

Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 231:

Eliza agreed. She dressed with care, choosing a soft blue dress Dallas had bought her.

She went downstairs to collect the mail before heading out. The street was relatively quiet.

She was walking toward the curb when a shadow detached itself from the building.

“Eliza.”

She froze. Anson.

He looked better than he had in the park — clean-shaven, suit pressed, expression determined.

“I have nothing to say to you, Anson,” Eliza said, pulling out her phone to summon a car.

“I broke up with Claudine,” Anson announced. “Officially. The engagement is void.”

“Good for you,” Eliza said, not looking at him. “But it changes nothing for us.”

Anson stepped into her path. “It changes everything. I’m free. We can start over.”

“I’m married, Anson. And I love him,” Eliza said firmly.

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Anson flinched. Then his eyes turned cold.

“You love a safety net,” he spat. “You love the illusion of a savior.” He paused, letting the silence sharpen. “I know why he’s really with you, Eliza. The debt his father owes your mother.”

Eliza stilled. “What debt?”

“Dallas didn’t tell you?” Anson smiled — sharp and predatory. “His father, Ferd Koch, had an affair. Decades ago. With a woman who wasn’t his wife. Your mother, Diana, was her confidante. She helped the woman and her child disappear, to protect them from Ferd’s wrath. It was the Koch family’s dirtiest secret.”

He let that settle before twisting the knife. “Dallas is marrying you to buy your silence. Your mother is gone, but you’re a loose end. He’s tying you to him with a ring to make sure the secret never comes out. It’s hush money, Eliza — disguised as a wedding.”

“That makes no sense,” Eliza shook her head, her world tilting again.

“Doesn’t it?” Anson pressed. “Why else would the King of New York marry a bankrupt girl he barely knew? Gratitude? No. It’s a transaction. A liability management strategy.”

Eliza wavered. The logic was twisted, but in the insecure corners of her mind, it found a foothold. Was I just a liability he was managing?

Anson extended his hand. “Come with me. I have proof. I’ll show you.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” Eliza said, stepping back and clutching her purse.

“Fine.” Anson pulled out his phone. “Look at this.”

He opened a file. A bank transfer record — a personal transfer from Dallas Koch to the Solomon Charity Foundation. The amount was staggering. The date was from three years ago, long after her mother’s death but right before Solomon Industries began its final, catastrophic decline.

“He wasn’t supporting her charity,” Anson said, his voice smooth and measured. “He was setting the stage. A down payment on his conscience before he let you fall — just so he could be the one to catch you. A donation to honor her memory? No. It was a strategic investment.” He paused. “He feels obligated. A debt of honor to protect his family’s name. It’s not love.”

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His voice softened to something almost gentle. “You are a receipt, Eliza. A line item in his family’s ledger.”

Eliza stared at the transfer. It looked real. Because it is real, a voice whispered inside her. But the context...

“If he loved you, why did he wait until you were ruined to step in?” Anson asked. He answered before she could. “Because he wanted you cheap. He wanted you grateful.”

“Stop it,” Eliza said, feeling sick.

“The Koch family will never accept you. You know that.” Anson pressed on the bruise with quiet precision. “They are royalty. You are... a scandal.” His tone shifted again, softening to something almost tender. “I can protect you. I know you. I accept your damage. We are the same, El. Broken toys.” He touched her arm.

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Eliza looked at him. For just a moment, the old familiarity tugged at her — the shared history, the worn grooves of a decade.

But underneath it was fear. Fear that Dallas was too good to be true. Fear that she really was just a problem he was solving.

“I need to go,” Eliza said, pulling her arm free.

“Go ask him then,” Anson called after her. “Ask him if his family accepts you. Watch him hesitate.”

Eliza turned and walked away quickly. A black sedan with tinted windows pulled silently to the curb, summoned by her app. She got in and locked the door, leaving Anson on the sidewalk.

The car eased into traffic. For ten minutes she said nothing, just stared out the window as the city blurred past, her hands trembling in her lap.

