

Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 1:

The crystal flute in Eliza Solomon's hand was going to shatter.

She could feel the hairline fractures pressing against her palm, a perfect mirror of the way her chest felt — tight, brittle, and one breath away from breaking.

“He looks happy, doesn't he?”

The voice came from her left. A socialite in emerald silk, someone Eliza used to know before the Solomon empire crumbled — before she became the pitiful ward of the Hyde family. They weren't just her guardians; they were the iron-fisted trustees of the Solomon estate, a vast fortune she couldn't touch until she turned twenty-five, or married. Anson, as the primary trustee, controlled every dollar.

Eliza didn't answer. She couldn't. Her throat had closed up somewhere between the appetizer course and the moment Anson Hyde walked into the ballroom with Claudine Chapman on his arm.

Anson looked more than happy. He looked victorious.

He stood at the center of the room, beneath the massive chandelier that had cost more than Eliza's entire college tuition. His hand rested at the small of Claudine's back, fingers splayed possessively against the white fabric of her dress. He leaned down and whispered something into her ear that made Claudine throw her head back and laugh.

The sound was sharp. It cut through the heavy orchestral music and lodged itself directly behind Eliza's ribs.

It was the same laugh Claudine used when she made fun of Eliza's second-hand shoes.

"Excuse me," a waiter muttered, bumping into Eliza's shoulder with a heavy tray.

Champagne sloshed over the rim of her glass and soaked into the bodice of her grey dress. It was cold and sticky.

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The waiter didn't apologize. He glanced at her, recognized her as the charity case, and curled his lip in a sneer before moving on to serve the guests who actually mattered.

Eliza's stomach cramped. The humiliation was a physical weight, pressing down on her shoulders until her knees felt weak. She needed air. She needed to not be here — watching the man who held the keys to her gilded cage announce his engagement to the girl who had made that cage a living hell. The promise to “protect her” had always been a lie. It was a promise to possess her.

She turned and walked toward the library, keeping her head down.

The library was dark, smelling of old paper and lemon polish — the only room in the Hyde estate where Eliza had ever felt safe. She closed the heavy oak door behind her and leaned her forehead against the wood, gasping. Her lungs burned.

The door handle turned beneath her grip.

Eliza jumped back, wiping frantically at her eyes. She expected Anson. She expected him to walk in and tell her to stop making a scene, to smile for the cameras, to be grateful for the roof over her head.

But the figure that filled the doorway wasn't Anson.

It was a wall of a man in a black tuxedo that seemed to absorb the room's dim light. He was taller than Anson, broader, with a stillness about him that dropped the temperature in the library by ten degrees.

Dallas Koch.

Eliza's breath hitched. Why was he here? The CEO of Koch Industries — the most powerful man in the city — didn't hide in libraries. He didn't even look at people like Eliza.

He stood in the doorway, one hand still on the brass knob, his dark eyes moving slowly across her face. He took in the champagne stain on her dress, the red blotches on her cheeks, the way her hands were trembling so hard the crystal flute rattled against her fingers.

For a moment, the stoic mask he wore — the one that made him look like a statue carved from granite — cracked. A muscle jumped in his jaw. He stepped inside and closed the door, sealing out the noise of the party.

He reached into his breast pocket and produced a handkerchief: white silk, folded into a perfect square. He held it out to her without a word.

Eliza stared at it. "I'm fine."

"You are not fine," Dallas said. His voice was a low rumble, filling the quiet room. "Take it."

Eliza reached out. Her fingers brushed against his palm as she took the silk, and a jolt of static electricity snapped between them – sharp and surprising. She flinched. He didn't move.

The handkerchief smelled of sandalwood and something clean, like rain on pavement. It smelled expensive. It smelled like stability.

From the hallway, Anson's voice drifted through the thick wood of the door. He was making a toast.

“...to my beautiful fiancée, Claudine...”

The words landed like a blow to the back of her knees. Her legs gave out.

She didn't hit the floor.

Dallas moved with a speed that shouldn't have been possible for a man of his size. One moment he was standing three feet away; the next, his arm was around her waist, catching her before she fell.

His grip was firm. Solid. He held her up effortlessly, his arm like a steel bar against her spine.

Eliza looked up. Her vision swam with tears, blurring his features, but she could see the intensity in his eyes. He wasn't looking at her with pity. He was looking at her with a terrifying kind of focus.

"Take me away," she whispered.

The words fell out of her mouth before she could stop them — a desperate plea born of heartbreak and the sudden, overwhelming instinct that this man was the only thing in the room that wasn't trying to crush her.

Dallas went still. His eyes darkened, shifting from brown to something nearly black. He looked down at her, assessing the weight of her request, calculating the cost.

"There is no turning back if we leave, Eliza," he warned, his voice low and rough at the edges. "If you walk out that door with me, you do not come back to this house."

Eliza nodded frantically. The tears were spilling over now, hot tracks on her cold skin. "Please. Just get me out."

Dallas didn't hesitate. He shifted his grip and guided her toward the servants' exit hidden behind a tapestry, positioning his broad shoulders between her and the security cameras as they moved.

The night air outside was biting. A sleek, matte black Maybach idled at the curb, looking like a predator waiting in the shadows.

