

# Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 161:

“Anson,” Azalea breathed, her hand rising to cover her mouth. “But why would he leak it? He hates the idea of you two together.”

“He doesn’t need to hunt her — he already knows who she is,” Dallas said, his voice dropping to something quiet and dangerous. “This isn’t about finding her. It’s about exposing her. He can’t reach me. He can’t reach her physically. So he’s using the press as a weapon.”

He paused, the silence carrying more weight than the words that followed. “He starts a public hunt for ‘Mrs. X.’ The press digs, gets desperate, and eventually they find her. And when they do, Anson will be waiting with his narrative: the poor orphan, the gold-digger who trapped a grieving billionaire. He wants the world to tear her apart until she’s so broken she believes running back to him is the only safe harbor left.”

Dallas moved back to his desk and placed both hands flat on the polished surface. His knuckles were white.

“This isn’t just about Eliza,” he said. “He’s trying to smoke her out by setting the entire forest on fire. He’s putting a target on every woman I’ve spoken to in the last year.”

“He’s hunting you, Dad,” Azalea whispered.

“Let him hunt,” Dallas said. A dark, predatory stillness settled over his expression. “He’ll find a predator, not prey.”

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He looked up at Weston. “Scrub the photo. Kill the thread. Contact the platform administrators directly. If anyone publishes Eliza Solomon’s name in connection with this, sue them into poverty. I want that image gone within the hour.”

“Understood, sir.”

“And Weston.” Dallas’s voice dropped another register. “Find the employee at the jewelry store who took that photograph. Fire them. And make certain they never work in this city again.”

Weston closed the door behind him.

Dallas stood alone. He picked up his phone and stared at Eliza's name on the screen. Every instinct told him to call her, to hear her voice, to drive across the city and not leave her side until this was over. But he knew she was at work, holding together the fragile independence she had fought so hard to build.

He typed instead.

Dallas: Ignore the noise. You are safe. I handled it.

In the studio, Eliza read the message. The tightness in her chest loosened — just a fraction. She deleted it immediately, then shoved the phone deep into her pocket, as though the device itself were contraband.

The underground garage of The Aurelia was quiet, save for the hum of ventilation fans and the intermittent squeal of tires on polished concrete.

It was evening. Dallas's black Maybach pulled into its designated spot. He stepped out and loosened his tie with a sharp tug. The day had been a nightmare of damage control — silencing legal teams, scrubbing the internet clean, and ensuring no trace of the story survived long enough to take root.

Azalea was waiting by the elevator bank, leaning against the wall with her phone in hand. She looked up as he approached.

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“You scrubbed it fast,” she noted, falling into step beside him. “It’s like it never happened. The thread is gone. The account is banned.”

“Money buys silence,” Dallas said, pressing the call button. “And fear buys compliance.”

“Eliza is freaked out,” Azalea said, her tone shifting to something more serious. “She thinks Anson is watching her sleep. She asked me if the Ghost has a dashcam that records the interior.”

Dallas stopped. His hand hovered over the elevator panel. “She said that?”

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“Not in those exact words. But I know her.” Azalea shifted her backpack on her shoulder. “She still has that... bond with him. She’s waiting for the other shoe to drop. Waiting for him to punish her.”

“Stockholm syndrome,” Dallas said, the words coming out harder than he intended.

The elevator doors slid open and they stepped inside.

“Maybe,” Azalea conceded. “Or maybe she just remembers when he was her hero — before he became a villain. You have to remember, Dad, he raised her. He was the only family she had for ten years.”

Dallas looked away, watching the floor numbers change. A sharp pang of jealousy flared in his chest, hot and acidic. He hated that Anson had history with her — that he knew her childhood, her fears, her favorite colors — while Dallas was still learning the edges of who she was.

“She needs to see you as the hero,” Azalea said, poking his arm and breaking through the brooding. “Or better yet, the lover. You two are stuck in this strange limbo.”

“We are taking it slow,” Dallas said. “She needs space.”