She looked at her ring. Is it a shackle? Or a gift?

She texted Dallas: Where are you?

He replied instantly: Office. Waiting for you for lunch. Azalea said you were coming.

He was waiting. Like a loyal dog. Or a patient spider.

Eliza pressed her fist against the seat beside her. “I hate this doubt.”

She spoke to the car’s AI. “Sentinel, change destination. Koch Tower.” She needed to see his eyes when she asked.

The car changed course, heading toward the massive glass building. It loomed ahead – cold, intimidating. Scandal, Anson had called her.

She drew a slow breath as the car pulled into the private entrance.

When she stepped out, Anson was already there. He had followed her.

“You followed me?” Eliza spun around, anger flaring.

“I’m saving you from humiliation,” Anson said, seizing her arm. “Don’t go up there.”

People in the lobby were already staring. It was becoming a scene.

“Let go, Anson,” Eliza struggled against his grip.

“They will chew you up,” Anson pleaded. “Come back to the Hyde Estate. Where you belong.”

“I belong where I choose!” Eliza snapped.

Up in his office, Dallas glanced at the security monitor on his desk — a habit long ingrained in him. He saw the commotion in the lobby. He saw Anson’s hand on Eliza’s arm. A glacial rage, cold and absolute, moved through him. He was on his feet before he had even registered the decision.

The elevator doors pinged open.

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Dallas strode out, flanked by Weston and two security guards, looking like a thundercloud in a dark suit. He crossed the lobby in three strides, seized Anson's wrist, and twisted. Hard.

Anson yelped and released her.

Dallas stepped between them — a solid wall.

“Touch my wife again,” he said, his voice low and deadly, “and you lose the hand.”

Anson rubbed his wrist, sneering. “She’s your wife on paper. She’s my family in spirit.”

“She is nothing to you,” Dallas said. “You lost her.”

“Did you tell her about your father’s dirty laundry?” Anson threw out, grasping for chaos. “The affair? The hush money?”

Dallas glanced at Eliza. He saw the fear in her eyes. The doubt.

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“There is no hush money,” he said to her directly, ignoring Anson entirely. “Only love.”

“Prove it,” Anson shouted. “Tell her your parents accept her!”

Dallas paused. A flicker — barely there, but visible. He knew his parents were returning, and he knew how difficult they would be.

Anson laughed. “See?”

“My parents don’t matter,” Dallas said, his voice ringing through the lobby. “I matter. And I claim her.” He wrapped his arm around Eliza’s waist and pulled her firmly against him. “Security – remove Mr. Hyde. Permanently. And the front desk staff who let him in are dismissed.”

The guards swarmed Anson and moved him toward the revolving doors.

“You’re making a mistake, Eliza!” Anson shouted as he was dragged out. “He’s using you!”

The doors spun shut behind him. Silence returned to the lobby. The staff went back to work, keeping their eyes carefully down.

Eliza looked up at Dallas. “Is it true? About your father?”

“We need to talk,” Dallas said. “Not here.”

He guided her to the private elevator. “To the top.”

Dallas's office was a fortress of glass overlooking the city, separated from the world below.

Dallas locked the door and turned to face her.

"Ask me," he said. "Whatever he told you."

"Did your father have an affair? Did my mother help hide it? Is our marriage a payment to keep that secret?" Eliza's voice trembled on every word.

"My father is a man of many secrets," Dallas said, stepping closer. "And yes — your mother was a kind soul who helped someone he had wronged. I made a donation to her charity three years ago to honor her memory. It had nothing to do with you. Or this." He gestured between them.

"And the debt?" Eliza pressed.

"The only debt I have is to my own heart," Dallas said. "For waiting too long."

"Anson said your love is calculated," Eliza said, giving voice to her deepest fear. "A transaction."

Dallas laughed – short, bitter.