Dallas opened the heavy door and helped her inside. The interior smelled of leather and isolation. He shut the door, and the silence was absolute. The music, the laughter, Anson's voice — all of it was gone.

Eliza slumped against the seat. A crystal decanter sat in the center console. She didn't think. She poured amber liquid into a glass and drank it in one swallow.

It burned — all the way down to her empty stomach, setting her blood on fire.

Dallas got into the driver's seat. He didn't look at her. He gripped the steering wheel so hard his knuckles turned white.

"Where are we going?" she asked, her voice slightly slurred as the alcohol hit her system with the force of a truck.

"My place," Dallas said.

The car moved. The city lights blurred into streaks of neon. Eliza felt dizzy, unmoored, the alcohol mixing with the adrenaline and the grief into a toxic cocktail in her brain.

She studied Dallas's profile. He was Azalea's dad. He was old money. He was power.

"I need a shield," she mumbled, the words tumbling out. "I need a wall he can't climb."

Dallas glanced at her in the rearview mirror, his expression unreadable.

They arrived at a building that pierced the skyline. The elevator ride was a blur of motion sickness. When the doors opened into the penthouse, Eliza stumbled.

Dallas was there again, steadying her. His hands on her arms felt hot through the thin fabric of her dress.

She looked up at him. In the harsh lighting of the foyer, he didn't look like a savior. He looked dangerous.

“Marry me,” she blurted out.

The silence that followed was deafening.

It was the alcohol talking, yes — but it was also a desperate, calculated gambit. Marrying Anson was a life sentence. Marrying anyone else, however, was the loophole in her father’s will. It was her only escape clause, the survival instinct of a wounded animal seeking the one predator in the forest who could kill the wolf at her throat.

Dallas froze. The air in the penthouse turned electric, charged with a tension that made the hair on Eliza’s arms stand on end.

He didn’t laugh. He didn’t tell her she was drunk.

He walked to a wall safe hidden behind a painting and punched in a code, the beeps loud in the quiet room. He pulled out a document and a heavy fountain pen, carried them back to her, and placed the paper on the marble console table.

“Sign,” he commanded. His voice was soft, but it carried the weight of a gavel striking a sounding block.

Eliza blinked, trying to focus on the page. The words swam. She made out “Marriage” and “Agreement.”

She didn’t care about the details. She just wanted Anson to know she was gone. She wanted to burn the bridge so thoroughly she could never cross it again.

She grabbed the pen. Her signature was messy — a jagged scrawl across the bottom line.

“Done,” she whispered.

The pen slipped from her fingers and clattered onto the marble. The room tilted sideways.

The last thing she felt was Dallas catching her again, lifting her into his arms as the darkness swallowed her whole.

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Chapter 2:

The light was aggressive.

It sliced through the floor-to-ceiling windows and hit Eliza squarely in the face. She groaned, rolling over and reaching blindly for the glass of water that usually sat on her nightstand.

Her hand found nothing but air.

She cracked one eye open. The ceiling was too high. The crown molding was too intricate. And the sheets — these weren't her scratchy polyester sheets. This was cotton so smooth it felt like water against her skin.

Memory slammed into her like a physical blow.

The party. The champagne. Dallas.

Eliza sat up so fast her head spun. The room tilted, her brain throbbing against her skull in a rhythmic, punishing beat. She looked down.

She was wearing an oversized men's silk pajama top that swallowed her frame. The fabric was impossibly soft, and it smelled faintly of sandalwood – his scent.

Panic, cold and sharp, flooded her chest. She grabbed the massive duvet and pulled it up to her chin, her heart hammering like a trapped bird. Her own dress – the cheap grey one – was nowhere to be seen.

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She scanned the room. It was minimalist, masculine, and expensive. Dark wood, grey accents, no clutter.

On the bedside table, a stack of clothes had been folded with military precision. Sitting on top was a piece of heavy cardstock and a black credit card.

Eliza reached out with a trembling hand. The card was metal, not plastic – a Centurion card, bearing only the platinum insignia of the bank. No name. A supplementary card.

She dropped it as if it had burned her.

She picked up the note. The handwriting was sharp, angular.

Hydrate. The code is your birthday. — D.

Flashbacks assaulted her. The car ride. The demand for a shield. The paper on the marble table.

Sign.

She gasped, pressing both hands to her mouth. She had proposed to her best friend's father. And he had said yes.

She grabbed her phone from the nightstand. The screen lit up with a barrage of notifications.

52 missed calls from Anson Hyde. 30 texts. 12 voicemails.

Then, a single text from a number she didn't have saved but recognized instantly.

Lawyers are filing. You are safe. Go to school.

Dallas.

Eliza stared at her left hand. There was a ring on it — a simple platinum band, elegant and understated — but it felt heavier than a shackle.

She scrambled out of bed, her legs unsteady. She grabbed the folded clothes: a soft cashmere sweater, dark jeans, fresh underwear. She pulled them on. They fit. They fit perfectly.

She paused with the sweater halfway over her head. How? How did he have clothes in her exact size already waiting? The thought sent a shiver down her spine, but she pushed it away. She couldn't deal with that right now.

She needed to leave.