“Slow?” Azalea rolled her eyes. “You’re moving at the speed of a glacier. You need a catalyst. Something to shake her out of ‘scared victim’ mode and into ‘wife’ mode.”

Dallas fixed her with a look. “No schemes, Azalea. I mean it.”

“I promise. No schemes,” she said smoothly.

Behind her back, she crossed her fingers.

The elevator opened on the fourth floor. Dallas walked to Unit 4A. Azalea lingered in the hallway, watching his door close.

Then she grinned.

She pulled out her phone and opened the Agent Provocateur app. She scrolled past the sensible silk pajamas without a second glance and went straight to the Bridal section. She found what she was looking for: a black lace set, very sheer, with a garter belt included. Expensive, scandalous, and precisely what the situation required.

She typed in the delivery instructions: Leave at Unit 4B (Eliza). If no answer, leave with neighbor at Unit 4A (Dallas).

“Oops,” she giggled softly to the empty hallway. “Delivery error.”

The following afternoon, Eliza was still at the studio, burying herself in work to avoid looking at her phone.

Back at The Aurelia, a courier arrived with a sleek black package and rang the bell at Unit 4B. Silence. He checked his instructions, turned, and knocked on Unit 4A.

Dallas opened the door mid-conference call, a headset pressed to one ear and an expression that communicated his feelings about interruptions with perfect clarity.

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“Package for Ms. Solomon,” the courier said, holding out the electronic pad.  
“Instructions say leave with neighbor if unavailable.”

Dallas paused. He muted his call and looked at the box — black velvet, heavy, with gold lettering. His first instinct was art supplies. His second, less comfortable instinct was Anson. Suspicion prickled at the back of his neck.

“I’ll take it,” he said. He signed the pad.

He set the box on his kitchen island. The apartment was still mostly bare — just stacked boxes and the essentials — which made the velvet package look strangely like a centerpiece. He ended his call, walked over, and examined the return label.

Agent Provocateur.

His eyebrows rose.

This was not paintbrushes. And it was certainly not from Anson.

Eliza bought this?

He stared at the box. The name was synonymous with high-end, provocative lingerie. The idea of Eliza – careful, reserved Eliza – ordering something like this didn't fit at all.

Unless.

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Azalea.

He groaned and pressed two fingers to his temple. He knew exactly what this was. A trap. A silk-and-lace trap, gift-wrapped in velvet.

He should leave it untouched. He should wait for Eliza to come home, hand it over, and say nothing.

The box sat on the counter and radiated temptation. It felt less like a package and more like a bomb — one that smelled faintly of expensive perfume.

The door buzzer sounded.

Dallas checked the monitor. It was Eliza. She looked tired, her bag slung over one shoulder, her hair loose and slightly disheveled.

He unlocked the door.

He looked back at the box on the island.

He didn't move it.

Eliza knocked on the door of Unit 4A. “Dallas? Mrs. Gable said you took a package for me?”

The door opened immediately. Dallas stood in the frame wearing a dark grey t-shirt that clung to his chest and a pair of sweatpants. He looked amused. And something else – something considerably more dangerous.

“Come in,” he said, stepping aside.

Eliza walked in. The apartment was still stark and mostly bare, but the kitchen island was dominated by a black velvet box.

“I didn’t order anything,” Eliza frowned, moving toward it. “Is it from the studio?”

“It has your name on it,” Dallas said. He leaned against the counter and crossed his arms over his chest.

Eliza reached out and lifted the lid. Tissue paper rustled softly beneath her fingers.

She pulled it back.

Her breath caught.

Inside lay a scrap of black lace so delicate it looked like spun cobweb. A garter belt with gold clips. And a pair of panties that were less underwear and more suggestion.

The heat started at Eliza's neck and flooded her face in an instant. She dropped the lid back down as though the lace had singed her fingers.

"Oh my god," she choked. "I didn't — this isn't —"

Dallas didn't look away. He reached into the box and lifted the bra between two fingers, holding it up to the light. "Size 32C," he observed, his voice clinically detached, though his eyes were anything but. "Accurate?"