“Calculated?” He ran a hand through his hair. “Eliza, if I were calculating, I would have married a senator’s daughter. Someone with connections. Someone safe.” He counted on his fingers. “I married the daughter of a bankrupt family. With a murderer for an uncle. A stalker ex-fiancé. And a media storm that follows her everywhere.” He looked at her. “Does that sound like a good business deal to you?”

Eliza blinked. “No. It sounds like a liability.”

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“Exactly,” Dallas said. “You are a liability. A risk. A danger to my stability.” He stepped close and cupped her face in his hands.

“And yet,” he whispered.

“I am hopeless. I am absolute. I would burn this tower down to keep you.” His voice broke. “This isn’t gratitude. This isn’t a scheme. This is obsession. Love. Whatever you want to call it.” He held her gaze. “I don’t want you because I owe you. I want you because I am empty without you.”

The raw confession hit Eliza like a wave, washing away Anson’s poison, dissolving the doubt entirely.

“You really love me,” she whispered.

“More than I should,” Dallas said. “More than is safe.”

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Eliza threw her arms around his neck. "Then keep me." She kissed him. "Risk and all."

Dallas kissed her back. It was a seal. A vow.

The cold war was over. The walls were down.

"My parents are coming back," Dallas murmured against her lips. "Next week."

"Let them come," Eliza said, feeling brave in his arms. "We'll face them."

"They will try to separate us," Dallas warned.

"They can try," Eliza smiled.

Dallas held her tight. He knew the storm that was coming with Ferd and Jeannine. But here, high above the city, holding her in the quiet of his office, he had everything he needed.

The morning light filtered through the sheer curtains of the master bedroom, casting long, pale strips of illumination across the tangled sheets. It was a quiet, grey sort of light – the kind that usually promised rain – but right now it felt peaceful. The air was still, heavy with the scent of sleep and the warmth of the night before.

Eliza stirred, her body feeling heavy and loose all at once. The movement made her aware of the weight draped across her waist – a solid, warm arm. Dallas.

She turned her head on the pillow. He was already watching her. His eyes were open, clear, focused entirely on her face. There was no sleep in them, only a deep, possessive calm that made her breath catch. His hair was messy, falling over his forehead in a way that made him look younger – less like the CEO of Koch Industries and more like the man who had held her while she fell apart.

“Good morning, Mrs. Koch.” His voice was a low rumble, vibrating against her chest where they lay pressed together.

A flush of heat rose up her neck. The title still felt new – heavy and thrilling at once. The memories of the previous night flooded back: the confession in his office, the truth about the debt and her mother, the desperate, consuming need they had finally stopped fighting.

“Good morning,” she whispered.

She reached out and traced the faint, jagged white line of the scar on his shoulder – a physical map of his pain, a reminder of the violence he had survived and the violence he was capable of unleashing to protect her.

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Dallas caught her hand. His grip was firm but gentle. He brought her palm to his lips and kissed the center of it, his eyes never leaving hers.

“No regrets?” he asked.

The question hung in the air. It was the question Anson had planted in her mind — the weed that had nearly choked out everything good between them.

“None,” Eliza said. For the first time in weeks, she meant it completely. The insecurity was gone, burned away by his honesty.

Dallas smiled — a rare, genuine expression that softened the hard angles of his face. He pulled her closer, his hand sliding up her back, skin against skin. He leaned in, his lips brushing her jawline, sending a shiver down her spine.

Then a sharp, frantic knocking on the bedroom door shattered the silence. Not a polite tap — a rapid-fire assault on the wood.

Dallas groaned, his forehead dropping against Eliza’s shoulder. The tension in his body shifted instantly from desire to annoyance. “Azalea,” he muttered into her skin. “It has to be.”

“Dad! Emergency! Code Red!” Azalea’s muffled voice screamed through the thick mahogany door. “Open up! It’s a disaster!”

Dallas exhaled — a long, suffering sound. He pulled away from Eliza and sat up on the edge of the bed, running a hand through his hair. The muscles in his back flexed as he stretched, the scars there moving with him.

