

# Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

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Chapter 31:

The elevator doors slid open with a soft, expensive hush. Azalea stepped out first, her laughter bouncing off the floor-to-ceiling windows and the city skyline beyond.

“Did you see her face?” Azalea gasped, clutching her stomach. “Celeste looked like she swallowed a whole lemon. A really sour, cheap lemon.”

Eliza followed, the adrenaline from the campus confrontation still humming beneath her skin – jittery and sharp, like too much caffeine. For the first time in years, she hadn't simply absorbed the blow. Azalea had struck back for her, wielding the Koch name like a riot shield.

“It was intense,” Eliza admitted, setting her bag on the console table. Her hands were still trembling slightly. “Thank you, Az. I don't know what I would have done.”

“You would have crushed her,” Azalea said, kicking off her sneakers. “I just sped up the process.”

She spun around, mimicking Celeste’s horrified expression, puffing out her cheeks and widening her eyes. “My daddy will hear about this!” she squealed in a high-pitched mockery.

Laughter bubbled up in Eliza’s throat — a release of tension she hadn’t realized she’d been carrying.

Then the temperature in the room seemed to drop twenty degrees.

Dallas was sitting on the grey suede sofa. He held a tablet in one hand, his posture rigid, ankles crossed. He wasn’t looking at the screen. He was looking at them — his face a mask of stone, the kind of expressionless void that made board members sweat through their Italian suits.

“Did you enjoy your performance?”

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His voice was low and completely without warmth. It cut through Azalea’s laughter like a blade.

Azalea froze mid-spin. Her smile vanished, replaced by the wary look of someone who has crossed a line they didn't see coming. She took a half-step back, positioning herself slightly behind Eliza's shoulder.

"She started it," Azalea said, her earlier bravado thinning. "She insulted Eliza. In front of everyone."

Dallas stood. He seemed to fill the room, blocking out the city lights behind him. He crossed toward them slowly, each step deliberate.

"And your solution was to use the family name as a weapon?" he asked. "To announce to the entire university — and by extension, the local press — that Eliza is under Koch protection?"

"It worked!" Azalea argued, chin jutting out. "They were terrified. Celeste ran."

"It was reckless," Dallas said. He stopped three feet from them. His eyes were dark, unreadable, and utterly intent. "You painted a target on her back. You put a spotlight on her that she isn't ready for."

Eliza felt a surge of guilt. Azalea had only been trying to help. She stepped forward and placed herself between Dallas and his daughter.

“Dallas, don’t blame her,” Eliza said, her voice steady despite the hammering in her chest. “She protected me. I was cornered.”

Dallas’s eyes snapped to Eliza. The force in them stole the breath from her lungs. He wasn’t looking at her like a business partner. He was looking at her like a man who had just found a scratch on something irreplaceable.

“I do not need a teenager to protect my wife,” he said.

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The word hung in the air. Wife. Not a legal formality — something heavier. Possessive. Vibrating with a dark intensity that made Eliza’s toes curl inside her shoes.

He turned his gaze back to Azalea. “No trust fund access for a week. Your cards are frozen. Learn discretion.”

Azalea’s mouth fell open. “You’re joking. I have a ski trip next week!”

“Then you’d better start packing a lunch,” Dallas said coldly. “Dismissed.”

“You’re a tyrant!” Azalea shouted. She spun on her heel and stormed down the hallway. Her bedroom door slammed with a force that echoed through the penthouse like a gunshot.

Silence flooded back into the living room, heavy and suffocating.

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Eliza stood where she was, feeling small and out of place. She looked at Dallas. He was pinching the bridge of his nose, the anger slowly draining from his face to reveal a stark, grey exhaustion beneath.

“You were harsh,” Eliza said softly.

Dallas lowered his hand and looked at her. For a moment, she saw the cracks in the armor.

“This world eats people who are loud, Eliza,” he said, his voice rough. “It chews them up and spits them out. I need you safe. Not famous.”