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“Dallas!” Eliza lunged to snatch it back.

He raised his hand above her reach. A slow smirk settled on his lips.

“There’s a card,” he said, tilting his chin toward the bottom of the box.

Eliza snatched it up. Heavy cardstock, no written message — just a QR code and the words: Scan for message.

Panic made her irrational. She needed to know who sent this so she could have them erased from existence. She pulled out her phone and scanned the code.

Azalea’s voice filled the silent apartment, amplified mercilessly by the high ceilings.

“Eliza! Wear this for Daddy. He’s been grumpy. He needs a release. Love you – wingman out!”

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Silence.

Absolute, deafening silence.

Eliza wanted to dissolve directly into the floorboards. She wanted the building to come down on top of her. Azalea called him Dad – but in this context, with the lingerie, with the gold garter clips sitting right there –

Dallas’s eyes darkened. The pupils dilated until the blue was nearly swallowed whole. He lowered the bra slowly.

“Daddy, huh?” His voice dropped a full octave. It seemed to vibrate somewhere inside her chest.

“She means — you know — because she calls you Dad,” Eliza said, stumbling over the words as she backed up until her hips met the edge of the island. “It’s a joke. She’s young. She doesn’t know what she’s saying.”

“She knows exactly what she’s saying,” Dallas murmured.

He took one step forward, closing the distance, trapping her between himself and the marble counter. He placed one hand on the island beside her hip and leaned in. He smelled of scotch and something warmer beneath it. The air between them crackled.

“Is that what you want, Eliza?” he asked softly. “A release?”

Her heart was pounding so hard she was certain he could hear it. She looked up at him. His face was inches from hers. The scar on his lip was impossible to look away from.

“I... I should go,” she whispered. The words barely made it out.

Dallas held her gaze for one more beat, letting the tension stretch until it was almost unbearable. Then he pulled back.

“Take your gift,” he said. He collected the lingerie and folded it back into the box with efficient, maddeningly composed movements, then held it out to her. His fingers brushed hers as she took it. A spark — sharp and real — jumped between them.

“If you decide to wear it —” he leaned down, his lips grazing her ear — “my door code is 1024.”

Eliza grabbed the box and fled. She crossed the hallway at something close to a run, fumbling with her keys at the door of Unit 4B, and pulled it shut behind her.

She stood with her back against the door, chest heaving, face burning. Her body felt electric — alive and aching in a way she hadn’t felt in years.

She looked down at the velvet box in her hands.

1024.

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The next morning, Eliza tried to slip out early. She opened her door quietly and checked the hallway. Clear.

She stepped out.

At the exact same moment, the door to Unit 4A opened.

Dallas stepped into the hallway. He was wearing a navy suit, crisp and perfectly tailored, looking every inch the titan of industry he was.

“Sleep well?” he asked, pressing the elevator button. His voice was casual. His eyes were laughing.

“Fine,” Eliza said, avoiding his gaze. She walked straight into the elevator.

He followed. The doors closed, sealing them into the small mirrored box.

“Did you try it on?” he asked. He was looking at his phone, scanning emails, as though he had just asked about the weather.

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Eliza felt the blush crawl up her neck. “No. I threw it in the trash.”

“Pity,” Dallas murmured. “Waste of good lace.”

“Stop teasing me,” she said, watching his reflection in the mirrored doors. “It was Azalea’s prank. It wasn’t an invitation.”

Dallas pocketed his phone and turned to face her. He stepped closer, unhurriedly closing the distance between them. “Was it? Or was it a suggestion?”

“I am not a honey trap, Dallas,” she said, lifting her chin. “I don’t use sex to solve problems.”

“You are a trap, Eliza,” he said quietly. His gaze dropped to her lips, then returned to her eyes. “I’m just waiting to find out whether I can escape.”

The elevator dinged. The doors opened onto the lobby. Dallas stepped back, his expression sliding back into its customary composure as smoothly as a mask being replaced.

