

Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 241:

“I heard you.” Dallas fixed his mother with a hard look. “‘Phase.’ ‘Rebellion.’ You’re recycling your material, Mother.” He crossed to Eliza’s chair and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“You project your own unhappy marriage onto mine,” he said, his voice turning sharp. “You married Father for status. You despise him. You’ve despised him for thirty years. Don’t lecture me on love.”

Jeannine flinched. The mask of icy composure cracked, and a flash of genuine pain moved across her eyes.

“That was cruel, Dallas,” she whispered.

“Truth is cruel,” Dallas said. “Come, Eliza.”

He held out his hand. Eliza took it and stood. She looked at Jeannine one last time. The woman sat surrounded by her expensive things, looking remarkably small and lonely. A strange pang of pity moved through Eliza despite everything.

“Wait,” Jeannine called out as they reached the door. She rose and smoothed her skirt. She addressed Eliza directly. “Meet me tomorrow. Café Pierre. Alone.”

“No,” Dallas answered immediately. “You’ve said enough.”

“I’ll be there,” Eliza said, overriding him.

Dallas turned to look at her, his brows drawing together. “Eliza?”

“I need to finish this conversation,” Eliza said firmly. “Without you protecting me. If I’m going to be your wife, I need to handle this myself.”

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Jeannine nodded slowly, a gleam of something — respect, or perhaps calculation — entering her eyes. “Ten o’clock,” she said. “Don’t be late.”

Eliza arrived at Café Pierre at 9:55 AM. It was a pretentious little spot on the Upper East Side — the kind of place that served tiny pastries for the price of a used car.

Jeannine was already there, sitting at a corner table, staring out the window. The café was oddly empty. Eliza realized with a jolt that Jeannine had likely bought out the morning slot to ensure privacy.

“Punctual. Good.” Jeannine gestured to the empty chair without looking up.

Eliza sat down. She kept her coat on. She set her left hand on the table, the diamond ring catching the light.

Jeannine stared at it. Her eyes narrowed. “That diamond,” she murmured. “It was his grandmother’s. Gigi’s. He had the setting reset. But the stone is old.”

“I didn’t come here to talk about jewelry,” Eliza said.

“No. You came to prove a point.” Jeannine leaned back and crossed her arms.

She reached into her purse and produced a checkbook. She slid a single check across the polished table. It was blank — signed, but with the amount line left empty.

“Fill it in,” Jeannine said. “Any number. Seven figures. Eight figures. I don’t care. Then leave New York.”

Eliza looked at the check. It was a piece of paper that could solve every problem she had ever had. It could buy back the Solomon Estate. It could buy freedom.

“Why are you so afraid of me?” Eliza asked, leaving the check where it lay.

“I’m not afraid of you,” Jeannine said. “I’m afraid for him.”

“He is happy with me,” Eliza said. “You saw him yesterday. He defended me.”

“I saw a man ready to destroy his own father for a woman,” Jeannine said sharply. “That is not stability, Eliza. That is chaos.”

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Chapter 242:

“You think love is chaos because you’ve never had it,” Eliza said, pressing the nerve deliberately.

Jeannine’s eyes narrowed to slits. “You are insolent.”

“I am honest.” Eliza held her gaze. “I love Dallas. We are married – legally, emotionally, in every way. And I am not going anywhere.” She placed one finger on the check and slid it back across the table. “So you can either accept me, or lose your son forever. He already chose me over Ferd. Do you want him to choose me over you as well?”

Jeannine stared at the returned check. Her hand trembled slightly.

“You don’t know what he is,” she whispered. The hardness had drained from her voice, replaced by something that looked disturbingly like genuine fear. “You don’t know what he carries.”

“I know he was lonely,” Eliza said. “I know you sent him away to boarding school when he was a child.”

“We sent him away to save him!” Jeannine snapped, her composure fracturing. “And to save us!”

“From what?”

Jeannine leaned in, her eyes wide and intense. “From the curse. From the Omen,” she hissed. Her voice dropped to barely above a whisper. “Dallas was born with a caul — a veil over his face. The family astrologer, an old fool Ferd trusted, said he would devour the family fortune. That he was a dark star.”