She grabbed her bag and the black card — shoving it deep into her pocket — and fled the room.

The penthouse was silent. A housekeeper was dusting in the hallway, a stout woman with grey hair.

“Good morning, Mrs. —”

Eliza didn't let her finish. She bolted for the elevator, jabbing the button and half-expecting it not to work. To her surprise, a green light blinked and the doors slid open. He had already given her access.

Her phone buzzed. It was Azalea.

Library. Now. Emergency.

Eliza's stomach dropped. Did she know?

She hailed a cab outside the building, her hands shaking so badly she could barely open the door. The ride to the university took twenty minutes, but it felt like twenty seconds.

She ran through the campus quad, ignoring the stares of students who had no doubt seen the photos of her fleeing the party the night before.

She found Azalea pacing behind the reference section. Azalea looked manic, her blonde hair disheveled, phone clutched in both hands.

“Eliza!” Azalea grabbed her arm and dragged her further into the stacks. “My dad just transferred a crazy amount of money to my account.”

Eliza froze. “What?”

“Like, ‘buy a small island’ money,” Azalea whispered, eyes wide. “He said to take you shopping. Why is he spoiling you?” Her eyes narrowed, scanning Eliza’s face.

Eliza’s mouth went dry. “I... I helped him with a project. Some translation work.”

It was a weak lie. Eliza was an art history major, not a translator. Azalea nodded slowly, though a flicker of doubt crossed her face. Translation work? For her father, who had an entire in-house team of linguists? It felt thin — but Eliza looked so fragile that Azalea decided not to press. For now.

“Whatever. We have orders. Come outside.”

Azalea marched her out of the library toward the student parking lot.

“He said your car is a death trap,” Azalea called over her shoulder. “Which, to be fair, it is. The brakes sound like dying cats. So I took the liberty of having it towed to a junkyard this morning. You’re welcome.”

They reached the lot. A flatbed truck was idling there, its empty bed a testament to Azalea’s efficiency. Parked in Eliza’s old spot was a silver Aston Martin, gleaming under the morning sun and looking completely alien among the dented Civics and Toyotas surrounding it.

The driver climbed out and walked over to Azalea, handing her a key fob. Azalea tossed it to Eliza.

“He said this is the replacement.”

Eliza caught it. The fob was heavy — leather and chrome. She looked at the car. It was worth more than the house she had grown up in.

“I can’t take this,” she whispered.

“You have to,” Azalea said, crossing her arms. “You know how he is. If you send it back, he’ll just send two.”

Students were stopping. Phones were coming out. Whispers rippled through the air.

Is that Eliza Solomon? Who bought her that?

Eliza’s phone buzzed again. Anson.

She declined the call, her thumb hitting the red button with aggressive force.

She walked to the car and pressed unlock. The mirrors unfolded. The lights flashed.

“Get in, Mrs. Koch,” Azalea joked, nudging her in the ribs.

Eliza flinched. The title hit too close to home.

She slid into the driver's seat. The smell of new leather enveloped her — the same scent as the Maybach. The same scent as Dallas.

She gripped the steering wheel, her knuckles white. She had signed a contract with the devil, and now she was driving his chariot.

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Chapter 3:

The coffee shop on campus was loud — a chaotic blend of hissing espresso machines and students complaining about midterms.

Eliza sat in the corner booth, clutching a latte like a lifeline. The caffeine was making her hands shake worse, but she needed it to cut through the fog in her brain.

Azalea sat opposite her, scrolling through Instagram with a grimace.

“Everybody is talking about how you vanished,” Azalea said, not looking up. “Claudine is posting passive-aggressive quotes about ‘loyalty’ and ‘trash taking itself out.’”

Eliza flinched. A drop of foam spilled onto her thumb. “Let her talk.”

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“Oh, I am,” Azalea said darkly. “I’m commenting with vomit emojis on every single post.”

Eliza reached for a napkin. As she moved, the cashmere scarf she was wearing slipped slightly to one side.

Azalea gasped.

The sound was loud enough that two people at the next table turned around. Azalea's phone clattered onto the table.

"Eliza! What is that on your neck?"

Eliza's hand flew to her throat. She felt the tender spot just below her ear — a dark, purplish bruise against her pale skin.

She had seen it in the mirror that morning and had been trying not to think about it. The memory of the night was hazy, obscured by alcohol. She remembered stumbling. She remembered Dallas catching her. Had he held her too tightly? Or was it something else? She couldn't be sure, and the uncertainty was terrifying.

"It's nothing," Eliza stammered, pulling the scarf tighter. "The car door hit me on the way out this morning."

"Bullshit," Azalea hissed, leaning across the table. Her eyes were wide and predatory. "That is not a door. That's a hickey — world-class, possessive, 'stay away from her' energy. Who is he?"

Eliza's heart hammered against her ribs. She couldn't say Your dad. She absolutely could not say that.

"It's complicated," Eliza said, staring into her cup. "An older guy."

Azalea's eyebrows shot up. "Older? Like... Anson's age?"

"Older," Eliza whispered.

Azalea opened her mouth to scream, but her phone cut her off – vibrating violently against the wooden table, its screen flashing a contact name: The Bank.

That was her name for Dallas.