He walked past her toward his study. As he passed, his arm brushed against her shoulder — a fleeting contact, but it sent a shiver racing down her spine. It wasn't cold. It was searing.

Was he controlling? Or was he terrified?

Eliza stood alone in the empty living room for a long moment, trying to understand the man she had married. He was a fortress with no visible doors.

Twenty minutes later, Eliza knocked on Azalea's door. She was carrying a tray with two glasses of milk and a plate of Mrs. Higgins's chocolate chip cookies.

“Go away,” came the muffled reply.

“I have bribes,” Eliza said.

The door cracked open. Azalea peered out, eyes red-rimmed. She saw the cookies and opened the door wider.

Eliza stepped inside. The room was a chaotic explosion of clothes and textbooks — a stark contrast to the sterile perfection of the rest of the penthouse.

Azalea flopped back onto her bed and grabbed a cookie. “He’s such a mood swing king,” she muttered, chewing with feeling.

Eliza sat on the edge of the mattress. “He was worried. In his own intense way.”

“One minute he’s cool, buying you a rose garden,” Azalea grumbled. “The next he’s Mr. Freeze. It’s exhausting.”

Eliza studied the teenager’s face. “Is he always like this?”

Azalea stopped chewing. She glanced at the door, then leaned in, dropping her voice.

“Since the war? Yeah,” she whispered. “He came back different. He gets intense. Especially about control and safety. He thinks the only way to keep people safe is to lock everything down. He’s not crazy – he’s just terrified of losing things. If he feels like he’s losing control of a situation, he snaps.”

It made a terrible kind of sense to Eliza. The coldness. The sudden flares of anger. The rigidity.

“Terrified,” Eliza repeated slowly.

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## Chapter 33:

The word settled in her stomach like a stone. She wasn't dealing with a cold corporate machine. She was dealing with a man carrying real damage, doing the only thing he knew how to do with fear — turning it into control.

“I need to be careful,” Eliza murmured, more to herself than to Azalea.

“Just don't poke the bear,” Azalea advised, reaching for another cookie. “And maybe do something nice for him. To balance the scales. He hates feeling like the bad guy — even though he's genuinely very good at it.”

Eliza nodded slowly. She needed to find a way to pay him back. Not just for the protection, but to steady the ground between them. If he was volatile, perhaps she could be the thing that grounded him.

The clock on the wall read 6:00 PM. The penthouse was quiet, save for the rhythmic clink of silver against china as Mrs. Higgins set the long dining table.

Eliza sat at the far end, her art history textbooks spread open before her. She was trying to focus on the Baroque period, but her mind kept drifting down the hall.

“Mr. Koch has a gala dinner with the Board tonight,” Mrs. Higgins noted, placing a single setting at the head of the table. “You’ll be dining alone, ma’am.”

Eliza nodded, a quiet wave of relief washing over her. A peaceful evening. No walking on eggshells, no navigating the minefield of Dallas’s moods. “That’s fine, Mrs. Higgins. Just a salad for me, please.”

The elevator chimed.

The doors slid open, and Dallas walked in.

He was early. He was loosening his tie as he moved, the silk hanging undone around his neck. He looked tired, but the energy rolling off him was sharp and alert.

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“Mr. Koch?” Mrs. Higgins straightened, visibly surprised. “The dinner — I thought —”

“Cancelled,” Dallas said smoothly. He tossed his jacket over a chair. “I prefer to dine with my wife.”

Eliza froze. Her pen hovered over her notebook. He had cancelled a board dinner — an event worth millions in networking and decisions — to eat in silence across a wide table from her.

He pulled out the chair opposite and sat down. The table was broad, but it suddenly felt intimate.

“How was your study session?” he asked. His voice was neutral, the anger from the afternoon apparently dissolved.

“Fine,” Eliza said. She closed her book. “Why are you really home, Dallas?”