Eliza stared at her. “You exiled a child because of... astrology?”

“It wasn’t just that!” Jeannine insisted. “Accidents happened around him. Nannies fell. Dogs died. He is dangerous, Eliza. He attracts death.”

“He attracts death because you surrounded him with coldness,” Eliza said. She stood up, her chair scraping against the floor. She couldn’t listen to another word.

It was madness – rich people madness, the kind that dressed cruelty up in superstition and called it protection.

“I’m done listening to fairy tales,” she said, picking up her purse. “You’re not protecting him. You’re justifying your own cruelty.”

She turned to leave.

Jeannine’s hand shot out and seized Eliza’s wrist. Her grip was surprisingly strong, her nails digging into the skin.

“It wasn’t just superstition!” Jeannine hissed, pulling her back. “He hurt people. He has violence in his blood.”

“Who?” Eliza demanded, trying to shake free. “Who did he hurt?”

“Ferd’s... assistant,” Jeannine said, the word tasting like something rotten. “Dosha. She fell down the stairs when Dallas was ten.”

Eliza went still.

“Dallas was at the top of the stairs,” Jeannine said, her eyes haunted. “Watching. Smiling.” She paused. “That’s why we sent him away. He pushed her.”

“Dallas would not push a woman down stairs,” Eliza said. “He protects women.”

“He was a child!” Jeannine insisted. “A jealous, dark child. He knew Ferd liked her more than him.”

“Or maybe Dosha fell,” Eliza said. “Or maybe she lied.”

“Dosha was pregnant,” Jeannine said.

The silence in the café was deafening.

“She lost the baby,” Jeannine whispered.

“Ferd’s baby?” Eliza guessed, her stomach turning.

Jeannine went pale. She realized she had said too much and pressed her lips together.

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Chapter 243:

“So Dallas was blamed for the miscarriage of his father’s mistress?” Eliza pieced it together, the horror dawning slowly. “You exiled your ten-year-old son to protect your husband’s affair?” She looked at Jeannine with quiet devastation. “You are a terrible mother.”

“I did what I had to do!” Jeannine cried, tears welling in her eyes. “To protect the family name! Imagine the scandal!”

The bell above the café door chimed. A gust of cold air swept in.

Dallas walked through the door.

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He hadn't stayed in the car. He had been waiting right outside.

He walked toward the table, his face a mask of unreadable stone. He had heard enough.

"You told her," he said flatly.

Jeannine shrank back into her chair. "She asked."

"But you left out the best part." Dallas reached the table. He didn't look at Jeannine. He looked at Eliza. "I didn't push Dosha," he said clearly. "She threw herself down the stairs."

"Liar!" Jeannine gasped.

“She saw me watching from the hallway,” Dallas continued, his voice utterly devoid of emotion. “She smiled at me — a cruel smile. And she jumped. Backwards. To frame me. To eliminate the legitimate heir so her child could take my place.”

Eliza covered her mouth. This was it. The dark, unspoken core of the wound he had revealed in his office. He had admitted to being the family pariah, the so-called curse — but the shame and injustice of this specific lie, he had kept buried. Until now.

“And you...” Dallas finally looked at his mother. The expression in his eyes wasn’t anger. It was profound pity. “You believed the mistress over your own son.”

Jeannine raised a trembling hand to her mouth. “No... she wouldn’t...”

“She did,” Dallas said. “And she was paid handsomely for it. By Ferd. To keep quiet about the fake miscarriage.”

“Fake?” Jeannine whispered.

“There was no baby, Mother,” Dallas said, delivering the final blow with quiet precision. “She wasn’t pregnant. It was a cyst. The doctors told Ferd. But Ferd used the story to justify sending me away — because I made him uncomfortable.”

Jeannine looked as though she had been struck. Her entire reality crumbled around her in the quiet of the empty café.

Dallas took Eliza's hand. "Let's go, El. The air is toxic here."

They turned and walked out together, leaving Jeannine sitting alone among her expensive things, surrounded by the ghosts of every choice she had ever made.

