

Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 151:

“I know,” she mumbled into the crook of his neck. “But you’re warm. And you don’t lie. You’re the only real thing in my life.”

Her body went slack against him, the exhaustion and alcohol finally claiming her all at once.

Dallas exhaled — a sound of quiet, resigned longing. He bent down and scooped her up, and she curled into him instinctively, her head settling against his shoulder.

He carried her past the guest room and walked straight to the master bedroom. He couldn’t leave her alone tonight.

He set her down gently on the bed, removed her shoes, and pulled the duvet up around her. As he turned to leave, her hand shot out and caught his wrist.

“Don’t go,” she whispered, her eyes squeezed shut. “The monsters come when it’s dark.”

Dallas felt something crack open in his chest. "I'll stay."

He pulled a chair to the side of the bed. Eliza didn't release his hand. She fell asleep gripping his fingers like a lifeline.

He sat there for hours in the dark, listening to her breathing even out, watching the moonlight trace the curve of her cheekbone.

I will destroy anyone who makes you cry, he vowed silently to the sleeping woman. I will burn their worlds to ash.

The next morning, sunlight poured through the sheer curtains — merciless and bright. Eliza woke with a groan. Her head felt as though it were being slowly crushed in a vice.

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She opened one eye. This wasn't her room. It was the master bedroom. Dallas's room.

Panic flared for a brief, sharp second before she registered that she was fully clothed and neatly tucked under the duvet. She was alone. The pillow beside her bore a faint indentation but was cool to the touch. Her own pillow smelled like him. It smelled like safety.

She turned her head. On the nightstand sat a glass of water, two aspirin, and a note written on heavy cardstock.

Drink water. Azalea is coming over at noon. — D

Eliza groaned and buried her face in the pillow.

Across the city, in the high-rise offices of Koch Industries, Dallas sat behind his desk, phone pressed to his ear.

“Regarding Azalea’s accounts,” he said. “Restore her Tier 1 access. She’s shown... recent maturity.”

“Sir?” His private banker sounded genuinely surprised. “You said not until she was thirty.”

“Circumstances have changed,” Dallas replied, his eyes drifting to a live feed of Eliza sleeping peacefully on his tablet. “She’s contributing to family stability.”

Noon arrived with the subtlety of a hurricane.

The private elevator opened, and Azalea burst into the penthouse.

“Eliza! You are a magician!” she shrieked, dropping her designer backpack on the floor and launching herself across the room.

Eliza was perched at the kitchen island, nursing her third cup of coffee and wearing sunglasses indoors. “Too loud,” she winced, accepting the hug gingerly.

“Daddy unfroze my Black Card!” Azalea beamed, pulling back. “He sent me a text saying I was ‘contributing to family stability.’ What does that even mean?”

Eliza blinked behind her dark lenses. “I think I got tipsy and cried on him.”

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“Whatever you did, it worked! I can buy the Porsche now!” Azalea squealed, breaking into a small, triumphant dance. “Wait.” Eliza pressed her fingers to her temples. “You’re buying a car?”

“Two cars,” Azalea said, with an unapologetic wink. “One for me, one for you. Buy one, get one free. It’s a sale.”

Eliza sat up straighter. “No. Absolutely not. I am not letting you buy me a car.”

“Come on, you need one,” Azalea argued, hopping onto a bar stool. “Taking the subway is dangerous with Anson lurking around like a creep. Daddy says public transport is a ‘variable he can’t control.’ And you don’t have the Aston Martin anymore.”

“I returned the keys to Dallas’s security team this morning,” Eliza said firmly. “Driving a car worth more than my life felt like wearing a billboard. I want something that’s mine.”

She paused. “I’ll buy a used Honda. Something reliable. With my own money.”

“Fine. Be boring,” Azalea pouted.

But under the table, her thumbs were already flying across her phone screen.

Azalea: She refused the direct gift. Plan B?

Dallas: Execute Plan B. Make it look like junk.

