingers, usually sure and dexterous, moved slowly today.

Eliza brushed his hands aside. “Let me.”

She undid the buttons and parted the white fabric.

Her breath caught.

His torso was a map of old violence — scars from his military service, faded and pale. But amidst them, fresh and angry, a wound on his side told the story of the underwater fight with Jared Solder. The stitches were black against his skin. Two had torn open and were weeping blood.

“Oh, Dallas,” she breathed.

She crossed to the sidebar where the first aid kit was kept, brought it back, and knelt beside his chair. She poured antiseptic onto a gauze pad. “This will sting.”

“Do it,” he said, staring at the wall.

She pressed the gauze to the wound. The muscles beneath her hands jumped — hard and reactive. She worked carefully, her movements gentle and deliberate, cleaning away the blood.

He saved me. This wound exists because I exist.

She applied antibiotic ointment and taped a clean bandage over the area. Her fingers lingered on his skin. He was warm. He felt alive.

Dallas looked down at her. His eyes were dark, unreadable.

“Does it hurt?” she asked softly, her hand resting on his uninjured shoulder.

“Only when you stop touching me,” he murmured — a low rumble in his chest that she felt against her palm.

Heat flooded her cheeks.

She finished taping the bandage quickly, her heart hammering. “Done.”

She moved to pull away.

Dallas caught her wrist.

His grip wasn't painful, but it was absolute. He drew her slightly closer until she was standing between his knees, and held her there. The promise he had extracted from her in the dark hours before dawn echoed in the charged silence between them.

"I promise," she whispered, answering the unspoken question again — sealing the vow in the quiet intimacy of the room.

He released her wrist. He buttoned his shirt, covering the wound, covering the vulnerability. The moment sealed itself back behind his armor.

But the bloodstain on the white silk remained.

The penthouse living room was vast, silent, and suffocating.

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It was evening. Eliza paced back and forth across the Persian rug. The deed to The Gilded Lily sat on the coffee table like an accusation. The image of Dallas's bleeding wound was burned into her eyes.

It was too much. The money. The violence. The intensity.

She felt like she was drowning in his world. She needed air. She needed to know where Eliza Solomon ended and Mrs. Koch began.

The elevator chimed. Dallas walked in, returning from what had likely been a meeting devoted to dismantling another company that had displeased him. He looked exhausted, but there was a settled quality to his posture — a sense of order restored.

He began removing his cufflinks, dropping them into the crystal bowl by the entry. Clink. Clink.

“I want to move out,” Eliza blurted.

The silence that followed was absolute.

Dallas went still. His back was to her. He didn’t turn around for a long moment. When he finally did, his face had become a mask of sub-zero ice.

“Excuse me?”

“This – us – it’s too much,” Eliza said, her voice shaking but determined. “I need space. I need to process the kidnapping. Everything is moving too fast.”

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It was a lie. She didn’t need to process the kidnapping. She needed to process him – the fact that she loved him so much it terrified her.

Dallas walked closer, looming over her. “You are my wife. You live here.”

“It’s a contract marriage, Dallas!” Eliza stepped back, her voice rising. “We agreed on boundaries! You are buying me restaurants and taking bullets for me. That wasn’t in the deal!”

Dallas laughed – a bitter, jagged sound. “Boundaries? You want to talk about boundaries after I pulled you from the bottom of the ocean?”

“That’s exactly why!” Eliza cried, tears stinging her eyes. “I can’t owe you my life! I can’t be another debt on your ledger!”

Dallas stared at her. His jaw clenched so hard a muscle ticked in his cheek. He looked at her as though she had struck him.

He turned away abruptly. He walked to the bar cart and poured a glass of whiskey without offering her any.

“Do whatever you want,” he said, his voice flat. He took a long drink. “If the cage is open, fly away.”

A sharp pain bloomed in Eliza’s chest. She had wanted him to fight for her, perhaps. Or perhaps she had simply wanted him to understand. Instead he just looked rejected.