They sat in the parked SUV with the engine off. The silence was heavy.

Dallas gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white, staring straight ahead, his jaw working.

"I didn't push her, El," he said, his voice tight.

"I know," Eliza said immediately.

She unbuckled her seatbelt, leaned across the center console, and wrapped her arms around him — a fierce, protective embrace. She buried her face in his neck.

Dallas hesitated for just a moment. Then he crumbled. He let go of the wheel and pulled her against him, his face buried in her hair. He shuddered. “They sent me to that school... it was hell,” he whispered. “Because of a lie.”

“I’m so sorry,” Eliza murmured, stroking the back of his neck.

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Chapter 244:

“Dosha has a daughter,” Dallas said, pulling back slightly to look at her. “Cathey.”

Eliza frowned. The name tugged at something. “Cathey Norton? The intern in Marketing at S&D?”

“Yes.” Dallas nodded. “My half-sister. Ferd brought her into the company quietly last month. He thinks I don’t know.”

“So the mistress won,” Eliza said quietly. “She got her daughter in.”

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“Not yet,” Dallas said, his expression hardening. “I tolerate Cathey because she’s innocent — she doesn’t know her mother is a viper. But Dosha is still pulling strings from the shadows.”

“Does Ferd know Dosha faked the fall?” Eliza asked.

“He doesn’t care,” Dallas sighed, leaning back against the seat. “He wanted me gone. I was too observant. I saw his sins. I was the mirror he didn’t want to look into.”

“We need allies,” Eliza said. “If Ferd is backing Cathey, he might try to replace you. Or undermine you.”

“He can’t replace me — I have the shares,” Dallas said. “But he can make life miserable. Freeze assets. Ruin our reputation.”

“We need Gigi,” Eliza said.

Dallas looked at her. “Gigi?”

“Your grandmother. The one whose ring I’m wearing,” Eliza said. “Jeannine mentioned her. She seemed... respectful of her.”

“She keeps a penthouse in the city, but she spends most of her time in Florida,” Dallas said. “Weston’s intel says she flew back last week but told my father she was still away. She hates the cold — but she hates his incompetence more.”

“Call her,” Eliza urged. “Tell her everything. Tell her about Doshia. About the lie.”

“She might not listen. She loves the family image,” Dallas said, skeptical.

“She loves the family,” Eliza insisted. “And you are the family. You are the heir she wanted.”

Dallas looked at her. A slow smile spread across his face. “You want to summon the Matriarch?”

“I want to win,” Eliza said. “For us. For the little boy on the stairs.”

Dallas kissed her cheek. “Okay. I’ll call Gigi.”

Later that evening, in the library of the Koch Estate.

Jeannine walked in looking like a ghost, her perfect hair slightly undone.

Ferd was drinking scotch by the fire. “Did you buy her off?”

“No,” Jeannine said hollowly. “And Dallas knows. About Dosha’s fall. He told me the truth.”

Ferd went still. “He knows nothing.”

“He knows she jumped, Ferd.” Jeannine looked at her husband with pure, exhausted loathing. “He knows there was no baby. He knows we sacrificed him for nothing.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Ferd said, waving a dismissive hand. “He is still the Omen. He is still trouble.”

The phone on the heavy oak desk rang — the private house line. Only family had that number.

Ferd frowned and picked it up. “Hello?”

A voice boomed through the receiver — raspy, commanding, and loud enough that Jeannine could hear every word from across the room.

“Ferdinand! Prepare the guest suite. I’m coming home.”

Ferd’s glass slipped from his hand. It hit the hearth and shattered.

“Mother?” he whispered.

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Chapter 245:

The next day, the gravel driveway of the Koch Estate crunched under the tires of a convoy.

Not limousines. Three black, armored SUVs – practical, expensive, and deeply intimidating.

Ferd and Jeannine stood on the front steps. Ferd looked like a man facing a firing squad. Jeannine looked resigned.

Dallas and Eliza stood off to the side, near their own car. Dallas looked quietly amused.