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Later that afternoon, Eliza retreated to the small art studio Dallas had set up for her in a quiet wing of the penthouse. She was attempting to focus on a restoration sketch, but her hand remained unsteady.

Bella Rose, who had stopped by to drop off some files, was watching her with open suspicion.

“You have the ‘I got laid’ glow,” Bella accused, leaning over the drafting table.

“I have the ‘I’m hungover’ pallor,” Eliza corrected, carefully shading a cornice detail.

“Same thing. Was it the mysterious billionaire husband?” Bella teased.

“He’s just... complicated,” Eliza sighed, setting down her pencil.

“Complicated is code for ‘good in bed,’” Bella laughed.

Eliza’s phone pinged on the table.

Dallas: Dinner tonight? I’m making steak.

Eliza stared at the screen. Her heart did that stupid, traitorous flutter again.

She typed: I'm busy.

Her thumb hovered over the send button. She wasn't busy. She was going to eat instant noodles and watch reality TV.

She deleted it.

She typed: Okay.

Sent.

She could feel the net drawing tighter around her. The terrifying part was that she was walking into it willingly. She wanted the steak. She wanted the quiet. She wanted him.

"Who is it?" Bella craned her neck toward the screen.

"No one. Just spam," Eliza said quickly, flipping the phone face-down.

Bella smirked. “Spam doesn’t make you blush, Eliza.”

Eliza groaned. She was in so much trouble.

Meanwhile, at a discreet auto body shop in Queens, Dallas stood with his arms crossed, inspecting a vehicle raised on a lift.

Azalea stood beside him, wrinkling her nose at the pervasive smell of oil and grease.

“She won’t take it if it looks expensive,” Azalea warned.

“I know,” Dallas said. He turned to the mechanic — a man named Sal who had worked for the Koch family for twenty years. “Make the exterior look approachable. Cream white. Vintage. Maybe a scratch on the bumper.” He paused. “But inside, I want the V8 engine. Reinforced chassis. Bulletproof glass. Runflat tires.”

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Sal wiped his hands on a rag. "So you want a tank dressed up as a classic convertible."

"Exactly," Dallas said. "And install the AI interface. The new prototype."

"The one with your voice?" Azalea recoiled with a look of pure horror. "That is so cringe, Daddy."

Dallas ignored her. "Get it done by tomorrow."

On Wednesday morning, Azalea called Eliza down to the street outside The Aurelia, her voice breathless over the phone.

“You have to come see! It’s a miracle!”

Eliza grabbed her coat, hailed a cab, and made her way down, half-expecting a traffic accident or a celebrity sighting.

Instead, she found Azalea posed on the hood of a bright pink Porsche 911 — obnoxious and absolutely perfect for her.

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“Subtle,” Eliza laughed, shielding her eyes from the glare.

“I know, right? But look at this.” Azalea hopped off the hood and pointed to the car parked directly behind it.

It was a vintage convertible — a Mercedes SL type, painted a soft, creamy white. It had clean classic lines, a canvas top, and the kind of worn beauty that suggested a long and well-traveled life. There was a small dent near the rear license plate.

“It was a bundle deal,” Azalea said, her eyes wide with practised innocence. “The collector wanted to clear garage space for his Ferraris. He said if I bought the Porsche, I had to take this old thing too. Literally for a dollar.”

Eliza walked a slow circle around the car, running her hand along the bodywork. It was beautiful in a quiet, understated way.

“I can’t drive two cars,” Azalea pressed on, her words coming faster now. “You have to take it. Or I’ll have to sell it for scrap metal. That would be a crime against vintage aesthetics, Eliza.”

“Azalea, you are a terrible liar,” Eliza said. But the metal under her palm felt solid. Reassuring.

“How much?”

“You pay for gas and insurance,” Azalea negotiated. “Consider it a long-term loan. Indefinite.”

Eliza opened the door and lowered herself into the driver’s seat.

It adjusted automatically — sliding forward, tilting back — fitting itself to her frame with uncanny precision. She ran her hand over the steering wheel. It was warm. Heated.