“Code Red usually means she broke a nail or the Wi-Fi is down,” he said, standing and grabbing a pair of grey sweatpants from the floor.

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Eliza sat up and wrapped the duvet around herself. A chill that had nothing to do with the temperature settled in her stomach. Azalea was dramatic, yes — but there was a pitch to her voice that sounded like genuine panic.

Dallas pulled the door open.

Azalea stood in the hallway in silk pajamas, her hair a bird’s nest of tangles. Her face was pale, her eyes wide and frightened. She was trembling.

“They’re back,” she gasped. “They moved up the timeline to ambush you. The jet just landed at Teterboro. Weston got the security alert.”

Dallas went still. The relaxed lover vanished in a heartbeat. His shoulders squared, his jaw set, and his eyes turned to ice. The CEO was back.

“My parents?” he asked — though his tone said he already knew.

“Your parents,” Azalea confirmed, her voice shaking. “Ferd and Jeannine. And they are furious. Nuclear furious.”

“They saw the news,” Dallas said. “About the marriage registration. About the press conference.”

“They’re demanding a family dinner. Tonight. At the Estate.” Azalea swallowed. “They sent a car. It’s already on the way.”

Eliza stepped out of bed and reached for one of Dallas’s discarded white dress shirts draped over the chair. She buttoned it quickly, her fingers fumbling slightly. The fabric smelled like him — cedar and expensive cologne.

“Are they coming here?” she asked, stepping up beside Dallas.

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“No.” Azalea shook her head. “They want us on their turf. The Estate.” Her lower lip trembled. “I’m not going. I can’t. Grandpa Ferd — he looks at me like I’m dirt. You know how he gets.”

Dallas reached out and placed a hand on top of Azalea’s head — a grounding, protective gesture. “You don’t have to go,” he said softly. “They’re coming for me. I don’t want you in the crossfire. I’ll handle them.”

“No,” Eliza said.

Her voice was quiet but firm. Both Dallas and Azalea turned to look at her. Eliza felt her heart hammering against her ribs, but she lifted her chin. She wasn’t the woman who hid in the guest room anymore. She wasn’t the victim Anson had made her.

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“We go together,” Eliza said. “I’m your wife. I don’t hide.”

Dallas looked at her. Surprise flickered in his eyes, followed quickly by fierce pride. He nodded slowly. “Okay. We go to war.”

Azalea stared at Eliza with a mixture of awe and horror. “You’re brave,” she whispered. “Or stupid. Grandpa Ferd is a monster. He eats people like us for breakfast.”

“Why?” Eliza asked. “Because I’m a Solomon?”

“Because he thinks I’m the daughter of a traitor,” Azalea whispered — the words slipping out before she could stop them. She covered her mouth, her eyes darting to Dallas.

Dallas’s face darkened. “That’s what he calls a hero he couldn’t control.” He looked at Azalea. “Go get dressed. Wear something armored.”

Azalea nodded and bolted down the hall.

Dallas turned back to Eliza. He reached out and buttoned the top button of the shirt she was wearing, his knuckles grazing her throat.

“Get ready, Mrs. Koch,” he said grimly. “The honeymoon is definitely over.”

Before Eliza could respond, Dallas had already turned toward his closet. The casual, relaxed man in sweatpants was gone. In his place was a commander preparing for battle. He moved with swift, brutal efficiency – stripping off the sweatpants, pulling on perfectly tailored black trousers, selecting a crisp white shirt. His movements were precise as he fastened each button, then the platinum cufflinks at his wrists. Each click was a punctuation mark in a silent declaration of war. He slid into a dark suit jacket that fit his broad shoulders like a second skin, and the transformation was complete – the formidable CEO, a predator donning his hunting attire.

Eliza stood in the center of her walk-in closet, surrounded by rows of clothing that looked more like costumes for a life she was still learning to inhabit. The air conditioning hummed softly, but sweat pricked at her hairline.