The lead SUV stopped. The driver jumped out and pulled the rear door open.

A cane with a silver handle struck the pavement first. Click.

Then Gigi Koch emerged.

She was eighty years old, but she moved with a terrifying energy. She wore a leopard print coat that would have looked absurd on anyone else but looked regal on her. Oversized Chanel sunglasses shielded sharp eyes that missed nothing.

“Mother.” Ferd stepped forward, attempting a smile. “You look... healthy.”

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Gigi swatted him away with her free hand. “I look alive, Ferdinand,” she barked. “Unlike you. You look like a pickled herring.”

Eliza bit her lip to stifle a laugh. Dallas smirked openly.

Gigi turned to Jeannine. She lowered her sunglasses, revealing keen, intelligent eyes. “And you,” she sniffed. “Still wearing grey. You look like a rainy day in London. Depressing.”

Jeannine dipped her head slightly. “Welcome home, Gigi.”

Gigi ignored her and turned her attention to Dallas. Her face softened instantly.

“Come here, boy,” she commanded.

Dallas walked over. Gigi seized his face with both hands and pulled him down for a kiss on the cheek, then pulled him into a hug that was surprisingly forceful for a woman her age.

“You got tall,” she said, patting his chest. “And rich. Good.”

Then she turned to Eliza. The sunglasses came all the way off. The inspection began.

“So,” Gigi said, her gaze settling on Eliza with unhurried precision. “I saw the marriage license registry two weeks ago. My lawyers flagged it.”

Eliza braced herself for an outburst.

Gigi simply smirked. “About time someone in this family married for something other than a merger. Good choice, Dallas.” She stepped in front of Eliza and looked her up and down with the practiced eye of a woman who had seen everything. “Still got that Solomon spine,” she declared, nodding with satisfaction. “I knew it then. I see it now.”

“Mother!” Ferd choked. “She is a bankrupt—”

“Silence!” Gigi’s cane struck the pavement. The crack rang out like a gunshot.

“I’m hungry,” she announced. “Lunch. Now.”

She marched up the steps, the staff scrambling to hold the doors open. The entire power dynamic of the estate had shifted in under thirty seconds.

Dallas leaned down to Eliza’s ear. “She likes you. We’re safe.”

“She’s terrifying,” Eliza whispered back.

“She’s the only one Ferd fears,” Dallas said.

Inside the grand dining room, Gigi took the head of the table. It was Ferd’s usual seat. He didn’t dare argue. He sat to her right, looking considerably smaller than usual.

Gigi unfolded her napkin with a sharp snap and looked around the table.

“So,” she said. “Tell me why you tried to divorce my grandson.”

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Chapter 246:

Servants moved silently around the table, serving lobster bisque. The only sound was the soft clinking of spoons against fine china. The tension was thick enough to cut with a knife.

“Well? I’m waiting,” Gigi said, her gaze fixed on Ferd.

Ferd cleared his throat. “She is not suitable, Mother. The Solomon name is ruined. Her uncle is a murderer.”

“Names don’t ruin families, Ferdinand. People do,” Gigi said, taking a measured sip of her soup. “You should know that better than anyone.”

“She brings nothing to the table,” Ferd insisted, attempting to regain some ground.

“She brings Dallas.” Gigi pointed her spoon at her grandson.

Dallas was eating calmly, his left hand resting on Eliza's knee beneath the table, squeezing it gently.

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"He hasn't visited this house in five years," Gigi observed. "Now he's here. Because of her." She turned her gaze back to Ferd, her eyes cold and deliberate. "And you want to drive him away again? Like you did when he was ten?"

Ferd paled. "That was necessary. He was dangerous."

"It was a lie!" Gigi's hand slammed onto the table, sending the silverware jumping. "A lie you concocted to cover your own pathetic sins. I got the whole story from Dallas this morning. You let a conniving secretary and your own weakness nearly ruin our heir."

Jeannine flinched at the words, but she didn't look at Gigi. She looked at Ferd, her eyes filled with a cold, burning hatred.