Then she noticed the leather of the seats. It wasn't old, cracked vinyl. It was buttery soft, full-grain Italian leather — the exact grain she had admired in an Architectural Digest magazine weeks ago, sitting in Dallas's office.

“This feels... custom,” Eliza murmured.

“It's just... ergonomic,” Azalea said, visibly perspiring. “German engineering, you know?”

Eliza turned the key. The engine didn't cough or sputter the way an old car should. It purred — a deep, throaty rumble that vibrated through the floorboards and spoke of something far more powerful than the body let on.

“It drives like a dream,” Eliza admitted.

“Take it for a spin!” Azalea urged, practically pushing the door shut behind her.

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Eliza put it in gear and pulled out into the street. The car absorbed the potholes of New York City as if they simply didn't exist, its weight low and steady beneath her. It felt grounded. Deliberate. Safe.

She spotted a small logo etched into the corner of the dashboard display. Not the Mercedes star. A stylized K.

Koch?

She shook her head. No — that was too obvious. It had to be the custom shop's mark. Kustoms, or something equally on the nose.

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Still, the suspicion settled into her gut and refused to leave. The seat that fit her perfectly. The heated wheel. The engine that growled like a beast dressed in a vintage suit.

She pulled back to the curb and parked.

“I’ll take it,” she said, her voice firm. “But I’m paying you rent for it.” She knew it was a losing battle — a token gesture, nothing more — but she had to make it.

“Sure, whatever,” Azalea said, waving a breezy hand. Mission accomplished.

Eliza climbed out and started down the sidewalk. Behind her, the car’s lights flickered once, and the locks engaged with a deep, solid thunk — less like a car door and more like a bank vault sealing shut.

It felt as though the car were watching over her. As though he were.

Traffic on 5th Avenue was a gridlock nightmare. Eliza drummed her fingers on the steering wheel of the Ghost — that was what she had decided to call the white car.

She was going to be late for a client meeting at S&D.

She pressed a button on the console marked Assist, expecting a generic GPS map to appear.

Instead, a voice filled the cabin.

“Good morning, Eliza. Traffic on 5th Avenue is heavy. ETA is delayed by twelve minutes.”

Eliza went very still.

The voice was deep. Smooth. Synthesized, yes, but unmistakable. The cadence, the slight drop in pitch at the end of each sentence.

It sounded exactly like Dallas Koch — if Dallas Koch were a robot.

“Who is this?” she asked, staring at the console.

“I am Sentinel. Your vehicle’s operational assistant.”

Eliza laughed — a startled, incredulous sound. “Sentinel? Not something more... theatrical?”

“The designation was selected for optimal functionality.”

“I never set a profile,” she said, narrowing her eyes.

“Rerouting to avoid congestion. Turn right on 42nd Street.”

Sentinel ignored the question entirely.

Eliza listened closely. The measured pause before each response. The quiet authority in the tone. It was him — or a very precise recording of him.

At the Sterling Club, Zane Sterling was practically weeping into his glass of scotch.

“You gave away the Ghost?” He slammed his hand on the table. “The 1965 prototype I spent three years restoring?”

Dallas sat opposite him, attention fixed on his tablet. On the screen, a small white dot moved steadily through a map of Manhattan.

“She needed a car,” Dallas said calmly.

“You could have bought her a Ferrari! A Bentley! The Ghost is one of a kind!” Zane’s voice pitched upward. “It was my baby!”

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“It has the best safety rating,” Dallas said, without looking up. “Reinforced chassis. I added the bulletproof glass. It’s the only car I trust with her life.”

“You turned my masterpiece into a soccer mom tank?” Zane stared at him in open horror. “Bros before hoes, Dallas. That was the rule.”

Dallas looked up then. His eyes were cold and sharp as flint. “She is not a hoe, Zane. She is my wife.”

Zane closed his mouth. He deflated slowly into his chair with a long, surrendering sigh. “You’re gone. You are completely gone for her. You just gave away a two-million-dollar restoration project so she could drive to work safely.”