“Have a good day at work,” he said, and walked out — leaving her breathless and thoroughly unmoored.

Later at the studio, Eliza was attempting to focus on a cornice molding when her phone rang.

The caller ID read: Victoria Hyde.

The air in the room seemed to turn stale. She considered ignoring it. But old, ingrained fear — the kind that had been conditioned into her over a decade — made her answer.

“Eliza, darling,” Victoria’s voice was strained, trembling. “We need you.”

“I’m working, Victoria,” Eliza said, her voice cold. “And I thought we had established boundaries.”

“The wedding is off,” Victoria sobbed. “Anson postponed it. He’s not well — he’s truly unwell.”

“That’s not my problem,” Eliza replied, gripping the phone.

“He won’t eat. He won’t speak. He just sits in your old room, holding that little blue music box your mother left you,” Victoria wept. “He thinks you’re coming back. He’s delusional, Eliza. Please — just come for tea. To collect your mother’s heirlooms. If you tell him to stop, to his face, perhaps he’ll listen. He needs to hear it from you.”

Eliza closed her eyes. Guilt was a powerful weapon, and Victoria Hyde had always been a sharpshooter.

“One hour,” Eliza said. “To collect my mother’s heirlooms and say goodbye to you both properly. And then I never want to hear from any of you again.”

“Thank you. Oh, thank you,” Victoria wept.

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Eliza hung up. She felt sick. She needed to end this chapter completely – to look them in the eye and extinguish whatever hope they were still clinging to.

She texted Dallas.

Eliza: Going to Hyde Manor. Don't worry. Just severing the final tie.

His reply came immediately.

Dallas: The security app on your phone is active. I'll have a car waiting outside the gate. 60 minutes.

He was timing her. Protective, not controlling.

Eliza picked up her bag. She felt as though she were walking into a funeral. Or a trap — but not the honey kind.

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The iron gates of Hyde Manor groaned as they swung open. Eliza guided the Ghost down the familiar gravel driveway, the powerful purr of its engine a quiet shield against the oppressive silence of the estate. The house looked smaller than she remembered. The grandeur she had once feared now looked like nothing more than old stone and ivy straining to conceal the rot beneath.

Maria — the maid who had once slipped Eliza extra bread rolls in secret — opened the front door. Her eyes held a look of quiet pity.

“Miss Eliza.”

“Hello, Maria,” Eliza said softly.

Victoria was in the drawing room, looking aged and frail, her hands trembling as she poured tea into delicate china cups.

“Thank you for coming,” she said, gesturing toward a chair.

“Where is he?” Eliza remained standing. She kept her coat on.

“Upstairs. He refuses to come down,” Victoria said, the teapot rattling faintly against the cup.

“You said he was unwell. He sounds like a child throwing a tantrum,” Eliza said, her voice cold. “I’m not here to babysit his ego.”

“He loves you, Eliza. He made a mistake with Claudine,” Victoria pleaded, looking up with watery eyes. “He realizes that now.”

“He made a choice. For money. For status,” Eliza corrected. “He didn’t make a mistake, Victoria. He made a transaction.”

The sound of tires screeching on gravel cut through the room. A car door slammed. High heels struck the marble foyer in sharp, furious clicks.

Claudine Chapman burst into the drawing room. She was wearing a white coat, her hair wild, her face twisted in rage.

“I knew it! I knew she was here!” She leveled a manicured finger at Eliza. “The prodigal orphan returns!”

Victoria rose from her chair, alarmed. “Claudine, this is a private family matter.”

“I am family!” Claudine’s voice cracked. “I am carrying his heir!”

The room went silent.

Eliza stared. “Heir?”

Claudine placed a hand over her flat stomach and lifted her chin. “Yes. I’m pregnant. Six weeks.”

Victoria made a soft, strangled sound, her hand flying to her chest. “You... are?”

Eliza looked at Claudine and waited — for the pain, the jealousy, the old familiar ache of loss.