"Don't look at me like that, Jeannine," Gigi snapped. "You went along with it. To keep your pearls. To keep your status." She let the silence settle before delivering her verdict. "You are both selfish, cold, and stupid."

Her expression softened as her gaze moved to Dallas.

“Dallas is the only good thing this family has produced in two generations. And he chose her.” She gestured toward Eliza. “If he had chosen a beggar, I would have welcomed her. But he chose a Solomon — a girl with backbone. A girl who stood up to you.”

Gigi raised her wine glass. “Eliza, welcome to the family. Ignore these two idiots.”

Eliza felt tears prick her eyes. “Thank you, Gigi.”

Dallas smiled — a genuine, warm smile. “Thanks, Grandma.”

Ferd stood abruptly, his chair screeching against the floor. He was trembling.

“I will not be insulted at my own table!” he shouted.

“Sit down, Ferdinand.” Gigi didn’t even rise from her seat. “Or I will write you out of the will completely and leave every penny to the cat sanctuary.”

Ferd froze. Money talked. He sat down slowly.

Jeannine spoke up, her voice soft and hesitant. "I... I can help with the guest list."

Ferd turned to his wife, his expression raw with betrayal. "Jeannine?"

Jeannine looked at Dallas. "Gigi is right. Dallas looks happy." She then turned to Eliza. "And you were right. About the cafe."

The tide had turned. Ferd was isolated.

"I need a drink," he muttered, reaching for the wine bottle.

The lunch continued, but the atmosphere had shifted from tense to volatile. Ferd was drinking heavily, his face flushed and his eyes glassy.

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Chapter 247:

“You think you won,” he sneered, his gaze cutting across the table toward Eliza.

“It’s not a game, Father,” Dallas warned, his voice low.

“Everything is a game,” Ferd slurred. “And she is playing for the jackpot. Just like Doshia.”

“Ferdinand, shut up,” Gigi said quietly, not looking up from her plate.

“No! I see her!” Ferd shouted, losing control entirely. He pointed a trembling finger at Eliza. “She’s just like Doshia — a gold digger! A parasite!” He grabbed his wine glass, and for a brief, charged moment, it looked as though he might throw it.

Gigi moved faster than anyone expected.

She picked up her water glass — a heavy crystal tumbler filled with ice water — and splashed the contents squarely into Ferd's face.

Ice water dripped down his flushed cheeks and soaked into his expensive shirt. An ice cube slid slowly down his nose.

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The room gasped. Even the servants froze against the wall.

"Cool off," Gigi said calmly. "You are drunk and disgraceful."

Ferd wiped his face with a napkin and looked around the table. No one supported him. Not even Jeannine. She was watching him with unconcealed disgust.

He stood up, knocking his chair over behind him.

“Fine,” he spat. “You want her? Keep her.”

He swiped at his face with the back of his hand, indifferent to his soaked sleeve, then fumbled inside his jacket with shaking fingers and produced a checkbook — miraculously dry on the inside. He scribbled furiously, the pen dragging against the slightly damp paper near the edge where his wet fingers had touched it. He tore the check free with a sharp, violent sound, walked around the table, and slammed it down in front of Eliza.

“Ten million dollars,” he said. “Consider it a settlement. A dowry. Whatever.” He straightened up, his jaw tight. “Just don’t expect me to walk you down the aisle.”

He stormed out of the room.

Eliza looked down at the check. Ten million dollars. Signed Ferdinand Koch. The ink was still wet.

“Is this... hush money?” she asked, looking up at Dallas.

“That’s from his emergency fund,” Gigi sniffed. “The last of his little secrets. Consider it the idiot tax.” She waved a hand. “Take it. He owes you far more for the insult. Put it in your own account.”

Dallas picked up the check, studied it for a moment, and smirked. “We’ll put it in a trust. For our children.”

Eliza felt heat rise to her cheeks. Children.

Jeannine cleared her throat. She looked at Eliza with an awkward, tentative expression.

“I... I have something too,” she said. “Not money. But family history. Pictures. Of Dallas as a baby.” She paused. “I’ll give them to you later.”

“Thank you,” Eliza nodded.