Azalea answered immediately, her posture straightening on instinct. "Yes, Daddy?"

Eliza held her breath. She could hear the deep rumble of Dallas's voice on the other end, though she couldn't make out the words. The sound alone made the hair on her arms stand up.

Azalea frowned. “Right now? But we have class in an hour.”

She listened for another few seconds, then sighed. “Okay. Fine. We’re coming.”

She hung up and looked at Eliza, puzzled.

“He wants us at the flagship store downtown.”

Eliza’s stomach dropped. “Both of us?”

“Yeah. He says you need ‘appropriate attire’ for a dinner tonight.”

“Dinner?” Eliza squeaked.

“Apparently.” Azalea gathered her bag. “Come on. You don’t keep The Bank waiting.”

They walked back to the parking lot. The silver Aston Martin gleamed in the sun, drawing long stares from a group of fraternity guys lingering nearby.

Eliza unlocked the car and slid into the driver's seat, the leather molding around her. She pressed the start button and the engine roared to life — a guttural growl that vibrated through the floorboards and up into her spine.

“You’ll get used to the high life eventually,” Azalea laughed, buckling her seatbelt.

Eliza pulled out of the lot and merged onto the main road toward the city. The skyline loomed ahead, glass towers throwing back the afternoon sun. She glanced at her reflection in the rearview mirror and adjusted the scarf, making sure the mark was covered.

Whether it was a bruise or something else entirely, Dallas had left it in a place that was difficult to hide. It felt like a brand.

The dashboard screen lit up. Eliza had paired her phone to the car's Bluetooth earlier, and now a text notification bloomed across the center console, large and undeniable.

Sender: Anson Hyde Stop playing games. Come home. You belong here.

Azalea saw it. She let out a low whistle.

“He’s obsessed,” Azalea said, shaking her head. “It’s actually creepy. Good thing you have a new ‘older man’ to distract you.”

Eliza tightened her grip on the steering wheel. “Yeah. Good thing.”

She pressed down on the accelerator, putting distance between herself and the university, between herself and Anson. But the road ahead led straight toward the man who had put a ring on her finger and a mark on her neck — and she still had no idea what his game was.

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Chapter 4:

The air inside the jewelry store was perfumed and chilled to a temperature that kept the clientele alert and the diamonds sparkling.

The store manager – a man in a suit so expensive it hummed with tailored arrogance – bowed slightly as they entered.

“Ms. Solomon,” he said. “Please, follow me to the VIP suite.”

He led them past glass cases filled with jewels that could have fed a small country, then into a private room at the back enclosed by frosted glass walls. A tray of sparkling water was already waiting.

“Our client instructed us to show you the investment collection,” the manager said, clasping his hands.

Azalea choked on her water. She coughed, setting the glass down hard. “Investment? Who is buying?”

Eliza froze. Dallas moved fast. Too fast.

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“It’s portfolio diversification,” Eliza said, grasping at the first thing that came to mind. “Diamonds hold value.”

Azalea looked skeptical. “Since when do you care about investment portfolios?”

“Since I decided to stop being poor,” Eliza snapped, a little too sharply.

Azalea shrugged, already distracted by a massive five-carat emerald-cut diamond resting on a velvet pillow. “Fair enough.”

Eliza picked up a ring from the tray — a vintage setting, platinum with a solitaire diamond — and slid it onto her finger.

It fit perfectly.

Of course it did. Just like the clothes.

The bell at the front entrance chimed. Not a polite ding, but a jarring clatter caused by the door being thrown open with force.

Voices rose at the front desk.

“Sir, you cannot go back there!”

“Get out of my way.”

Eliza’s blood ran cold. She knew that voice.

She turned just as the frosted glass door to the VIP room was shoved open.

Anson stood in the doorway. He looked disheveled – tie crooked, hair messy, eyes wild. He spotted Eliza instantly and stormed across the room, ignoring the manager, ignoring Azalea.

“That platinum band looks cheap, Eliza,” Anson said, his voice low and cutting. “Is that the best your new benefactor could afford?”

He didn't reach for her. He reached past her, picking up a grotesquely large diamond necklace from the velvet tray and dangling it in front of her face.

"This is what you're worth. Not that pathetic little shackle. Come home. I'll buy you ten of these."

"She's not for sale, Anson," Eliza said. Her voice shook, but her chin stayed up. She closed her left hand into a fist, the simple band pressing into her palm.

"Not for sale?" Anson laughed, a dark and humorless sound. "Everything about you is for sale. I control your trust fund. Your entire life is funded by my signature. I can cut you off without a penny."

"Not anymore," a calm, icy voice said from the doorway.

Everyone turned.

Dallas's senior lawyer, Mr. Sterling, stood there flanked by two security guards, a tablet held in front of him.

"As of nine-fifteen this morning, upon the official execution of her new legal status change, all assets within the Solomon Trust have been transferred to Ms. Solomon's independent control," Mr. Sterling announced, his voice carrying

cleanly through the silent room. “You no longer hold signing authority, Mr. Hyde. In fact, you are in breach of fiduciary duty for your past expenditures.”

Anson’s face drained from an arrogant flush to a ghostly white. His primary weapon had just been vaporized.