He poured himself a glass of water from the carafe and watched her over the rim as he drank. “To be a husband,” he said, setting it down. “Isn’t that the role?”

Eliza felt the full weight of what he had just given her. Time was currency for men like Dallas Koch. And he was spending it on her.

She looked around the penthouse – the marble floors, the art on the walls, the security detail outside. She was living in his house, driving his car, sheltered by his name.

She felt like a parasite.

“I need to contribute,” she blurted out.

Dallas raised an eyebrow. “You contribute by existing, Eliza.”

“No,” she said, sitting straighter. “A marriage should have equal exchange – even a contract one. I can’t just take.”

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She had been thinking about Azalea's advice. Balance the scales. She glanced toward her purse, where the Centurion card sat cold and heavy. She thought of the simple platinum band he had placed on her finger — a beautiful but entirely unilateral gesture. Using his own money to buy her something felt hollow. Whatever she gave him needed to come from her. A sign that she was bringing something of her own into this arrangement, however small.

"I want to buy us new wedding bands," she said.

Dallas went still. His hand paused on the tablecloth. Something shifted in his eyes — the ice softening, just around the edges. "You want to buy rings?" he asked quietly. "With your own savings?"

"Yes," Eliza said firmly. "You provided the house, the car, the protection. I should provide the symbol. One we choose together, even if it's simple."

Dallas leaned back in his chair. A hint of amusement touched his lips, though his eyes remained serious. "Very well," he agreed. "Surprise me."

Dinner continued, but the atmosphere had shifted. The anxiety in Eliza's chest had been replaced by a strange, quiet sense of purpose. She wasn't simply a victim anymore. She was a partner — a junior one, perhaps, but a partner nonetheless.

Later that night, Eliza sat in bed, her phone screen glowing in the dark.

She opened her banking app. The balance stared back at her. It was modest. Painfully so.

The Solomon accounts were gone. Her allowance from the Hyde trust had been cut off. All she had were the small savings she'd scraped together from tutoring before the marriage.

She couldn't afford diamonds. She couldn't afford platinum. She couldn't afford anything close to the standard of gold Dallas was accustomed to.

She bit her lip and searched: Simple Wedding Bands.

She scrolled past the luxury brands and found a site specializing in alternative metals. Tungsten. Silver. Durable. Real. She clicked on a set of plain silver bands — clean, unpretentious, honest.

Engraving options available, the screen read.

Eliza hesitated. What do you engrave on a ring for a fake marriage that is starting to feel dangerously real?

She thought about the contract. She thought about Anson's accusations. She thought about the way Dallas had said safe like it was the only word in his vocabulary that truly mattered.

She typed into the box.

Ring 1 (Size 10): Fortune Ring 2 (Size 6): Prosperity

It was a nod to their business arrangement. Almost a joke. But beneath it was a genuine wish — that this deal would bring him something good, since he was risking so much for her.

Her thumb hovered over the Order button. She stopped.

A picture on a screen wasn't enough. She needed to hold them. She needed to feel the weight of the metal in her hand, to be certain it was real – the way this marriage was quietly, undeniably becoming real.

She locked her phone. She would go to the jewelry district in the morning. She would find the right pair herself.

She lay back against her pillows. For the first time in weeks, she felt purposeful. She had a task. She had a way to pay him back, on her own terms.

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The next morning, Eliza took a cab to the jewelry district. She avoided the glittering stretch of Fifth Avenue where the doormen wore top hats. Instead, she directed the driver to a side street where the shops were smaller, family-owned, and smelled of metal polish and old wood.

She pushed open the door of a small shop called Miller & Sons. A bell jingled overhead.

“I need two bands,” she told the jeweler — an older man with a loupe fixed to his eye. “Simple. Silver. Size 10 and size 6. Can you engrave them today?”

“For a rush fee, sure,” the man grunted.

Eliza chose the plainest silver bands in the case. They gleamed under the halogen lights but felt light in her palm. Inexpensive.