The storm had passed. Ferd was exiled to his study. Jeannine had come around. Gigi was, as ever, firmly in charge.

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Chapter 248:

Gigi clapped her hands. “Now, dessert. I want more chocolate.” She fixed Eliza with a sharp, glinting look. “And after that, we plan the wedding. It needs to be grand. I intend to wear my emeralds.”

Eliza laughed — a genuine, relieved laugh — and glanced at Dallas. He was watching her with that same intense look from the morning, steady and warm.

She had made it. She was a Koch. And for the first time, the name didn't feel like a burden.

It felt like a shield.

The silence in the dining room was absolute, save for the soft clink of fine china being cleared by the staff. The air smelled of roasted coffee and the heavy,

lingering scent of expensive perfume that seemed to emanate from Gigi. Ferd had retreated to his study hours ago, his exit less of a storm and more of a defeated shuffle, leaving the ten-million-dollar check sitting in the center of the mahogany table like a discarded napkin.

Eliza stared at it. The ink was a stark, black slash against the pale paper, a testament to Ferd's aggressive, jagged handwriting. It was a fortune. It was an insult. It was freedom.

She reached out and picked it up. The paper felt thin between her fingers — flimsy for something that carried so much weight. She folded it once, neatly, pressing the crease down with her thumbnail until the edge was sharp. It felt less like money and more like a weapon she had just disarmed.

“Now, my turn,” Jeannine said.

Her voice cut through the quiet, devoid of the earlier hostility but lacking any real warmth. It was the tone of a woman settling a business transaction. Eliza looked up and saw the deep exhaustion behind the older woman's eyes. The icy mask was still in place, but cracks were showing at the edges. This wasn't a truce — it was a surrender.

Jeannine gestured sharply to a maid standing in the shadows near the sideboard. The maid stepped forward, carrying a box. It was not a jewelry store box. It was large, the size of a shoebox, covered in faded blue velvet worn smooth at the corners. It looked old. It looked like history.

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Jeannine placed her hand on the lid. Her manicured fingers, usually so steady, trembled slightly.

“This was my dowry,” she said, her eyes fixed on the velvet. “From the Lynn family. When I married Ferdinand, this was the price of admission.”

She opened the lid.

The room didn't simply brighten — it seemed to fracture. The light from the crystal chandelier caught the contents of the box and exploded into a thousand prisms of cold, white fire.

Inside lay the Koch Royal Set. A necklace of diamonds so large they looked like chips of ice, matching drop earrings heavy enough to strain a lobe, and nestled in the center, a tiara. It was a delicate, terrifying thing of platinum and diamonds, rising in sharp, elegant spikes.

Azalea gasped — a sharp intake of breath that echoed through the large room. She leaned forward, her eyes wide. “Grandma,” she whispered. “That's the Coronation Set.”

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Chapter 249:

“I wore it once,” Jeannine said dryly, staring at the diamonds with an expression that bordered on distaste. “At my wedding. It gave me a migraine that lasted three days. It’s heavy, it digs into the scalp, and it requires perfect posture just to keep it from sliding off.”

She pushed the box across the polished wood toward Eliza. The velvet scraped softly against the table.

“It belongs to the Lady of the House,” Jeannine said. “Since you are staying, and since you seem to have the spine for it, you take it.”

Eliza stared at the array of gems. This wasn't ten million dollars. This was heritage. This was acceptance into a world that usually barred its doors to anyone with the last name Solomon.

"I can't accept this," Eliza said, her voice steady but quiet. "It's too much. It's your family legacy."

"You must," Jeannine said, her eyes hardening. "Unless you want Ferd to think you are weak. Unless you want the board wives to whisper that you are wearing costume jewelry. In this world, Eliza, armor comes in karat gold."

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Eliza hesitated. She looked at the tiara — beautiful and cruel, a gilded cage for the head.

Dallas reached out. His large hand moved past her hesitation and lifted the tiara from the box with casual ease, as though it were made of plastic rather than a king's ransom. He rose from his chair, moved behind Eliza, and the room went still. Gigi stopped buttering her roll. Azalea held her breath.