She turned and ran to her room, slamming the door behind her.

In the living room, Azalea rose from behind the large white sofa. She had been there the entire time, scrolling on her phone with headphones around her neck.

She walked over to Dallas.

“You’re an idiot, Daddy,” she said.

Dallas glared at her over the rim of his glass. “Go to your room, Azalea.”

“She thinks you only saved her because of the contract,” Azalea said, picking an apple from the fruit bowl. “She thinks she’s an obligation.”

“It doesn’t matter what she thinks,” Dallas said, finishing the rest of his drink. “She wants to leave.”

“Because she’s scared.” Azalea rolled her eyes and marched down the hallway.

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In the bedroom, Eliza was throwing clothes into a suitcase, crying – angry, messy tears.

“He deleted the video, you know,” Azalea said, appearing in the doorway.

Eliza froze, a sweater in her hand. She wiped her eyes. “What video?”

“The rescue,” Azalea said, leaning against the frame. “One of the security guys had his body cam running. Daddy made him wipe the footage. Scrubbed the cloud and everything.”

“Why?” Eliza sat down on the edge of the bed.

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Azalea walked in and dropped into the desk chair, spinning it slightly. “Because in the video, he was screaming your name like a maniac. He was doing CPR, breathing his life into you – and he kissed you before you were even breathing again.”

Eliza’s heart stopped. “He – what?”

“It was raw,” Azalea said, the smirk fading. “Not pretty. He deleted it because he didn’t want you to feel ‘burdened’ by his feelings.” She made air quotes around the word. “He didn’t want you to see him weak.”

She held Eliza’s gaze. “He’s not cold, Eliza. He’s just terrified you’ll leave.”

She glanced pointedly at the open suitcase. “And look at you. You’re packing.”

Eliza looked at the bag. It suddenly felt incredibly heavy — as though she were packing away his heart along with her clothes.

He hid his desperation to protect my dignity. To protect me from the weight of his love.

“I —” Eliza started.

“He’s a dumb guy,” Azalea concluded, standing up. “But he loves you. Just thought you should know.”

She walked out.

Eliza sat there for a long time, staring at the suitcase.

Slowly, she reached in and pulled out one item. A shirt.

She didn’t unpack the rest. Not yet. She was still scared. But she didn’t zip the bag shut.

The next morning, the city was loud. Horns blared, sirens wailed, and the wind whipped through the streets of Manhattan.

Eliza walked toward her art restoration studio. Azalea was tagging along, claiming she had a free period at school – though Eliza suspected she was cutting class to play bodyguard.

“You know, you could just tell him you’re staying,” Azalea said, kicking a pebble along the sidewalk.

“It’s not that simple,” Eliza said, clutching her bag strap.

A black SUV swerved to the curb and cut them off. Tires screeched. The sudden movement was a deliberate act of aggression against the city’s rhythm. Before Eliza could process it, the door flew open and Anson Hyde stepped out.

He looked terrible. His suit was wrinkled, his hair unkempt, his eyes wild with desperation.

“Eliza,” Anson said, moving toward her. The two bodyguards following them tensed immediately, stepping forward to intercept.

“Wait,” Eliza said, holding up a hand. The men stopped, rigid and ready. She wanted to handle this herself.

Anson reached her and grabbed her arm. “We need to talk.”

“Hey!” Azalea stepped between them and shoved his arm away. “Hands off, creep.”

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Anson ignored the teenager entirely. “Claudine is suicidal. Do you know what Dallas did? He destroyed her family’s legacy overnight. The stock is zero. They are bankrupt.”

“That’s not my problem, Anson,” Eliza said, ripping her arm from his grip.

“You have to talk to him,” Anson pleaded. “He listens to you. Tell him to stop the acquisition. Tell him to show mercy.”

Eliza stared at him in disbelief. “Mercy? Why would I help the woman who hired someone to kidnap me?”