“Engraving?” the man asked, pulling out a notepad.

“Yes. ‘Fortune’ on the large one. ‘Prosperity’ on the small one,” she said, managing a smile.

It cost half her remaining savings. She paid in cash, the bills soft and worn in her hand.

Walking out with the small velvet pouch tucked into her purse, a wave of nausea rolled through her. Was this an insult? Presenting a billionaire with a two-hundred-dollar ring? Would he laugh?

She returned to the penthouse in the late afternoon to find the foyer full of luggage.

“Going on a ski trip with friends!” Azalea announced, dragging a suitcase toward the elevator. She was bundled in a fluffy pink coat, radiating cheerful energy.

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“I thought you were grounded,” Eliza said, confused.

Azalea leaned in, voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “He thinks I’m grounded. He doesn’t know about the emergency account Grandma set up for me. He’ll assume I caved and begged a friend to cover it – which will satisfy his need to feel like he’s taught me a lesson. Besides, he told me to ‘cool off.’ Translation: he sent me away so you two can have some privacy.”

Heat crept up Eliza’s neck. “Have fun, Az.”

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!” Azalea called out as the elevator doors slid shut.

The penthouse fell instantly quiet — just the low hum of the refrigerator and the muffled pulse of traffic far below.

Dallas came home at five o’clock sharp.

“You’re early again,” Eliza remarked as he walked into the kitchen.

“I live here,” he reminded her, loosening his tie. He glanced at the empty spot where Azalea usually lounged. “Peaceful.”

“You sent her away,” Eliza said, not unkindly.

“She needs the mountains,” Dallas said, pouring himself a glass of water. “And we need clarity.”

They sat down to dinner. Mrs. Higgins served steak alongside a large bowl of mixed green salad.

Eliza picked up her fork and nudged the lettuce around, scanning out of habit for the thing she always had to remove. She always spent the first five minutes picking out the red onions — she loved the dressing, but raw onion made her gag.

There were none.

She went through the entire bowl. Not a single one.

“Mrs. Higgins?” Eliza looked up.

“Mr. Koch noted your preference in the household file, ma’am,” the housekeeper said from the doorway. “No raw onions.”

Eliza looked at Dallas. He was cutting his steak with his usual surgical precision, eyes on his plate.

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“You noticed?” she asked, her voice going soft. Anson had never noticed. In ten years, Anson had never once remembered the onions.

“I notice details, Eliza,” Dallas said, still not looking up. “It’s good business.”

What he didn’t let show was the memory from the night before: him, alone at his desk long after midnight, reviewing the comprehensive file his security team had compiled on her. It ran to dozens of pages – academic records, financial history, personal habits. He had skimmed most of it, but two entries had made him stop. The first was a short list of dietary notes: Dislikes raw onions. Prefers tea over coffee. The second was a single line in her medical summary, highlighted in red: Severe anaphylactic allergy: mango. He had closed the file with both items burned permanently into his memory.

Eliza felt warmth spread through her chest, steadier and deeper than the food could account for. This wasn’t business. You didn’t update household files for business assets.

She reached into her pocket and closed her fingers around the velvet pouch. Her palm was damp.

“I – I got the things,” she said. Her voice sounded small in the large room.

Dallas set his knife and fork down on the edge of his plate with careful deliberateness. He wiped his mouth with the linen napkin.

“Show me,” he said.

Eliza drew out the small black velvet pouch, loosened the drawstring, and tipped the rings onto the marble tabletop.

They spun for a moment before settling – two plain silver bands, simple and quiet. Against the vast expanse of expensive stone, they looked tiny. Insignificant. Like something from a different world entirely.

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Dallas stared at them without blinking. He looked at them as though they were the Hope Diamond.

“They’re simple,” Eliza began, her throat tightening. “I know they aren’t what you’re used to, but —”

Dallas reached out. His hand, large and steady, picked up the larger ring. The silver caught the light of the chandelier. He turned it over, tilting it slightly to read the inscription inside.