Dallas placed the tiara gently on Eliza's head. He adjusted it, his fingers brushing through her hair — warm and steady — and settled its weight.

“It fits,” he said.

His voice was a low rumble, dark with satisfaction. He wasn’t looking at the diamonds. He was looking at her reflection in the mirror on the opposite wall.

Eliza looked up. The woman in the mirror bore no resemblance to the orphan who had once begged for a contract marriage. She looked regal. The diamonds caught the chandelier’s light and cast a halo of cold fire around her dark hair. But it was the look in Dallas’s eyes in the reflection — predatory, proud, possessive — that made her heart hammer against her ribs.

“Heavy is the head,” Eliza whispered, lifting a hand to touch the cold metal.

“The neck is strong,” Dallas replied. He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her temple, just below the rim of the tiara. “You were built for this weight, El.”

Azalea let out a long exhale and slumped back in her chair. “Okay, that was disgustingly cinematic.” She looked at Jeannine. “Can I borrow the earrings for prom? They would look incredible with my black dress.”

“No,” Jeannine snapped, the sharp, critical edge returning in an instant. “You’ll lose them. Or trade them for concert tickets.”

Azalea pouted, crossing her arms. She glanced at Eliza, then back at Jeannine. “See? She still hates me. I’m just the spectator at the royal wedding.”

Eliza felt a pang of guilt. She carefully lifted the tiara from her head, feeling the relief as the weight lifted, and placed it back in the velvet box.

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Chapter 250:

“Thank you, Jeannine,” she said formally. “I will keep them safe. I will ensure they are preserved.”

“There is one more thing,” Jeannine said. She closed the box, her expression turning unreadable. “But it is paperwork. Not as sparkly as this.” She paused, glancing at Azalea, then back to Eliza. “I will have it sent to your apartment tomorrow. It requires reading. And a signature. It is a personal matter.”

Dallas checked his watch – a dismissive gesture that signaled the end of the audience.

“We are leaving,” he announced. “Before Ferd wakes up from his drunken stupor and decides to rescind the check.”

“Go,” Gigi waved a hand from the sofa where she had settled with a truffle. “Go make great-grandchildren. I’m not getting any younger.”

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Eliza felt the heat rise up her neck. Dallas simply smirked, his hand finding the small of her back and guiding her to her feet.

“We’ll do our best, Grandma,” he said smoothly.

They walked out of the estate, the heavy oak doors closing behind them with a final, resonant thud. The air outside was crisp, smelling of rain and wet earth. Dallas carried the velvet box in one hand, the check folded in his pocket.

They were carrying a fortune in paper and stone. But as Eliza looked up at the grey sky, she felt lighter than she had in years.

The courier arrived at the penthouse just after ten in the morning. The city below was a wash of grey rain, the skyline obscured by low-hanging clouds, but inside the climate-controlled luxury of the Koch residence, the air was still and warm.

Eliza signed for the package on the digital pad. It was a thick, legal-sized envelope, stamped in red ink: Private & Confidential.

Dallas was at the office, dealing with the fallout from the destroyed Hyde Group stocks. Azalea was at school, likely terrorizing her teachers or texting Forrest under her desk. The apartment was quiet.

Eliza set the envelope on the marble kitchen island. She made herself a cup of tea, letting the ceramic warm her cold fingers, before reaching for the letter opener.

Inside was a stack of documents bound with a blue ribbon. On top lay a handwritten note on heavy, cream-colored stationery. The handwriting was elegant, spiky, and aggressive — unmistakably Jeannine's.

Eliza,

I know you restore art. I know it is not merely a hobby for you, but a vocation. This institute was my family's legacy. The Lynn family built it in the 1920s. It has been dormant since I married — since I allowed myself to become nothing more than a decoration in Ferdinand's house.

Revive it. Run it. Consider it my penance for the stairs. Consider it an apology for thinking you were weak.

— J.

Eliza's hands trembled. She set the note down and picked up the legal documents.

It was a deed. A transfer of ownership.

The Lynn Restoration Institute.

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