Dallas didn’t respond. His eyes drifted back to the small white dot moving through the streets of Manhattan.

Back in the car, Eliza decided to test the AI.

“Sentinel, tell me a joke.”

A pause.

“My humor parameters are uncalibrated,” the voice replied stiffly. “However, I can confirm there is a 40 percent chance of precipitation. Closing the convertible top is advised.”

That was exactly what Dallas would say. He had no patience for bad jokes.

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Eliza smiled and shook her head.

It was evening when Eliza returned to The Aurelia, still wrapped in the safe, solid weight of the Ghost.

She crossed the lobby, and Mrs. Gable — the sharp-eyed elderly neighbor from 3C who knew everything about everyone — waved at her from the mailboxes.

“New neighbor moved in today!” Mrs. Gable chirped.

“Oh? The unit across from me? 4A?” Eliza asked, unlocking her mailbox. The apartment had been empty for months.

“Yes. Very handsome young man. Quiet. But lots of boxes.” Mrs. Gable gave her a knowing wink. “Maybe you can borrow some sugar.”

Eliza smiled politely and stepped into the elevator.

When the doors opened on the fourth floor, Azalea was already standing in the hallway, holding a plate covered in tin foil.

“You’re late! We have to welcome the neighbor!” she announced.

“Since when do you welcome neighbors?” Eliza asked, unlocking her own door. “And I thought your dad bought the whole building. Why is Mrs. Gable still downstairs?”

“He kept her,” Azalea shrugged. “He said a building needs eyes, and Mrs. Gable watches the street like a hawk. Plus, she makes good cookies. Now come on.” She grabbed Eliza’s arm and hauled her across the hall to Unit 4A.

Azalea knocked with complete disregard for subtlety. Bang. Bang. Bang.

Eliza sighed and instinctively smoothed her hair. “Azalea, stop. He’s probably still unpacking.”

The door opened.

Dallas stood there.

He wasn’t wearing a suit. He had on grey sweatpants that hung low on his hips and a fitted black t-shirt, and he was barefoot. He looked effortlessly, infuriatingly domestic – and incredibly, unfairly attractive.

Eliza’s jaw dropped. “Dallas?”

“Hi,” he said, leaning against the doorframe as though this were the most ordinary thing in the world.

“You... you live here?” Eliza managed, pointing at the number on the door.

“Just moved in,” he said, with complete nonchalance.

“Why?” she demanded. “You have a penthouse. A literal palace in the sky.”

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“The penthouse has a leak,” Dallas said, his face arranged into an expression of grave concern. “And a termite infestation. Very bad.”

Eliza crossed her arms. “Termites. In a steel and glass skyscraper sixty stories in the air.”

“Mutant termites,” Dallas said, without so much as a flicker. “Very aggressive. They fly.”

Azalea dissolved into laughter behind her.

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Dallas shot his daughter a brief, quelling look before his gaze returned to Eliza — and softened.

“I wanted to be closer to my investments,” he said, looking directly at her.

Eliza felt the heat rise to her face. She knew exactly which investment he meant.

“You are stalking me,” she said, though her heart was doing something thoroughly unreliable.

“I am co-habiting in the same building. Totally legal,” he countered.

“Brownie?” Azalea extended the plate between them, shattering the tension with cheerful efficiency.

Dallas took a brownie. “Thanks.” He stepped back and pulled the door open wider. “Coming in?”

Eliza looked past him into the apartment. The layout was a perfect mirror of her own — the same walls, the same bones, the same windows. Like a reflection of her life, but emptier. He had moved into the space directly across from her sanctuary.

She stepped inside.

The apartment was sparse. Unopened boxes were stacked everywhere.

“You have no furniture,” Eliza noted, taking in the empty living room.

“I have a bed. And a coffee maker. Essentials,” Dallas said.

Azalea dropped onto a beanbag chair in the corner — the only piece of furniture besides a floor lamp. “It’s cozy. Minimalist.”

Eliza turned to face him. “Dallas, really. Why are you doing this?”