Nothing came. Only a wave of immense, uncomplicated relief.

“Congratulations,” Eliza said. Her voice was flat and entirely genuine.

Claudine blinked. She had come expecting tears. She had expected Eliza to crumble. Instead she received indifference, which was somehow worse.

“Don’t pretend you’re happy,” Claudine spat. “You’re here to steal him back. You’re trying to break us apart.”

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“You can keep him,” Eliza said, picking up her bag. “He’s entirely yours. Especially now.”

She turned toward the door. “I’m leaving. This is a circus.”

“Eliza.”

The voice came from the staircase like a thunderclap.

Anson stood on the landing. He looked disheveled and gaunt — shirt unbuttoned, hair unkempt, eyes burning with a feverish, manic hope as they fixed on Eliza. He did not glance at Claudine once.

“You came back,” he whispered, descending the stairs with slow, deliberate steps.

“To say goodbye, Anson,” Eliza said clearly. “Especially now that you’re going to be a father.”

Anson stopped on the bottom step. He turned and looked at Claudine as though seeing her for the first time.

“Father?” he repeated. The word left his mouth like a curse.

The air in the room grew suffocating. Anson didn’t look like a man receiving good news. He looked like a man realizing, for the first time, exactly how small his cage had become.

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“You’re pregnant?” Anson crossed the room toward Claudine, his voice dangerously quiet.

Claudine lifted her chin, though her hand trembled against her stomach. “Yes. The doctor confirmed it this morning.”

“That’s impossible,” Anson said, his tone dropping to a lethal calm. “We haven’t slept together in two months.”

Claudine went pale. Her eyes darted to Victoria, then back to him. “It must be from before. The dates are fuzzy. Doctors are often wrong about these things.”

Eliza watched them. It was pathetic. It was a tragedy she was no longer part of.

“Well, fuzzy math or not, a baby is a blessing,” Eliza said cheerfully. She meant it as a knife twist, and it landed perfectly. “I wish you both a very happy life. Truly.”

She smiled – a genuine, utterly dismissive smile.

That smile broke him.

“Stop it!” Anson roared. He lunged across the room and seized Eliza’s arm. “Don’t smile at me like I’m a stranger! Scream at me! Hit me!” He shook her. “Show me you care!”

“Anson! Let her go!” Victoria cried, dropping her teacup. It shattered on the floor.

“You are hurting me,” Eliza said, her voice perfectly level, though her arm throbbed under his grip. She didn’t struggle. She simply looked at him with empty, patient eyes.

“Tell her you hate her!” He pointed a shaking finger at Claudine. “Tell her you love me!”

“I don’t hate her,” Eliza said quietly. “I pity her. She has to live with you.”

Anson’s face contorted. The vein at his temple stood out sharply. “You think you’re better than us? Because of Koch? Because your new husband bought you a new life?”

“He didn’t buy me,” Eliza said, her voice like drawn steel. “He treats me like a person. That’s something you never understood.”

From the corner, Claudine let out a shrill laugh. “He’s using you! You’re just a flavor of the month – a charity project with a pretty face!”

“And you’re a trap that failed,” Anson spun on Claudine, his rage pivoting with terrifying ease.

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“Get out! Both of you!” He snatched a heavy crystal vase from the side table and hurled it at the wall.

It exploded near Eliza’s feet. Shards skittered across the floor in every direction.

“You are not leaving until you admit you still love me!” He moved to block the drawing room door, his breath ragged, his eyes wild. He was past reason. Dangerous.

Eliza’s hand slipped into her coat pocket. Her fingers closed around the cold metal canister Dallas had packed.

“Move, Anson,” she said, her voice steady and deliberate. “Or I will make you move.”

“Anson, stop! Think of the baby!” Claudine grabbed his arm, trying to pull him back.

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Anson looked down at her. His expression curdled into something cold and contemptuous.

“There is no baby, is there?” he said softly.

Claudine flinched. The lie collapsed behind her eyes before she could stop it.

“You liar!” he roared.

