

## 350 Gift To Him

Eve 1

The next morning was overcast, the sky hanging low like it knew what we were about to do.

I sat on the edge of the bed, fingers trembling slightly as I buttoned Elliot's shirt. His small frame was still sleepy, his eyes bleary but trusting as he tilted his head to let me adjust his collar.

He didn't ask questions. He never did.

Not with words.

But his eyes always asked enough for both of us.

The suit hung loosely on his shoulders—tailored, yes, but still foreign to him. He'd never worn black before. Not like this. Not with meaning.

He kicked his feet a little as he sat on the wooden chest at the foot of my bed, clutching his favorite carved wolf figurine in one hand. The other rested quietly in his lap.

I reached for the tie.

The dark navy one Hades had chosen.

But it felt... heavier today. Like grief had woven itself between the threads.

I looped it carefully around his neck, letting the ends slide through my fingers with mechanical precision. Half-Windsor. Just like Danielle used to tie for Hades on rare council days.

I swallowed the lump forming in my throat.

"You're going to be very brave today," I said softly, my voice barely above a whisper. "Braver than anyone in that room."

He blinked up at me.

Then, slowly, he raised one small hand and rested it over mine—right where I held the knot.

And just like that, I broke.

Not outwardly. Not enough to scare him. But inside, something caved.

Because this child—this beautiful, resilient soul—was about to say goodbye to a mother he barely remembered.

And I was helping him do it.



I smoothed down the tie, then rested my hand on his cheek. "Do you remember her?" It was a stupid to asking, especially knowing how she died. He had barely been an hour hold. 1

But Elliot had always been one of those children.

The kind that seemed to know more than they should.

The kind that carried things—memories, feelings, shadows—that were far too heavy for such small hands.

He bore it quietly, never asking for help, never realizing he was drowning under the weight of things no child should be asked to hold.

And gods, I wanted to release that weight.

I wanted to pry it from his shoulders, stitch up the holes it had torn in him, and tell him he could rest—that someone else would carry it now. That he didn't have to keep remembering what should've never touched him in the first place.

But I couldn't.

Not today.



Today, we were the ones who would carry her.

Today, grief would walk with us, hand in hand, dressed in ceremonial black and bitter silence.

I smoothed down the tie, then rested my hand on his cheek.

He looked down, his fingers tightening slightly around the carved wolf. His lips pressed together, like he was chewing on something heavy. Then—slowly, so slowly—he signed.

"She screamed."

My blood ran cold.

Elliot didn't look up at me, just kept his gaze low, like saying the words too loudly might summon ghosts.

"She screamed really loud."

My hands stilled on the tie. My heart climbed into my throat.

Elliot hesitated, fingers trembling a little now.

Then he signed again, more slowly, more uncertainly:



"She begged Mama not to kill her."

I froze.

Every inch of me turned to ice.

"I remember her hands," he continued, blinking hard. "They were shaking, but she held me. Tight. Like she was trying to make me invisible. She... she didn't want me to get hurt." 1

His voice didn't rise. He didn't cry. He was just... saying it.

Like he was talking about a feeling he'd carried his whole life without knowing why.

"I remember that," he whispered aloud now, not signing. "I remember her arms. I remember the way it felt... like she was trying to keep me inside her. So they couldn't take me."

He went quiet.

Then, almost like it hurt to say it, he added:

"I don't remember her face. But Mama said I looked like her."

He glanced up at me, brow furrowed. The quiet storm of a child trying to understand something



too big for language.

"She said I had her eyes."

He swallowed, jaw trembling for the first time.

"And she hated me for it."

Oh gods.

The floor fell out from under me.

I knelt in front of him so quickly the bed creaked behind me, my hands cupping his tiny face before he could look away. His eyes—Daniele's eyes—were wide and brimming but still dry.

"Your real mama didn't hate you," I said, voice shaking. "She didn't. You were the one thing she loved until the end. You hear me?"

He nodded, a little. Maybe.

I kissed his forehead, then leaned mine against his, breathing through the ache.

Elliot shifted slightly beneath my hands, his brows drawing together as something flickered across his face—something too old for his age. He opened his mouth, then closed it again, struggling to form the words.



Finally, in a voice as soft as the spaces between sobs, he asked:

"Is that why... she waited?"

I blinked.

He looked up at me with searching eyes. "Is that why she didn't go in the ground yet? She waited for me... until I was a big boy. So I could say goodbye?"

Oh, gods.

The answer lodged like glass in my throat.

Because the truth was uglier than that.

Because Danielle had not been preserved out of love.

She had been sealed in cold silence, entombed in sterile sanctity not to give anyone peace... but because Montegue—her father—had refused to let her go until someone paid for her death.