Azalea sat on the velvet ottoman in the center of the room, chewing aggressively on her thumbnail. She had changed into a black dress that was surprisingly conservative for her – high-necked, long-sleeved. A stack of LSAT prep books rested on the floor beside her, a stark reminder that while she was only a nineteen-year-old college sophomore, Dallas was already rigorously grooming her to survive the corporate warfare of the Koch empire. She looked like she was going to a funeral.

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Chapter 237:

“Wear the navy blue,” Azalea advised, pointing a trembling finger at a sheath dress on the rack. “Jeannine hates bright colors. She calls them ‘vulgar.’ If you wear red, she’ll spend the entire night staring at you like you’re a neon sign in a cathedral.”

Eliza lifted the navy dress off its hanger. The fabric was heavy, expensive silk. “Jeannine... you call her by her first name?”

“She doesn’t like ‘Grandma,’” Azalea said, rolling her eyes, though the fear never left her face. “Makes her feel old. She prefers to pretend she simply materialized as a fully formed, elegant statue at age forty.” She picked at a loose thread on the velvet ottoman. “She cares about image. And bloodlines. Especially bloodlines.”

Eliza paused, holding the dress against her body and studying Azalea’s reflection in the mirror. The girl looked small, huddled on the ottoman.

“Is that why she hates you?” Eliza asked softly. “Because of the ‘traitor’ comment?”

Azalea sighed and dropped her hand from her mouth. “You know the basics, El, but let me tell you what really happened.”

“He told me,” Eliza said, turning around. “He married your mom to give you a name. To protect you.”

“Yeah,” Azalea nodded. “But did he tell you why? My real dad was a soldier. He served with Dallas. He died saving him in Syria.”

Eliza felt a pang of quiet sympathy. “That makes you a hero’s daughter.”

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“Not to them.” Azalea laughed — a humorless, brittle sound. “To Ferd and Jeannine, I’m just a stray dog Dallas brought home. A reminder of the time he went ‘rogue’ and joined the military instead of sitting in a boardroom. They think my dad was low class. A grunt.” She paused. “Jeannine tried to stop Aunt Augustina from marrying her husband because he was ‘new money.’ Imagine what she thinks of me. A girl with no pedigree.”

“And me,” Eliza realized, the full weight of it settling on her shoulders. “A bankrupt Solomon. With a murderer for an uncle.”

“Exactly.” Azalea pointed a finger at Eliza, then at herself. “To them, you are a stain. I am a charity case. We are the blemishes on the perfect Koch portrait.”

“But Dallas doesn’t care,” Eliza said firmly. She stepped into the navy dress and zipped it up. It fit like a glove — stiff, formal, and cold. It felt like armor.

“Dallas hates them,” Azalea warned. “That’s why he protects us. But they have claws, Eliza. Ferd controls the family trust — or thinks he does. And Jeannine cuts with words.”

Eliza walked to the ottoman and held out her fist. “Then we stick together. The Stray and the Stain.”

Azalea looked up. A small smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. She bumped her fist against Eliza’s. “The Outcast Alliance.”

Forty minutes later, the black SUV wound its way up a long gravel driveway lined with ancient oak trees. The Koch Estate loomed ahead — not a house, but a gothic fortress of grey stone and dark windows, perched on a hill overlooking the Hudson River. It looked cold, imposing, and utterly devoid of warmth.

The car stopped before the massive double doors.

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Dallas reached over and squeezed Eliza's hand. His grip was tight, his palm warm against her cold skin. "Remember," he said, his voice low and intent. "You are the Lady of the House. They are guests in my empire."

"Technically, this is their house," Eliza whispered, looking up at the gargoyles perched along the roofline.

“I pay the mortgage,” Dallas said, a cold, predatory smirk crossing his face. “I pay the staff. I pay for the heating. It’s my house. They just live in it.”

The front door opened. A butler in a stiff uniform stood in the entrance, wringing his hands slightly.