Eliza moved. While his attention snapped to Claudine, she turned, crossed the room in three quick strides, and threw the latch on the French doors. She burst out into the cold, sharp air of the garden and didn’t look back.

Eliza ran across the manicured lawn. The gravel of the driveway crunched under her boots. The cold air burned her lungs.

“Eliza! Stop!” Anson’s voice rang out behind her.

She didn’t look back. She heard the heavy thud of footsteps in pursuit.

“Don’t leave me!” Claudine screamed.

Eliza glanced over her shoulder as she reached the iron gate.

Anson had stopped. Claudine had seized his jacket, trying to drag him back. Anson spun around. His hand closed around Claudine's throat.

“You ruined everything! You liar!” He squeezed.

Claudine gasped, clawing at his hands. Her face darkened. Her heels scraped uselessly against the gravel.

Eliza froze.

“Anson! Let her go! You'll kill her!” she screamed from the gate.

The sound of her voice cut through him. He looked up, wild-eyed – and released Claudine.

Claudine crumpled onto the grass, coughing and sobbing, both hands pressed to her throat. Anson stared at his own hands, then up at Eliza.

“Eliza... I...”

“You’re a monster,” she said, trembling.

She shoved the pedestrian gate open and sprinted out onto the public road. She didn’t go to her car. She couldn’t. Her keys were in the bag she had dropped in the drawing room during the confrontation, and even if she’d had them, she couldn’t bear the thought of being enclosed in a metal box anywhere near him. She just needed distance from the violence. From all of it.

She ran until her legs burned, until the gates of Hyde Manor were well behind her. She reached a small park, her chest heaving, and dropped onto the nearest bench.

A sleek vintage Rolls Royce was parked awkwardly on the shoulder nearby, its hazard lights blinking patiently. An elderly woman stood beside it, speaking sharply into a phone, her posture radiating the particular impatience of someone accustomed to being kept waiting. As Eliza watched, a leather-bound tote bag slipped from the woman’s grasp, scattering a collection of antique silver locket across the pavement.

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Eliza got up without thinking. She crouched down, her hands still trembling, and began gathering the delicate pieces.

“Here – let me help you,” she said, still breathless.

The woman ended her call and looked down. She had sharp blue eyes and silver hair set in a perfect bob, and she was wearing a vintage Chanel suit that cost more than Eliza's tuition had.

“Thank you, dear. My driver is an imbecile. And this car is a relic,” the woman said, her tone crisp and entirely matter-of-fact.

This was Genevieve Koch – Gigi, to the family. Dallas's grandmother. The matriarch who had exiled a ten-year-old boy to Siberia.

“Are you all right? You look as though you've fled a burning building,” Gigi observed, accepting a locket from Eliza's hand.

“Just... a bad ex,” Eliza said, wiping a tear that had escaped before she could catch it. “A very bad ex.”

“An ex-boyfriend is a poor investment,” the woman replied. “They offer diminishing returns. A husband is a strategic necessity, but an ex is simply a liability on the balance sheet.”

A laugh bubbled out of Eliza — hysterical, involuntary, and genuinely relieved.

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“I am Genevieve Koch,” the woman said, extending a gloved hand.

“I'm Eliza.” She shook it, her own hand feeling small and bare by comparison.

“Eliza.” Gigi gave a single approving nod, her gaze turning analytical as she studied Eliza's face. “A solid name. You have honest eyes — a rare commodity. My grandson is surrounded entirely by sycophants,” she added, more to herself than to Eliza.

A second black car — a modern sedan — pulled up behind the Rolls.

“Finally,” Gigi said with a sharp exhale. She looked at Eliza. “My transportation has arrived. May I offer you a lift? You look as though you need to be somewhere considerably far from here.”

Eliza glanced back down the road toward Hyde Manor.

“Yes,” she said. “Please.”

The interior of the car smelled of expensive leather and quiet discipline. Eliza sank into the seat, her adrenaline draining away into a deep, bone-weary exhaustion.