Dallas glanced at Azalea with a subtle tilt of his head. “Go check the... water pressure in the bathroom.”

Azalea rolled her eyes with theatrical exhaustion. “You two are so obvious. ‘Go check the water pressure.’ ‘Go buy milk.’ Just kiss already.” She marched off and pulled the bathroom door shut behind her with a pointed slam.

Alone, Dallas stepped into Eliza’s personal space. The air between them shifted.

“Anson knows the building’s general location,” he said, his voice dropping. “My security team tracked him. He used a shell company to rent a car and stayed just outside the primary surveillance perimeter, but we flagged him circling the block yesterday. He didn’t get inside — but he’s testing the boundaries. I’m not taking chances.”

Eliza felt the color drain from her face. “What?”

“So you moved in to play bodyguard?” she asked.

“I moved in because I sleep better when you’re within reach,” he admitted.

The vulnerability in his voice hit her harder than anything else could have. He wasn’t trying to control her. He was anxious. The formidable Dallas Koch was losing sleep because she was four miles away.

“You’re crazy,” she whispered – but there was no heat in it.

“About you? Yes,” he said.

He reached out and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, his fingers lingering against her jawline.

“Can I borrow some sugar?” he asked softly. “For real. I have coffee but no sugar.”

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Eliza laughed — a light, genuine sound that broke the tension cleanly.

“Fine. Come over,” she said.

They crossed the hall to her apartment. It felt warm and lived-in, still carrying the faint scent of the vanilla candle she had burned earlier. She handed him a jar of sugar from the kitchen.

“Stay for dinner?” she offered, before she’d quite decided to say it.

“I thought you’d never ask,” he said, and smiled.

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Azalea emerged from the bathroom. “Water pressure is fine. Can we order pizza? I'm starving.”

They sat on the floor of Eliza's living room and ate pepperoni pizza straight from the box. It felt like a college dorm gathering — except with a billionaire and a teenage heiress sharing a single pizza box on the rug.

Eliza found herself watching Dallas laugh at something Azalea said. He looked younger in moments like this. Lighter.

She realized she didn't want him to leave. She didn't want him going back to that empty, box-filled apartment across the hall.

Later, after Azalea had been collected by the driver, Dallas lingered in the doorway.

“Goodnight, neighbor,” he said.

Eliza closed the door and leaned against it, her heart still moving at a pace she couldn't justify. She stood there for a moment in the quiet, then reached for her phone.

Eliza: He's not that crazy.

A few nights later, a thunderstorm hit the city.

Lightning flashed in harsh, strobe-like bursts that bleached Eliza's living room white. Thunder shook the windows in their frames. Eliza hated storms. They reminded her of the night her parents died.

A knock at the door made her jump.

She opened it to find Dallas. He was holding a bottle of wine and two heavy-duty flashlights.

"I figured you might need backup," he said.

She let him in. The power flickered but held. They settled on the rug by the balcony window and watched the rain lash against the glass.

"You're not scared?" Eliza asked, taking a sip of the wine he poured.

“I’ve seen worse,” he said, with a darkness that suggested he meant something far beyond weather.

He shifted, and his sleeve rode up.

Eliza saw a jagged scar on his forearm. It wasn’t the clean line of his recent wound. This was older – puckered, discolored skin. A burn mark.

“What is that?” She reached out and touched it without thinking.

Dallas pulled back slightly, a reflex, then made himself be still.

“A souvenir from a Koch family ‘re-education’ compound,” he said, his voice flat. “It was disguised as a military academy. In Siberia.”

“Siberia?” Eliza looked at him in shock. “I thought you went to a Swiss boarding school. The one with the equestrian program.”

“That’s the PR version,” Dallas said, with a short, bitter laugh. “My father’s mother – the old matriarch, Genevieve. ‘Gigi’ to the family. She believed I was cursed. A bad omen after my mother’s death. She thought I brought bad luck.”

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He took a long drink of wine. “So they sent me away. To toughen me up. Or kill me. I was never entirely certain which they preferred.”