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“Mr. Koch.” He bowed as Dallas stepped out of the car. “They are in the drawing room.”

Dallas adjusted his cuffs, checking the platinum cufflinks. He looked impeccable — a wall of dark suiting and absolute composure.

“Let’s go say hello to the vipers,” he murmured to Eliza.

Eliza took his arm. Her heart hammered a frantic rhythm against her ribs, but she kept her face smooth, drawing on every ounce of poise her mother had ever taught her.

They walked up the stone steps together. The air felt colder here. Sharper.

As they crossed the threshold into the foyer, a woman's voice cut through the silence like a blade through silk.

“He actually brought her.”

The drawing room was a museum of intimidation. Heavy velvet drapes blocked out the natural light, leaving the room bathed in the golden glow of crystal chandeliers. Every surface was cluttered with priceless antiques — Ming vases, Fabergé eggs, statues that seemed to be passing judgment.

Ferd Koch stood by the marble fireplace. He was a tall man, broad-shouldered, with silver hair swept back from a high forehead. He looked like an older, crueller version of Dallas — the same blue eyes, but where Dallas's could turn warm, Ferd's were flat and hard as polished stone. Jeannine Koch sat on a brocade sofa, sipping tea from a delicate china cup. She was elegant in a terrifying way, wearing a grey suit tailored to within an inch of its life. Her face was unlined — likely the work of expensive doctors — but her expression was frozen in perpetual distaste.

“Father. Mother.” Dallas didn't let go of Eliza's hand. He pulled her slightly forward, presenting her. “This is Eliza.”

Ferd didn't look at Eliza. He kept his eyes fixed on Dallas, as though she were a piece of furniture he had already decided to return.

“You married a Solomon,” Ferd barked. His voice was a deep boom that echoed off the high ceilings. “Without my permission.”

“I don’t need permission,” Dallas replied evenly. “I’m thirty-two years old, and I run this family.”

“You run the company,” Ferd corrected, stepping away from the fireplace. “I am the head of this family. I decide who carries the name.”

He turned his gaze to Eliza at last. It landed like a physical weight — crushing and dismissive.

“She is a bankrupt girl,” Ferd sneered. “Her uncle is a murderer. Her family is a headline for failure. She brings shame to this house.”

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The words hit Eliza hot and sharp. She wanted to shrink, to apologize, to run. But Dallas's hand tightened on hers — an anchor. Stand straight, she told herself. Don't let them see you bleed.

“She brings grace,” Dallas countered, his voice dropping an octave. “Something this house has lacked for decades.”

“Divorce her,” Ferd commanded, waving a hand. “Annul it. Give her a check and send her away. We can manage the press. We can say it was a lapse in judgment.”

“Or what?” Dallas challenged. He stepped forward, placing himself subtly between his father and Eliza.

“Or I rally the board,” Ferd threatened, his face darkening. “I still have friends, Dallas. Old money friends. We can make your tenure... very difficult.”

Dallas laughed – a dry, mocking sound with no warmth in it.

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“Your friends are retired golfers, Father,” he said. “The board answers to profit. And I am profit. Since I took over, the stock has tripled. They don’t care who I marry. They care that I make them rich.”

Ferd’s face turned a violent shade of red. The veins in his neck bulged. He set his crystal glass down on the marble mantelpiece with a sharp, deliberate crack that rang through the silence. A fine web of fractures spread from the point of impact. He didn’t flinch – just left the ruined glass where it sat, a testament to his cold fury.

Eliza didn’t flinch either. She had spent years with Anson Hyde; she knew the sound of a man losing the edge of his control. She held Ferd’s gaze, her expression perfectly blank.

Dallas went rigid. The air in the room seemed to drop ten degrees, his eyes turning pitch black.

“You mistake my patience for weakness,” he said, barely above a whisper.