“Where to?” Gigi asked, adjusting her gloves.

“The Aurelia, please,” Eliza said.

“Ah. My grandson’s latest acquisition.” Gigi waved a dismissive hand. “He collects buildings the way other men collect mistresses.”

She continued without prompting, her sharp eyes fixed on Eliza's face. "He's a workaholic. Brilliant, but cold. A frozen asset. He requires a wife — a true partner who can manage him." She paused. "Are you unattached, dear?"

Eliza suppressed a nervous twitch. "I have a boyfriend, actually," she said, the lie and the truth knotting together somewhere in her chest.

"A boyfriend?" Gigi's interest sharpened visibly. "Is he a man of substance, or merely a pretty distraction? Does he value you?"

Eliza thought of Dallas. The car. The pepper spray. The way he had held her through nightmares. The way he had jumped into a freezing river without hesitation.

"He's... intense," she admitted softly. "Protective. And surprisingly kind, beneath all the ice."

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Gigi studied her with the unhurried precision of someone who had spent a lifetime reading people. “He sounds adequate. A pity — I was considering offering you my grandson as a project. He’s obscenely wealthy.” She paused, then dropped the name like a gauntlet. “Koch Industries.”

Eliza went very still.

The name landed like a physical blow. This was the woman from Dallas’s stories — the one who had sent a ten-year-old boy to Siberia. A sudden, cold fury coiled in her stomach, and she had to consciously relax her hands in her lap. This elegant, composed woman sitting beside her was the source of his deepest scars. She couldn’t reveal she was the secret wife. It would look like a calculated scheme.

“Oh,” Eliza said, keeping her expression carefully neutral. “I’ve heard of them.”

“Well, should your ‘adequate’ boyfriend prove insufficient, you have my card,” Gigi said, producing an embossed piece of heavy cardstock and placing it in Eliza’s hand.

The car pulled up to The Aurelia.

“Thank you, Gigi,” Eliza said, climbing out.

Gigi watched her cross the sidewalk toward the entrance. “Driver,” she said quietly. “Find out everything you can about that young woman’s boyfriend. I want a full dossier. Let’s see if he measures up.”

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“Yes, Madame.”

Eliza stepped into the lobby, exhausted down to her bones. She needed to tell Dallas about Anson. And now, about his grandmother.

She was moving toward the elevator when a shadow detached itself from behind one of the large marble pillars.

Anson. He looked worse than he had at the manor — hair disheveled from driving with the windows down, a smudge of grease on his cuff. He had driven like a madman to get here before her.

“We need to talk,” he said. “Without the screaming.”

“Get out, Anson.” Eliza gestured toward the concierge desk. “Or I call security.”

“Just five minutes,” he said. “Then I’ll leave you alone forever. I promise.”

Eliza held his gaze. She wanted “forever.” She wanted him gone permanently and completely.

“Five minutes,” she said. “Here. In the lobby.”

They sat in the lobby seating area, near a large potted fern — public enough to be safe, private enough to talk. Two of Dallas’s security guards stood at a discreet distance by the elevators, their eyes fixed on Anson, ready to move at the first signal.

“I left Claudine,” Anson began, smoothing his wrinkled jacket.

“You choked her, Anson,” Eliza said, her voice tight. “You didn’t leave her. You assaulted her.”

“She lied! There is no baby!” His eyes went wide. “She tried to trap me!”

“It doesn’t matter. You are toxic,” Eliza said. “You destroy everything you touch.”

“I built you!” Anson snapped, his composure fracturing. “I saved you from the foster system! I gave you a home! You owe me!”

“I paid you back,” Eliza said, rising to her feet. “With years of obedience. With my silence. The debt is paid.”

“It’s not paid until I say it is!” He grabbed her wrist, pulling her toward him.

The security guards stepped forward immediately, hands moving to their earpieces. Anson ignored them.

“Come back to the Manor,” he whispered, his tone shifting into something unsettlingly soft. “We can start over. I’ll forgive you.”

“Forgive me? For what?”

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