“I’ll find out who’s backing her,” he hissed, dropping the necklace back onto the tray with a clatter. “And I’ll ruin him. I will bankrupt him and leave him in the gutter. And then you’ll come crawling back.”

He spun on his heel and stormed out.

Eliza stood very still as the adrenaline began to ebb, leaving her knees hollow and weak.

The store manager stepped forward, bowing slightly toward Mr. Sterling. “Mr. Hyde is banned from all our properties, effective immediately.”

Eliza stared at the empty doorway.

Anson was going to try to ruin her husband. He was going to try to ruin Dallas Koch.

A laugh threatened to rise in her throat — hysterical, terrified, barely contained. Anson had no idea. He was about to kick a steel wall and break his own foot.

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Chapter 5:

Azalea guided a shaking Eliza out of the jewelry store and into a quiet, upscale café two doors down. She pushed her into a booth and ordered two double espressos without looking at the menu.

“Okay,” Azalea said, sitting down and fixing Eliza with an unwavering stare. “Spill. You’re married. For real.”

Eliza nodded. She was twisting the ring on her finger, the metal warm against her skin.

“Who is he?” Azalea demanded. “And don’t give me that ‘complicated’ line again. Anson looked like he wanted to murder someone. I need a name.”

Eliza took a deep breath and looked at her best friend. Azalea had pulled her away from bullies in high school. She had snuck her food when Anson locked her in her room. She couldn’t lie to her.

“Promise you won’t scream,” Eliza said.

Azalea crossed her arms. “Try me.”

“It’s Dallas. Your father.”

Azalea blinked. Once. Twice. The ambient noise of the café seemed to warp and recede into a dull roar. Her face went blank — a mask of pure, unadulterated shock. She opened her mouth, then closed it again, her expression shifting visibly as her brain worked to process the impossible words.

Then, slowly, a dangerous grin spread across her face.

“You’re... my stepmom?” Azalea whispered.

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Eliza covered her face with both hands. “It’s just a contract! For protection! I needed to get away from Anson, and he – he offered.”

Azalea burst out laughing. It was a loud, joyous cackle that startled a nearby waiter carrying a tray of pastries.

“Oh my god,” Azalea gasped, pressing a hand to her eye. “Anson is going to lose his mind. He’s going to stroke out.”

Eliza peeked through her fingers. “You’re not mad?”

“Mad?” Azalea leaned forward and grabbed Eliza’s hands. “Eliza, I have been trying to get Dad to date for five years. He’s a monk. A workaholic robot. And you – you are perfect.”

“But he’s your dad,” Eliza said weakly. “It’s weird.”

“He’s lonely,” Azalea said, her voice going serious. “And you need a tank to fight Anson. My dad is a tank. He’s a nuclear submarine.”

She squeezed Eliza’s hands. “We are going to destroy Claudine and Anson. We are going to bury them.”

A wave of relief washed over Eliza, so powerful it nearly knocked the air from her lungs. She wasn’t losing her best friend. She had gained an ally.

“Thank you,” Eliza whispered.

“Don’t thank me yet,” Azalea said, already pulling out her phone. “We have work to do. Dad’s credit card is crying out to be used.”

“I can’t spend his money,” Eliza protested.

“It’s not his money,” Azalea said, eyes bright with mischief. “It’s ‘step-mommy support.’”

Eliza groaned, but a small smile pulled at the corner of her lips.

Azalea's phone pinged. She glanced at the screen, then turned it to face Eliza.

It was a text from Dallas.

Is she okay?

Azalea raised an eyebrow. "See? He cares."

Eliza stared at the three words. Simple. Direct.

"He just doesn't want his asset damaged," she said, trying to convince herself. "It's a business deal."

Azalea rolled her eyes so hard it looked painful. "You are so blind." She tucked her phone away and reached for her espresso. "But that's okay. I see everything."

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Chapter 6:

The view from the fiftieth floor of Koch Tower was spectacular. The entire city lay spread out like a circuit board, cars moving like data packets through the veins of the streets below.

Dallas Koch stood at the window, his back to the room.

Behind him, the Board of Directors was arguing about the acquisition of a tech startup in Silicon Valley. Numbers were being thrown around – millions, billions – but Dallas wasn't listening. He was staring at a small red dot on his tablet screen.

The dot was moving. It had left the jewelry store and was now stationary at a café on 5th Avenue.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. A security report.

Subject: Anson Hyde. Incident at store. Neutralized. Banned from premises.

Dallas's jaw tightened. "Neutralized" wasn't enough. He wanted Anson Hyde erased. He wanted him to feel the fear Eliza had lived with for years.

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He turned around. The movement was sudden, and the room went silent.

"Gentlemen, we're done," Dallas said.

The CFO blinked. "But sir, the merger details —"

"Email them to me. Get out."

The tone was final. The board members scrambled to gather their papers, sensing the storm gathering behind the CEO's eyes, and filed out without another word. Only two men remained.

Zane Sterling and Vance Foster. His inner circle.

Zane spun a pen idly across the mahogany table. "You're distracted. Is it the market or a woman?"

Dallas ignored him. He walked to the head of the table and sat, loosening his tie. It felt like a noose today.