“I was ten,” he continued, his eyes fixed on the scar. “I learned to hunt before I learned algebra. This” – he touched the burn mark – “was from a hazing ritual. I didn’t cry. That was the rule.”

Eliza's heart broke quietly inside her chest. She had always assumed he was a spoiled prince, born into power and ease. She understood now that he was something else entirely. He was a survivor.

"That's why you're so hard," she whispered. "Why you built walls."

"I had to be," he said, looking at her. "Until I met you."

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"Me? I was just a charity case," she said.

"You were the only thing that felt soft," he said. "That day in the garden, five years ago. I had just come back from a tour. I was angry at everything. You were reading under a tree. I scraped my knee on the stone bench, and you — without even looking up from your book — just held out a bandage. A ridiculous pink thing with a cat on it. You didn't seem to notice me at all."

Eliza blinked. A memory surfaced — not of a face, but of a shadow, a fleeting presence. The lost book. The forgotten bandage.

"I didn't know that was you," she whispered.

“I know. But I knew,” he said. “You were the first person who didn’t look at me like I was a monster.”

He paused, and when he spoke again, his voice carried the faintest crack. “I’m not a curse, Eliza. But I am damaged.”

Eliza took his scarred hand in both of hers. She lifted it slowly and pressed her lips to the burn mark.

“You’re not damaged,” she said, smiling through the blur of tears. “You’re just... textured.”

Dallas looked at her the way a man looks at something he had stopped believing he deserved – like salvation, like the only fire capable of warming him through.

“Stay tonight,” she said. “Not because of the storm.”

“Are you sure?” His gaze was steady and intent.

“Yes,” she said.

He leaned in. The kiss was gentle and unhurried — reverent, not hungry. It wasn't about desire. It was about healing. A quiet seal on something new, forged in the truth of his scars and the warmth of her hands.

Sunlight streamed into Eliza's bedroom, bold and uninvited.

She woke up wrapped in warmth. Dallas was the big spoon, his arm draped heavily over her waist, holding her as though she were something he refused to lose.

They hadn't had sex. They had simply slept. It was intimate in a way that felt more dangerous than anything else could have been. She traced the line of his jaw with one finger. He woke instantly, his eyes snapping open — clear and alert before she had even pulled her hand back.

“Morning.” His voice was gravelly, vibrating against her back.

“Morning,” she smiled, turning to face him. No regret. Only peace.

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“I have to go to the office. Meetings,” he sighed, without moving an inch.

“Go. Make money,” she said, pressing her palm lightly against his chest.

He kissed her forehead. “I’ll be back for dinner.”

He left thirty minutes later. Eliza stood in the middle of her apartment, feeling light. Happy.

Sterling Club Group Chat

Zane: You slept there? Did you seal the deal?

Dallas: We talked.

Tyler: You? Talked? About feelings? Are you dying?

Zane: Oh my god. He used the Sad Boy tactic. You manipulative genius.

Dallas: It wasn't a tactic. It was the truth.

Back in the apartment, Eliza was packing for a weekend trip with Bella to a cabin upstate – a plan they had made weeks ago.

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She opened her suitcase. It was already half packed.

Eliza frowned. Dallas must have done it while she was in the shower.

Inside, neatly arranged, were her allergy medications in three separate packs, a cashmere scarf she loved, a can of pepper spray, and a GPS tracker disguised as a keychain.

And a note, written on heavy cardstock: Have fun. Don't talk to strangers. — D

She laughed out loud. He was overbearing, paranoid, and entirely too controlling. But she loved it. She loved that someone cared enough to pack pepper spray.

She zipped the bag. She felt ready for the world.

Downstairs, the Ghost was waiting at the curb.

She climbed in. "Sentinel, take me to Bella's."

"Route calculated. Drive safely, Eliza."

She pulled out into traffic and let the city open up around her.

Down the street, a dark sedan eased away from the curb.