“Fortune?” he read aloud. His voice was a low rumble.

“And mine says Prosperity,” Eliza explained quickly, her heart hammering against her ribs. “For our venture. To bring luck to the partnership.” She braced herself for the mockery. It’s silver. It’s cheap. It’s practically a joke.

“It’s silver,” she added, the apology spilling out. “Not platinum.”

Dallas looked up at her. His eyes were dark and intent, and completely devoid of mockery.

“It is perfect,” he said. His voice came out rough, as though something had caught in his throat. He held the ring out to her. “Put it on me.”

Eliza blinked. “Now?”

“Now,” he said.

He extended his left hand across the table – fingers long, elegant, powerful. The hand of a man who had built empires.

Eliza’s hand trembled as she took the ring. She reached across, her fingertips brushing against his warm skin, and slid the silver band onto his ring finger. It caught slightly at the knuckle, then settled at the base with a quiet finality.

A perfect fit.

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Dallas flexed his hand and studied it. The modest metal looked stark and bright against his skin. It looked like a claim.

“I will never take it off,” he said. The gravity in his voice made Eliza’s breath catch.

“But Dallas —” she whispered, “the secrecy. Everyone will see it.”

He met her gaze, a dangerous glint surfacing in his eyes. “Let them see. Let them wonder.”

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He set her protest aside without ceremony. He picked up the smaller ring.

“My turn.”

He reached for her hand without asking — simply took it. His grip was firm and warm. He slid the ring onto her finger. It was light, but the weight of his gaze made it feel like something permanent. Something irrevocable.

He held her hand a moment longer than necessary, his thumb moving slowly over her knuckles.

Then he tugged. “Come here.”

Eliza stumbled forward, rounding the corner of the table. Before she could understand what was happening, Dallas caught her by the waist.

He pulled her down. She gasped as she landed in his lap.

“Dallas — Mrs. Higgins —” she said, twisting toward the kitchen.

“Dismissed for the night,” he murmured against her hair. His arms wrapped around her waist, locking her in place. He rested his chin on her shoulder and looked down at their joined hands resting on his thigh. The two silver rings glinted side by side.

“We are a team now, Eliza,” he said. “Fortune and Prosperity.”

She felt his heartbeat against her back. Steady and strong, like a war drum.

“This is a slow adjustment period,” he murmured – the clinical term sounding obscenely intimate in this position.

“Adjustment to what?” she asked, barely breathing, her hands resting tentatively on his forearms.

“To being mine,” he said, and pressed his lips to the sensitive spot behind her ear.

A wave of desire moved through her – hot, disorienting, impossible to suppress. She should push him away. The contract said professional. Clause 4.

But she didn’t push. She leaned back, just slightly, just for a moment.

The ring on his finger was cool against her skin, but his body was fire. He smelled of sandalwood and authority.

“You bought me with silver,” he murmured, his lips grazing her neck. “A steal.”

“I thought you liked good deals,” she managed, her voice unsteady.

“I like the best deals,” he corrected. His hand shifted, his thumb tracing the line of her hip through the fabric of her dress.

Eliza’s mind was spinning. This wasn’t pretend. This wasn’t performance. His reaction to the cheap rings — the way he had looked at them, the vow he had made — he had treasured them. Because she had given them to him.

In that moment, with terrifying clarity, Eliza understood that the man holding her might actually love her.

And that frightened her far more than Anson’s hatred ever had. Because love meant vulnerability. Love meant something precious enough to lose. And she was no longer sure she could survive losing him.

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Chapter 38:

The atmosphere in the dining room had thickened to the consistency of molasses. Every breath Eliza took was saturated with Dallas – his scent, his heat, his overwhelming presence.

He turned her face toward him with a gentle pressure of his fingers beneath her chin. His gaze dropped to her lips. His pupils were blown wide, swallowing the dark irises almost entirely.