Vance slid a manila folder across the table. "Marriage license filed. Sealed by the judge this morning. It's buried deep, Dallas. No one finds this without clearance from the DOJ."

Zane choked on his water, coughing violently. "Marriage? You? The Monk?"

Dallas fixed him with a flat stare. "It was necessary."

“Who is the lucky victim?” Zane asked, grinning like a shark.

“Eliza Solomon.” The name felt heavy on his tongue. Foreign, yet right.

Vance nodded, ever the pragmatist. “The Hyde ward. Smart. If she has a claim to the Solomon estate, you gain leverage over Hyde’s sectors.”

Dallas didn’t correct him. He let them think it was business. It was safer that way. If they knew the truth – that he had been watching her, waiting for her, for three years – they would think he had lost his mind.

“She’s terrified of me,” Dallas admitted. The words slipped out, a rare moment of candor that settled over the room like a held breath.

Zane laughed, though it was softer than usual. “You are terrifying, man. You look like you eat puppies for breakfast. You need to woo her.”

“I don’t woo,” Dallas said stiffly. “I acquire.”

“Not with a wife,” Zane advised. “You need soft power. Flowers. Dates. Talking.”

“Talking is inefficient,” Dallas muttered.

Vance glanced up from his laptop. “Anson Hyde is running a background check on the license number. He’s hitting walls.”

“Let him hit them,” Dallas said, his voice dropping to absolute zero. “I want him to know she is untouchable. I want him to know she belongs to me.”

He picked up his phone, unlocked it, and stared at the background photo for a single, unguarded moment — a candid shot of Eliza laughing in a park, taken from a distance two years ago — before locking the screen again.

“Azalea is with her,” Dallas said. “They’re shopping.”

“Good. Azalea is your buffer,” Vance noted. “She humanizes you.”

Dallas stood, reached for his jacket, and shrugged it on.

“I’m leaving early,” he said.

Zane let out a low whistle. “The King leaves the castle before eight PM. It must be love.”

Dallas shot him a look that could have peeled paint off the walls. But he didn’t deny it.

He walked to the private elevator. He needed to see her. He needed to know that Anson hadn’t left a mark on her soul today — not just on her skin.

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Chapter 7:

The penthouse smelled of rosemary and roasted chicken.

Eliza stepped out of the elevator, her arms laden with shopping bags. Azalea followed behind her, carrying even more.

The living room was warm, the lights dimmed to a soft amber glow. Dallas was sitting in the leather armchair by the fireplace, reading something on a tablet. He had changed out of his suit into a charcoal cashmere sweater and dark jeans.

It was jarring. Seeing the titan of industry in casual clothes made him look human. Dangerous, still – but human.

Eliza froze in the doorway. “He’s home.”

Azalea breezed past her. “Hi, Dad! We bought the whole city. You’re welcome.”

Dallas looked up. His eyes locked instantly on Eliza, scanning her face – looking for cracks, looking for fear.

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“Did you?” he asked, his voice low.

Eliza stepped forward, feeling like an intruder in this perfect, expensive life.

“Thank you for — for everything,” she stammered. “The car. The help.”

Dallas stood. He crossed the room with that predator’s grace, closing the distance between them.

“It is what a husband does,” he said simply.

From the kitchen, Azalea let out a loud, theatrical gagging sound. “Gross. Let’s eat. I’m starving.”

They gathered at the long dining table, Eliza seated at Dallas’s right hand. Mrs. Higgins, the housekeeper, carried out the platter, smiling warmly as she set it down.

“Welcome home, Mrs. Koch,” she said.

Heat flooded Eliza’s cheeks. Dallas watched the color spread across her face, his gaze dark and attentive.

“Eat,” he said gently, placing a serving of chicken on her plate.

Azalea launched into a running commentary about the jewelry store, gesturing with her fork.

“Anson was a total psycho,” she said around a mouthful of potatoes. “Dad, you need to destroy him. Like, biblical destruction.”

Dallas cut his steak with surgical precision. “It is being handled.”

Eliza looked up. “Please don’t hurt the company. My parents’ legacy — Solomon Industries is still part of the conglomerate.”

Dallas paused and looked at her. “I won’t touch Solomon Industries. I will only target Hyde’s personal assets and his liquidity.”

Eliza blinked. “How did you know the difference? The corporate structures are mixed.”

“I do my due diligence,” Dallas said smoothly.

He didn't tell her he'd had a team monitoring the Solomon assets for years, making sure Anson hadn't quietly liquidated them.

The intercom on the wall buzzed. The doorman's voice crackled through.

"Mr. Koch, there is a Mr. Anson Hyde in the lobby. He is demanding to see Eliza. He says he has legal papers."

Eliza's fork slipped from her fingers and struck the fine china with a sharp, ringing clatter. Her hands began to shake. He had found her. He always found her.

Dallas wiped his mouth with a linen napkin. He didn't look angry. He looked bored.

He pressed the talk button.

"Tell him that if he is not off the property in sixty seconds, he will be arrested for trespassing and harassment. And tell him that if he raises his voice again, I will buy the building he lives in and evict him."

A brief pause on the other end. “Yes, sir.”

Dallas turned back to the table and lifted his wine glass.