Anson Hyde sat behind the wheel. His eyes were bloodshot, ringed with deep shadows. The interior of the car was littered with fast-food wrappers and empty coffee cups. He watched the white convertible until it disappeared around the corner.

“She looks happy,” he muttered, his knuckles whitening around the steering wheel. “Too happy.”

He started the engine.

She can't be happy without me.

The shout shattered the delicate silence of the studio.

Eliza's hand jerked. The fine brush she had been using to apply gold leaf to a nineteenth-century porcelain vase slipped, leaving a jagged, glittering smear across the pristine white glaze.

“Damn it,” Eliza whispered, her stomach dropping. She set the brush down carefully, her fingers trembling. She didn’t look up. “Bella, rule number one: do not scream when I am holding gold leaf.”

Bella Rose didn’t care about the gold leaf. She was practically vibrating, waving her tablet in the air as she swept into Eliza’s workspace. “Forget the vase. Look at this. The internet is broken.”

Eliza sighed and reached for a rag to blot the mistake before the adhesive could set. “Did a Kardashian buy an island? I’m busy.”

“Better. The Ice Prince,” Bella said, breathless. “Dallas Koch. The rumors are confirmed.”

Eliza went still. The rag stopped moving. The air in the room seemed to thin, the weight of those words displacing everything else. She forced her lungs to expand and kept her voice even.

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“What rumors?” she asked, her eyes fixed on the porcelain.

“The marriage.” Bella swiped at the screen and thrust the tablet under Eliza’s nose. “A source leaked a photo of a purchase order from a high-end jeweler. It’s blurry, but the date is recent. A custom diamond ring. Four carats. Flawless. The internet is hunting for ‘Mrs. X.’”

Eliza looked at the screen. The image was grainy – taken hastily, likely by a sales associate looking for a payout. But the header on the receipt was unmistakable. It was the same jeweler Dallas had taken her to. The date matched the very week he had placed the ring on her finger.

Her heart hammered against her ribs like something caged.

“I know it’s you, Eliza,” Bella whispered, leaning against the drafting table, her voice dropping low. “But the press doesn’t. They think she’s a model. Or maybe a diplomat’s daughter. Someone tucked away in a Swiss chalet.”

She sighed, almost dreamily. “Imagine being her. The power. The money. Waking up next to that face every morning.”

“Or the pressure,” Eliza murmured, picking up her brush again, though her hand felt numb. “And the secrecy. Maybe she’s hidden because it’s dangerous.”

Bella paused. Her eyes sharpened. “You sound worried. Is he keeping you hidden for a reason?”

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“I know rich men are complicated,” Eliza deflected, dipping the brush into the adhesive. “And I know that if I don’t finish this restoration, Gavin Ross will have my head.”

Her phone buzzed once against her thigh.

She pulled it out, angling the screen away from Bella.

Azalea: Code Red. Check the news. Don’t panic.

Eliza stared at the message. The panic was already there — cold and slithering through her gut. If her name leaked, Anson wouldn't need to hunt her anymore. The world would do it for him. He would turn her life into a public spectacle and let the press finish the work.

Across the city, the atmosphere in the CEO's office at S&D Group was glacial.

Dallas stood at the floor-to-ceiling window, looking out over the Manhattan skyline. His hands were clasped behind his back, his posture rigid. He radiated a cold, contained energy that made the room feel ten degrees cooler.

Azalea paced in front of his desk, her heels clicking a tense rhythm on the hardwood.

“Did you leak it?” she demanded, stopping to fix her gaze on his back. “To force her hand? To make her go public?”

Dallas turned slowly. His face was unreadable stone. “No. I don't play games with her safety, Azalea.”

The door opened. Weston entered, carrying a sleek black tablet, his expression grim.

“We traced the IP,” he said without preamble. “A burner account on a social platform, created three hours ago. But the location data points to a cell tower on the Upper East Side.”

Dallas’s eyes narrowed. “Specifics?”

“The signal triangulates to a three-block radius.” Weston tapped the screen. “Right in the heart of Hyde territory.”

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