He stepped forward, shielding Eliza completely with his body. He loomed over his father — the height difference negligible, the power difference immense. “Touch anything near my wife again,” he said, his voice soft and terrifyingly calm, “and I will cut your allowance. To zero.”

The room went dead silent. Even the ticking of the grandfather clock seemed to stop.

Financial castration. The ultimate threat in their world.

Ferd gasped, gripping the edge of the mantelpiece. “You wouldn’t.”

“Try me,” Dallas said. “I control the trust. I control the dividends. I control the very roof over your head. You want to play patriarch? Pay your own bills.”

Ferd stared at his son, mouth opening and closing. He looked to Jeannine for support. She was staring into her teacup.

“Enough.” Jeannine rose. Her voice was crisp, cutting cleanly through the standoff. “Ferd, sit down. You’re making a scene.”

Ferd looked at his wife. Then at his son. He understood, in that moment, that he had lost — defeated by his own wallet.

He stormed out, slamming the heavy oak door behind him hard enough to rattle the windows.

Jeannine smoothed her skirt. She didn't look at the door. She glanced briefly at the shattered glass on the mantelpiece. "He was always the hammer," she said, her voice entirely without feeling. Then she turned her cool, appraising gaze to Eliza. "Now the real conversation begins."

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She looked at Dallas. "Leave us. I want to speak to her. Woman to woman."

Dallas hesitated, visibly reluctant.

Eliza squeezed his hand. She needed to do this. She needed to face this one herself.

“It’s okay,” she said. “Go.”

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Dallas searched her face for fear. He found determination instead.

“I’ll be right outside,” he said — the words aimed squarely at Jeannine — and left the heavy oak door intentionally open by a fraction of an inch before walking out, casting one last dark look at his mother.

The door clicked shut — but Dallas had left it slightly ajar. Jeannine noticed. She crossed the room and closed it firmly, sealing them in.

“Sit,” Jeannine said, gesturing to a Louis XIV chair opposite the sofa.

Eliza sat. Back straight, hands folded in her lap.

“You think you won because Ferd threw a tantrum,” Jeannine began, pouring herself another cup of tea. She did not offer one to Eliza.

“No,” Eliza said. “I think we survived.”

Jeannine paused, the teapot hovering in mid-air. She looked at Eliza with a flicker of genuine surprise. “Dallas is a difficult man,” she said, setting the pot down. “He is damaged.”

“He is strong,” Eliza corrected her.

“He is obsessed,” Jeannine countered, her voice clinical. “He fixates. First it was building the company — he worked until he collapsed. Now it’s you.” She stirred her tea, the spoon clinking rhythmically against the china. “You are a phase, Eliza. A rebellion against us. He chose a Solomon because he knew Ferd hated your family. He chose you to hurt us.”

She set the spoon down. “When the novelty wears off, he will see you for what you are. A liability.”

She used the word like a weapon. It echoed Dallas's own words from weeks ago — but coming from her, it was pure malice.

“He already called me a liability,” Eliza said calmly. “And he married me anyway.”

Jeannine stopped. She looked at Eliza — really looked at her — for the first time.

“You have spirit,” she admitted, though it sounded more like an indictment than a compliment. “I’ll give you that. But spirit doesn’t host galas. Spirit doesn’t manage board wives. You are out of your depth.”

She leaned forward. “Leave him. I will ensure you live comfortably — Paris, or Milan. I have an apartment in the 7th arrondissement. It’s yours. Plus a monthly stipend.”

A bubble of laughter rose in Eliza’s throat. It was so perfectly clichéd — the wealthy mother trying to buy off the poor girl.

“I’m not for sale, Mrs. Koch,” Eliza said, placing her hands on the arms of the chair.

“Everyone is for sale,” Jeannine smiled, cold and certain. “The price simply varies. What is yours? A gallery? A studio?”

The door opened.

Dallas walked back in. He hadn’t gone far at all.

“Time’s up,” he said.

“We were just chatting,” Jeannine said, leaning back with an air of innocence.

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