Eliza was staring at him, eyes wide. “He won’t leave. He’s persistent.”

“He is a gnat,” Dallas said. “And I am the windshield.”

He looked at her, his expression softening by a fraction.

“Eat your dinner, Eliza. He cannot reach you here. The elevator requires a retinal scan for all non-registered guests. Your biometrics were added this morning. No one comes up without my explicit approval.”

Eliza studied the man beside her. For the first time in her life, the wall wasn’t closing in on her. The wall was standing between her and the monster.

She picked up her fork. Her hand was still trembling, but less than before.

“Okay,” she whispered.

Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 8:

The next morning, Azalea was meeting friends for brunch at a trendy spot in SoHo.

She arrived early and ordered a mimosa. She was scrolling through her phone when a shadow fell across her table.

She looked up. Anson Hyde was standing there. He looked worse than the day before — eyes bloodshot, jaw tight.

“What do you want, Anson?” Azalea asked, her voice thick with disgust.

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Anson didn't sit. He slid a velvet box across the table.

“Tell me who she married,” he said. “I know she's staying with you. I know you're hiding her.”

Azalea looked at the box, then flipped it open. Inside wasn't jewelry. It was an old, tarnished silver locket — Eliza's mother's locket. The one Anson had claimed was lost when the estate was settled. The one Eliza had cried over for weeks.

Azalea snapped the box shut, her face hardening.

“You think you can bribe me with her own stolen property?” she asked, her voice dropping to something dangerous. “Do you have any idea how pathetic you are?”

Anson gritted his teeth. “She is making a mistake. She is mentally unstable. She needs her family.”

“You aren’t family,” Azalea said. “You’re a jailer.”

She stood, picked up her mimosa, and without breaking eye contact, poured the sticky orange liquid over Anson’s expensive Italian loafers.

“She is happy,” Azalea said. “And she is way out of your league now. Bye, loser.”

She grabbed her bag and walked out, already typing as she went.

Anson tried to bribe me with Mom’s locket. Lol. Ruin him.

In the Koch Industries tower, Dallas read the text.

His face didn’t move. He pressed a button on his desk phone.

“Vance. Initiate a short position on Hyde Consolidated. Release the opposition research on their Q3 earnings to our contacts at the Journal. I want their credit lines frozen by morning.”

Vance's voice came through the speaker, measured and careful. "Dallas, that's a declaration of war. The market will react."

"Do it," Dallas said. "Burn it down."

Back at the penthouse, Eliza was in the library trying to study for her Art History midterm. Her iPad lit up with a news alert.

BREAKING: Hyde Consolidated Stocks Tumble Amidst Damning Report on Financial Irregularities.

She stared at the screen. The graph was a steep red line, plunging without pause. The realization settled over her slowly — Dallas had done this. This was what "handling it" looked like.

The front door opened. Dallas was home early again, just past one in the afternoon. He found her in the library.

"You didn't have to do that," she said, turning the screen toward him.

Dallas leaned against the doorframe. He looked relaxed — tie gone, top button undone.

“He annoyed my daughter,” Dallas said. “And my wife.”

“I’m not worth a stock war,” Eliza muttered, looking back down at her notes. “You’re losing money too, probably.”

Dallas crossed the room and stopped directly in front of her chair. He reached out, placed one finger beneath her chin, and tilted her face up toward his.

“You undervalue yourself, Eliza,” he said softly. “Stop doing that.”

His thumb brushed her lower lip. The contact was electric. Eliza stopped breathing. His eyes were fixed on her mouth, and the air between them grew thin, weighted with everything neither of them had said.

For a moment, she was certain he was going to kiss her.

Then Dallas pulled back. Abruptly.

“Pack a bag,” he said, his voice rough at the edges.

“Where are we going?” she asked, still breathless.

“Away,” he said, turning toward the door. “The city is too loud. And I want to show you something.”

Eliza nodded, finding — with some surprise — that she trusted him entirely now.

Dallas walked out into the hallway and leaned against the wall, eyes closed. His heart was hammering like a teenager’s.

He had almost kissed her. He had almost ruined the pacing.

He needed to get her to Maple Lake. He needed to show her the truth, piece by piece.

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 9:

The Aston Martin ate up the miles on the highway, leaving the grey skyline of the city far behind.

The car was quiet. Smooth jazz played softly from the speakers – Eliza's favorite genre, though she hadn't told him that.

She watched Dallas drive. His hands were relaxed on the wheel, his profile sharp against the passing green of the trees. He looked less like a CEO and more like a man at peace.

"Where are we going?" she asked again.

"Maple Lake," Dallas answered.

Eliza's hand flew to her chest. "Maple Lake? My parents used to take me there every summer. Before —" She trailed off. Before they died. Before the Hydes took over and sold the lake house.

"I know," Dallas said. Then he caught himself. "It's a popular spot. Good for privacy."

Eliza turned back to the window. Memories flooded through her — the smell of pine, the sound of water lapping against a dock. It was the last place she had been truly happy.

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"I haven't been back since the accident," she whispered. "Anson said it was too expensive to keep the house."

Dallas reached over and covered her hand where it rested on the center console. His hand was large, warm, and grounding. He didn't say anything. He didn't offer platitudes. He simply offered his presence.