Until the murderer was found.

Until vengeance could replace mourning.

So she had been kept suspended in a state of



near-stasis, untouched by rot but also  
untouched by dignity. She hadn't been allowed to  
sleep. To rest. To return to the soil like all things  
are meant to.

Her death had become a monument to political  
rage.

And I hated it.

But I couldn't tell Elliot that.

Not even a child like him.

Especially not a child like him.

Some truths were scars.

Others were wounds still open.

And some... were better kissed closed by the  
softness of lies.

So I swallowed the bitter truth and gave him the  
balm instead.

"Yes," I said, brushing his hair gently behind his  
ear. "She waited for you."

His lips quivered.



And then, for the first time in the stillness of our morning, his tears came.

Big, quiet drops that spilled down his cheeks without sound or warning.

"I'm scared," he whispered.

I pulled him close, wrapping my arms around his small body, letting him press his cheek to my shoulder.

"I'm scared it's really goodbye," he choked.

"Like... goodbye-goodbye."

"It's okay to be scared," I murmured, rocking him gently. "But it's not just goodbye."

He trembled against me.

"It's a promise too," I said. "A promise that she's not trapped anymore. That she can rest now. And that we'll remember her every time we look at each other."

Elliot sniffled, nodding into my shoulder.

I held him tighter.

"We'll carry her with us," I whispered, more to myself than him. "In every breath, in every



choice. She isn't gone. She's just... free."

His small hand gripped my sleeve.

And we stayed like that—curled together in silence that was finally allowed to mourn—until the knock came again.

Soft. Final.

It was time.

I pulled back slightly, brushing the tears from his cheeks with my thumbs.

"There's something I want to show you," I said softly.

He blinked at me, curious, still quiet.

I rose to my feet and offered him my hand.

He took it, his carved wolf tucked into the crook of his arm as we crossed the room. I led him past the tall shelves, the shelves stacked with worn leather books and the soft chair no one ever sat in, to the far wall—where the painting hung.

It looked like any other piece of art. To most.

A stormy sea, waves crashing violently against a



jagged shoreline. Above it, a full moon sat high in the clouds, luminous and unyielding... except for one thing. It was unfinished.

The moon was still unvarnished. Pale, almost faded compared to the richness of the oil around it.

Danielle never finished it.

She hadn't needed to.

I pressed my palm against it, fingers splaying across the unsealed surface.

There was a soft click.

The painting shifted slightly to the side, revealing a narrow seam of shadow in the wall. The hidden door creaked open, slow and silent, until a gust of cool, dust-scented air brushed our skin.

Elliot took a step forward, his eyes wide.

We entered.

Inside was a room drenched in stillness, like the kind you find in chapels and crypts. But it wasn't cold.



It was... golden.

Soft light poured in from a tall arched window, spilling across wooden floors and shelves stacked with sketchbooks, old palettes, and pigments sealed in delicate glass jars. A dozen easels stood in the corners, each one still holding canvases—some half-finished, some blurred with time. Charcoal portraits leaned against the far wall. There were jars of dry brushes in every size, and hanging on a clothesline stretched across the room were stained smocks—one of them child-sized.

"This was hers," I said gently. "Her art room. Her sanctuary."

Elliot's mouth parted in silent awe as he stepped forward, his small hand ghosting over the edge of an old canvas.

"She loved to paint. Always. She said it helped her feel when she couldn't speak."

He turned to me, eyes wide.

"Like me?" he signed.

I smiled, my heart aching. "Exactly like you."



He looked around again, slower this time, like he was seeing ghosts in every brushstroke.

Like the room was breathing with her memory.

"This is where she poured all of herself," I whispered. "When the world was too loud, or too cruel. This was where she remembered who she was."

At the center of the room stood the largest easel, draped in a faded tarp.

I turned to him.

"She left something behind," I said. "Something I think was meant for you."

He blinked up at me.

"Go on," I whispered. "Pull it off."

He hesitated, his fingers hovering.

And then, just as the door creaked open behind us—just as Hades stepped in, silent and unreadable—Elliot pulled the tarp down.

The cloth fell to the ground in a hush.

And there she was.

Danielle.

Painted in oil and memory, her dark hair swept back, her cheeks flushed with quiet pride. She sat in a chair near the arched window—this window—holding a baby no older than a few hours old, cradled against her chest. Her gaze wasn't on the viewer.

It was on the child.

The baby had green eyes.

Elliot's eyes.

The color practically glowed, the only detail painted in piercing, unmistakable brightness.

He stepped closer, hand rising to touch the frame but stopping just short.