Eliza understood, with sudden and absolute clarity, that she was about to kiss him. Not a staged kiss. A real one. The kind that leaves a mark on the soul.

Panic hit her like a bucket of ice water.

If she kissed him, she surrendered her leverage. She surrendered the boundary. She became the vulnerable girl who fell for her own savior.

She scrambled off his lap, nearly tripping over her own feet.

“I – I have homework!” she blurted out.

She fled. She literally ran from the dining room, down the hallway, and into the sanctuary of the study. She pulled the door shut behind her and leaned against it, her heart hammering against her ribs like something caged.

From the dining room, she heard a low, dark chuckle. He knew. He knew exactly what she had felt.

Eliza paced the study, muttering under her breath. “Stupid. He’s a shark. Don’t bleed in the water.”

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. She pulled it out – and the name on the screen made her blood run cold.

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Victoria Hyde.

Anson's mother.

Eliza's thumb hovered over the decline button. She hadn't spoken to Victoria since the day she left the Hyde estate with nothing but a single suitcase. She answered anyway.

"Hello, Mrs. Hyde."

"Eliza, darling." Victoria's voice purred through the speaker — false-sweet, laced with something corrosive. "We haven't heard from you. We were beginning to worry you'd fallen off the face of the earth."

"I've been busy," Eliza said, keeping her voice neutral, gripping the phone tight.

"Well, you simply must clear your schedule," Victoria continued. "Anson and Claudine's Engagement Gala is this Saturday. At The Plaza."

The room tilted. "I don't think I should go."

“Nonsense,” Victoria said, the sweetness evaporating in an instant. “Unless you’re still bitter? Or ashamed of your new life? People are talking, Eliza. They say you’re hiding. That you’re destitute. Claudine was most insistent — she wants to show everyone how generous she is. To welcome all of Anson’s past into their future.”

The implication was unmistakable. This was not an olive branch. It was a power play, dressed in one.

The manipulation was pure Victoria — baiting her pride with surgical precision.

“I’ll send the digital invite,” Victoria added, her tone sharpening at the edges. “Bring a guest, if you have one.”

The line went dead.

An email notification arrived immediately. Eliza opened it. The invitation was gold and cream, ostentatious and loud.

The Union of Anson Hyde & Claudine Chapman.

Eliza stared at the screen.

Going meant facing Anson. It meant facing all the rumors head-on. But not going meant admitting defeat — hiding in the shadows while they held a celebration over her grave.

Her phone buzzed again.

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Chapter 39:

Azalea: Heard about the Gala from my spy network. DON'T GO. It's a trap. Claudine wants to gloat.

Eliza typed back: I have to. To show them I'm fine.

But she had a problem. Bring a guest.

She couldn't bring Dallas. If Dallas Koch walked into that room on her arm, the evening would stop being about her reclaiming her dignity and become entirely about him. Her quiet life would be finished.

She had to go alone.

A knock at the study door made her jump.

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"Eliza?"

Dallas opened the door. He took one look at her pallor and the phone clutched in her hand. His expression hardened instantly.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Anson’s engagement party,” she admitted, her voice unsteady. “I’ve been invited.”

Dallas’s face became a mask of granite. His eyes narrowed slowly.

“We are going,” he said.

Eliza looked at him. He had assumed we without a second’s hesitation.

“No,” she whispered, more to herself than to him. “I have to do this alone.”

The next morning, breakfast was a battlefield.

Eliza pushed her scrambled eggs around the plate, building little yellow walls and tearing them down again.

“I’m going to the Gala alone,” she announced.

Dallas stopped buttering his toast. The knife scraped loudly across the crust. He looked up, his eyes cold.

“Excuse me?”

“This isn’t about the contract anymore,” Eliza said, her voice steady. “Everyone already suspects something is going on between us, thanks to Azalea. But this is about me. I need to walk in there as Eliza Solomon and face them on my own terms. If you come, you become a shield – your power will eclipse everything else in the room. This is my fight, Dallas. I need to prove to them, and to myself, that I don’t need a crutch.”