“She didn’t know! It was Jared — he went rogue!” Anson said, sweat beading on his forehead.

“She created the hatred that fueled Jared,” Eliza said, her voice cold. “She slapped me. She fed me poison. And you watched.”

“You’re heartless,” Anson sneered, his face twisting. “You’ve changed.”

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“I grew up,” Eliza said. “Unlike you.”

Anson stepped closer, looming over her — the old dynamic, the old intimidation, flaring back to life. “You belong to the Hydes. You owe us your life. You are nothing without us.”

“She owes you nothing!” Azalea shouted.

Anson raised a hand as if to shove her aside.

Something inside Eliza snapped. The fear vanished, replaced by a white-hot protective instinct. She stepped in front of Azalea, placing her body between the girl and Anson’s outstretched arm.

“Don’t you dare touch his daughter,” Eliza hissed.

“His daughter?” Anson laughed, the sound cruel and hollow. “You’re playing stepmother now? You’re just a contract whore, Eliza.”

“I am Mrs. Koch,” Eliza said.

Her voice rang out clear and sharp above the traffic noise. People on the sidewalk slowed and turned to look.

“Dallas Koch is my husband. And if you touch us – if you so much as look at us wrong – he will bury you.”

Anson froze. He stared at her. He had never seen this fire in her eyes. The terrified girl was gone.

“You actually love him,” he realized, horror spreading across his face. “You’re saying this to hurt me.”

“I’m saying it because it’s the truth, Anson,” Eliza said. She took a step forward, her voice carrying across the gathering crowd. “I am not your fiancée. I am not your ward. I am Mrs. Dallas Koch. I love him, I chose him, and I will never choose you.”

At that exact moment, a city bus roared past, its air brakes releasing with a deafening hiss that swallowed all other sound. A sleek black Maybach pulled up silently behind Anson’s SUV. The two bodyguards – who had caught only her raised, defiant tone, not the specific words – moved in.

“Ma’am,” the lead bodyguard said, his voice low and controlled, his hand hovering near his jacket. “Get in the car.”

Eliza grabbed Azalea by the shoulder and steered her toward the Maybach.

She turned to Anson one last time.

“Goodbye, Anson,” she said. It sounded like a funeral rite.

She got in. The heavy door slammed shut, sealing out the noise, the wind, and the past.

The car sped away.

Inside, Azalea was grinning from ear to ear.

“You called him husband,” Azalea crowed. “You said you love him.”

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Eliza covered her face with both hands. Her heart was racing so fast she thought she might pass out.

“I did,” she whispered into her palms. “Didn’t I?”

The penthouse was quiet when Eliza returned. She sent Azalea to her room to do actual homework this time, then walked out onto the terrace alone. The wind was cold, biting at her cheeks. She looked out at the city lights beginning to flicker on across the skyline.

I love him.

The realization wasn't a relief. It was a terrifying weight.

That's why I have to leave.

If she stayed now, under the contract, she would always doubt. She would always wonder if he kept her out of obligation. And when the year was up — if he let her go — it would destroy her. She needed to stand on her own feet first. She needed to be Eliza Solomon, an independent woman, so that if she came back to him, she came as an equal.

Dallas came home an hour later. He had already heard about the incident with Anson from security. He walked straight to her, his hands gripping her shoulders, his eyes scanning her face.

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“Did he hurt you?”

“No,” Eliza said calmly. “I handled it.”

Dallas relaxed slightly, his grip loosening. “Good.”

Eliza drew a slow breath. “I’m moving out tomorrow, Dallas.”

Dallas stiffened. He dropped his hands. “We talked about this. No.”

“I’m not leaving the marriage,” she said quickly. “Just the apartment.”

“Why?” His voice was dangerously quiet.

“Because I need to be Eliza Solomon, not just Mrs. Koch. I need to know I can stand on my own.” It was a partial truth, but it was the one he needed to hear. “If I stay here, I’ll become dependent on you. And I promised myself I would never be dependent on a man again. Not after Anson.”