Eliza didn't pull away. She turned her hand over and interlaced her fingers with his.

They left the highway and wound through forest roads where sunlight fell in shifting patterns through the canopy of leaves.

At last, they reached a set of massive iron gates. Koch Estate. The gates swung open automatically, and they rolled up a long driveway lined with ancient maple trees.

Then the house came into view. It wasn't a cabin — it was a modern masterpiece of glass, stone, and timber, cantilevered over the edge of the hill to command an unbroken view of the water below.

“This is beautiful,” Eliza breathed. “I didn't know you had a place out here.”

“I bought it three years ago,” Dallas said.

He didn't tell her he had purchased it the week after reading an interview in which she mentioned missing the lake. He didn't tell her he had built it with her in mind.

They parked and stepped out. The air was cool and clean, carrying the scent of damp earth and pine needles.

Mrs. Higgins was already inside, having arrived by helicopter earlier to prepare the house.

“Your room is the master suite,” Dallas said as they entered the foyer.

“And you?” Eliza asked, suddenly feeling shy.

“I have the study,” he said. “I have work to finish.”

He was lying. He had no work. He simply wanted to give her space, to make sure she didn’t feel pressured.

Eliza explored the house slowly. It was filled with art — not generic prints, but pieces she recognized. A Monet she had always loved. A sculpture that looked remarkably like one her father had once owned.

“He has good taste,” she murmured, her fingers grazing a frame.

She drifted out to the back patio. The lake stretched before her, calm and mirror-still, the tree line reflected perfectly in its surface.

Then the roar of an engine shattered the quiet. A red convertible tore up the driveway.

Azalea.

She hopped out wearing oversized sunglasses and brandishing a bottle of wine.

“Party time!” she announced.

Eliza smiled. Dallas had invited Azalea. He had known she would feel awkward alone with him, and so he had thought of everything — as he always seemed to.

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend’s Father

Chapter 10:

“Come on,” Azalea said, grabbing Eliza’s hand. “You haven’t seen the best part.”

It was an hour later. Dallas was inside, ostensibly on a conference call. Azalea dragged Eliza toward the far end of the property, past the infinity pool, to where a walled garden stood built of old stone that looked as though it had been there for a century.

“Dad is weirdly obsessed with this part,” Azalea said, pushing the wooden gate open.

Eliza stepped inside.

The breath left her body.

It was a rose garden — but not just any roses.

They were white roses. Hundreds of them. The bushes were mature and lush, heavy with blooms, and the scent was overwhelming – sweet, heady, and achingly nostalgic.

“Winchester Cathedrals,” Eliza whispered.

Her mother’s favorite flower. The same roses that had filled the Solomon garden before the bank took the house. They were notoriously difficult to grow in this climate.

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“How –” She touched one of the velvet petals.

Azalea leaned against the stone wall. “Dad has been obsessed with this garden ever since he bought the place. Hired some specialist from England just to keep these specific roses alive. Says they’re for the ‘future lady of the house,’ or some other corny line like that.”

Eliza went still.

“Ever since he bought the place?” she asked. “We weren’t – I didn’t know him then. Not really.”

“He knew you,” Azalea said softly, watching her with a quiet smile. “He knew you loved them.”

Eliza’s heart hammered against her ribs. The timeline didn’t fit a sudden business arrangement. It didn’t fit a marriage of convenience.

He had been cultivating this garden for someone. For her.

Dallas appeared at the gate. He was still in his casual clothes, hands in his pockets, and he wore an expression she had never seen on him before — something uncertain, almost tentative. Like a boy who had just handed over a valentine and was bracing to be turned away.

Azalea caught Eliza’s eye and winked. “I’m going to go find snacks. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

She slipped past Dallas and disappeared, leaving them alone in the sea of white petals.

Eliza turned to face him. Her eyes were wet.

“Why?” she asked. “Why these flowers?”

Dallas walked in. The gate clicked shut behind him.

“Because they are resilient,” he said, his voice low. “They survive the frost. Like you.”

“You didn’t marry me for a deal, did you?” Eliza asked. Her voice trembled.

Dallas stopped inches from her, tall enough to block out the sun. He reached out, and his hand — rough and warm — cupped her cheek. His thumb brushed away a tear that had escaped.

“I married you because I couldn’t watch you break anymore,” he admitted.

It wasn’t a declaration of love. Not explicitly. But it was heavy with it.

Eliza looked into his eyes and saw the depth there — the patience, the quiet and terrifying intensity of a man who would wait years simply to plant a flower she might love.

She wasn't a pawn. She was the queen on his chessboard.

A wind moved through the garden, scattering white petals around them like snow.

Dallas leaned down. Eliza didn't pull away. She tilted her face up, her eyes closing.

He didn't kiss her lips.

He pressed his mouth to her forehead instead — a firm, lingering kiss. A kiss of reverence. A kiss of possession.

“Welcome home, Eliza,” he whispered against her skin.

Eliza exhaled a breath she felt she had been holding for five years. The walls around her heart didn't just crack. They crumbled into dust.

From the second-story window, Mrs. Higgins watched them. She smiled, wiping her hands on her apron. The master was finally happy.

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