“I am not a crutch,” he said, his voice rising, cracking with frustration. “I am your husband.”

“And I am not a damsel in distress!” she insisted. “I need to do this myself. Please.”

Dallas stared at her. He saw the resolve in her eyes – the pride he admired and resented in equal measure.

“Fine,” he said coldly. “Go alone.”

He stood, threw his napkin onto the table, grabbed his briefcase, and walked out of the penthouse without finishing his coffee.

Eliza slumped in her chair. She felt terrible. She had wounded him to protect a fragile piece of independence she wasn't even sure was worth the cost.

In his black SUV, Dallas was fuming. He punched the speed dial on the console.

“Zane,” he barked into the Bluetooth system. “What is an appropriate engagement gift for an enemy?”

Zane's voice crackled over the speakers, caught off guard. “A bomb? Or a better car than his?”

“Something that says ‘I won,’” Dallas clarified, staring out at the grey city streets.

Zane was quiet for a moment. “Send a check. A substantial one, to a charity in his fiancée's name. Specifically, a charity she despises. Or better yet — a charity for victims of domestic emotional abuse. Classy and deeply insulting at the same time.”

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Chapter 40:

“Done,” Dallas said. “Make it substantial.”

He paused, his hand tightening on the steering wheel.

“Also —” He stopped. The words felt like gravel in his throat.

“Yeah?”

“I need information about protection,” Dallas said, his voice dropping.

“Bodyguards?” Zane asked. “I can double the detail for the Gala.”

“No,” Dallas said through his teeth. “Contraception. Brands. The best ones.”

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Silence filled the car. Then Zane let out a howl of laughter. “The Monk is breaking his vows? The ice king is melting?”

“Shut up,” Dallas snapped, his ears burning. “Just send me the information. And pull me a live feed of the Plaza’s ballroom security for Saturday night – all cameras. I want eyes on her the entire evening.”

He hung up before Zane could say another word.

He stared at the road ahead. He wasn’t letting her walk into that Gala as a single woman. Not in spirit.

If she wouldn't take him to the party, he would make absolutely certain she belonged to him before she left the house. He would make sure that when Anson looked at her, he saw a woman who was thoroughly, irrevocably taken.

He decided to accelerate the adjustment period.

Back at the penthouse, Eliza was working through the dresses in her wardrobe. Nothing felt right. They were all too soft, too pretty. She needed armor.

She had no idea that Dallas was at that moment standing at a pharmacy counter, ignoring the cashier's raised eyebrow as he set down three different boxes of condoms. He tucked the bag into his jacket pocket as he rode the elevator back up.

The hunt was on.

It was the night before the Gala. The air in the penthouse hummed with static electricity.

Eliza paced the living room, her steps quick and restless. Dallas stood by the bar cart, drinking scotch. The bottle was noticeably lighter than it had been an hour ago.

He watched her move. Her anxiety was a palpable wave, crashing against his composure.

“You look like a prisoner awaiting execution,” he said, his voice dry.

“It’s just a party,” Eliza lied, turning on her heel.

“Then why won’t you let me drive you?” he asked, swirling the amber liquid in his glass. “Why won’t you let me stand beside you?”

“We discussed this,” she said again. The excuse tasted like ash.

Dallas set down his glass and stood. He crossed the room toward her without hurrying, and didn’t stop until he had backed her against the tall bookshelf lined with first editions.

“Is it my protection you don’t want?” he asked, his voice dropping low. “Or is it me?”

Eliza looked up at him, caught off guard. “What?”

“Are you ashamed that you chose me?” he asked. “The ‘machine’? Do you feel dirty, Eliza?”

“No! Dallas, that’s not it,” she protested, her hands pressing against his chest.

“Then prove it,” he said. “Let me claim you.”

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