That landed. He knew her history. He knew that forcing her to stay would make him no better than the man she despised.

He clenched his jaw and turned to the window, looking out at the city. He was fighting every instinct he possessed — the soldier, the predator, the man who couldn’t bear to have her out of his sight. The urge to lock her in this tower, safe and contained, was a physical clawing in his gut. But he recognized the shadow of the Hydes in that urge, and it disgusted him.

“Fine,” he said at last, the word tasting like ash.

Eliza blinked. She had expected a war.

“But,” Dallas raised a finger, turning back to her, “I approve the location. Security must be top tier – doorman, cameras – or no deal.”

“Deal,” she agreed.

Dallas turned away to conceal the small, sharp smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. He already had a plan.

He pulled out his phone and typed a message to Zane: Activate Project Aurelia.

“I’m going to pack,” Eliza said softly.

She went to her room.

Dallas watched her door close. Run all you want, little bird, he thought. I own the sky.

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He called Azalea.

“You have a mission tomorrow,” he told her.

“Ugh, what?” Azalea answered.

“Show her the apartment. Make her take it.”

“What’s in it for me?” she bargained immediately.

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“I won’t ground you for the C-minus in Math.”

“Deal,” Azalea said.

The next day was a disaster of real estate.

Eliza viewed three apartments. The first smelled of wet dog and had bars on the windows. The second was a shoebox with a shower wedged into the kitchen. The third was decent, but the broker wanted a ten-thousand-dollar deposit.

“Ugh, this city,” Eliza sighed, leaning against a brick wall on the Upper West Side.

Azalea checked her phone and arranged her expression into one of pleasant surprise. “Oh! Look at this one. Just listed.”

She shoved the screen in Eliza’s face. The photos showed high ceilings, generous windows, hardwood floors, and a fireplace.

“The Aurelia?” Eliza read the building name. “That sounds expensive, Azalea. Look at that marble lobby.”

“It says a corporate tenant broke their lease — the owner wants it filled fast, big discount,” Azalea improvised unconvincingly. “Something about a tax write-off?”

“Let’s go look,” Eliza said, too desperate to interrogate the logic.

The building was a pre-war masterpiece. The lobby doorman tipped his hat as they entered. Eliza didn’t know he was on Dallas’s private payroll.

They were met by the landlady, Mrs. Albright — a sweet older woman with perfectly coiffed silver hair and a theatrical warmth about her. She was also a retired Broadway actress Zane had hired that morning.

“Welcome, dears,” Mrs. Albright beamed. “Let me show you Unit 4B.”

She unlocked the door.

Eliza stepped inside and gasped.

It was perfect. The apartment was fully furnished in tasteful Nordic minimalism — exactly her style. Light wood, cream fabrics, touches of sage green. It felt like home the moment she crossed the threshold.

“Why is the rent only thirty-five hundred?” Eliza asked, suspicion sharpening her voice. This has to be a scam. No one in Manhattan rents a place like this for less than eight thousand. What’s the catch? Is it haunted? Is the plumbing made of paper?

Mrs. Albright waved a dismissive hand. “Oh, honey, I don’t need money. My late husband left me plenty. I just need good energy in the building. Someone who will water the orchids.” She gestured to a silk orchid on the side table.

Eliza ran her fingers over the smooth surface of the dining table. “It’s incredible.” She looked up. “Is the security good?”

“Best in the city,” Mrs. Albright said. “Biometric locks. Twenty-four-hour surveillance.”

Azalea jabbed Eliza hard in the ribs. "Take it before I do."

Eliza bit her lip. It felt too lucky. It felt like a trap. But she was exhausted, and the sunlight streaming through the tall windows was so warm and unguarded. It was a perfect lie, and she was just desperate enough to believe it.

"I'll take it," Eliza said.

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