

# Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 101:

The words hung in the cool night air.

Dallas froze. He turned his whole body toward her. "Did you?"

"I wanted to hurt him," Eliza explained quickly, her hands twisting in her lap. "I wanted to make him stop. It was the only weapon I had left."

Dallas relaxed slightly, but a shadow crossed his face. He looked at her, his eyes searching hers in the moonlight.

"Effective," he murmured.

Then he asked the question she was terrified to answer.

"Was it a lie?"

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His voice was low, free of any pressure — just a simple, honest question.

Eliza looked at the lake. She thought about the way he had saved her. The way he looked at her. The way he had built this garden.

“I don’t know anymore,” she whispered.

Dallas didn’t push. He didn’t demand a clarification. He simply watched her, his expression unreadable.

“Stay,” he said. “The guest room is ready.”

A loud, thoroughly unladylike growl interrupted the moment.

Eliza’s hand flew to her stomach. Heat rushed to her cheeks. “I skipped dinner.”

Dallas let out a short, low chuckle — a rusty sound, like he hadn't used it in a while.

He stood and buttoned his jacket. "Come on."

He led her not into the house, but to a covered patio that looked more like a professional kitchen than a backyard grill. Stainless steel appliances gleamed in the dim light.

He opened a mini-fridge and pulled out two bottles of beer and a vacuum-sealed package of marinated steaks.

"You cook?" Eliza asked, surprised. She had only ever seen him in boardrooms or in the back of a town car — a man who seemed to survive on black coffee and ambition.

"Survival skill," Dallas said, firing up the massive gas grill. "Boarding school food was inedible. And in the later years, you learn to make do with what you have."

He took off his jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his white dress shirt. His forearms were thick with muscle, corded with veins.

Eliza watched him. The domesticity of it was disarming — it made him seem less like a titan of industry and more like a man.

He handed her a cold beer. “Drink.”

She took a sip. It was crisp and bitter, washing away the taste of her anxiety.

The smell of searing meat soon filled the air, drifting together with the scent of the roses.

“So,” Dallas said, flipping a steak with practiced precision, not looking at her. “Anson is behaving?”

Eliza traced the condensation on her bottle. “He broke into my room last night.”

Dallas stopped.

The sizzle of the grill seemed to die. All sound ceased except for its low hum. He didn’t drop the tongs. He simply held them, his hand suspended motionless over the flames.

He turned to her slowly. His face was in shadow, but the tension in his shoulders was terrifying. The firelight caught his eyes, turning them from blue to chips of ice.

“He what?”

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“I handled it,” Eliza said quickly. “I threatened him with a lamp. And I kneed him in the stomach. He left.”

Dallas stared at her, his eyes glittering with a dangerous, calculating light – the look of a man working out exactly how many bones in Anson’s body he intended to break.

Then a corner of his mouth ticked up. It wasn’t a smile. It was the baring of teeth.

“Good girl,” he said, his voice low and dark.

The words sent a shiver down Eliza’s spine that had nothing to do with the cold. The tone was primal – possessive and proud.

He plated the food. They ate at the patio table in the dark, and it was the best steak she had ever tasted – perfectly charred on the outside, tender on the inside. Or perhaps she was simply starving.

They finished the beers. The alcohol hit Eliza’s empty system quickly, leaving her lightheaded and pleasantly floaty.

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“It’s 2 AM,” Dallas said, checking his watch. “Don’t drive back.”

“I have to be at Hyde Manor by seven for Victoria’s medication,” she said, rubbing her temples.

“I’ll drive you,” he said. “Stay.”

“Okay,” she agreed. She didn’t have the energy to argue. And truthfully, she didn’t want to leave.

He led her inside. The house was modern and minimalist — all wood and stone — but it felt warm. It felt lived-in, unlike the penthouse, which sometimes had the feeling of a very expensive museum.

At the bottom of the stairs, he pointed. “First door on the right.”

“Where do you sleep?” she asked, pausing.

“Across the hall,” Dallas said. He leaned against the banister, watching her. “If you need anything.” He let the word linger, his eyes dropping to her lips for just a fraction of a second.

Eliza nodded, her throat suddenly dry. She turned and walked up the stairs, feeling his gaze on her back with every step.

Eliza opened the door to the room Dallas had indicated.

She gasped.

It wasn't a guest room.

The walls were painted a soft, pale sage green — her favorite color. She had mentioned it once, in passing, years ago at a gala where they had barely spoken.

By the floor-to-ceiling window, which offered a panoramic view of the moonlit lake, stood a professional easel. Beside it was a cart stocked with high-quality oil paints, brushes of every size, and blank canvases.

A bookshelf in the corner held art history books, rare restoration guides, and monographs of her favorite painters.

On the nightstand sat a bottle of perfume. A niche Italian brand — one she used to wear before the Solomon bankruptcy, one she hadn't been able to afford in five years.

“He prepared this,” she whispered.

Anson’s cynical words from that morning echoed briefly in her mind – does he know something you don’t? – but she pushed them away. This wasn’t business. This was something else entirely.

She walked to the easel and touched the frame. There was no dust. This room hadn’t been set up yesterday. It had been waiting.

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Chapter 103:

It wasn't just money. Any wealthy man could buy things. This was attention. This was detail. This was obsession.

She turned to thank him, to ask him why, but the hallway was empty.

She crossed to the other door. It was slightly ajar.

"Dallas?" she whispered, peeking in.

He was lying on the bed, fully clothed – one shoe off, the other still on his foot. He had passed out completely. The beer, combined with whatever he took for his insomnia, had finally knocked him under.

Eliza stepped inside. His room was a stark contrast to hers. Grey walls, grey sheets, nothing personal. No photographs, no art. It was a cell designed for sleeping, nothing more.

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She knelt beside the bed. He looked younger in sleep, the deep lines of stress between his brows smoothed away.

She reached out and untied his remaining shoe, sliding it off gently and setting it on the floor. She loosened his collar and pulled his tie free. He stirred, muttering something unintelligible, but didn't wake.

She drew the heavy grey duvet over him, tucking it around his shoulders.

As she began to pull away, his hand shot out.

He grabbed her wrist — not aggressively, but with a desperate, unyielding grip. His fingers closed around the bone like a clasp.

“Eliza,” he mumbled into the pillow, eyes still closed.

“I'm here,” she said softly, her heart aching.

“Don't — leave — again,” he slurred, the words raw and pleading in a way his waking self would never allow.

“I won’t,” she promised. She told herself he meant just for the night.

She tried to gently loosen his fingers, but his grip was iron. He wouldn’t let go.

She sat on the edge of the bed, held in place.

She looked around the room. It was so lonely. Her room across the hall was full of color and life. His was just a place to exist.

The contrast broke her heart.

She stroked his hair with her free hand. It was soft and thick.

Exhaustion hit her in a wave. She couldn’t hold herself upright anymore. She lowered herself down onto the mattress — just to rest her head for a moment. She curled up on top of the duvet, her hand still locked in his.

Just for a moment, she told herself.

Sunlight sliced through the blinds and hit Eliza directly in the eyes.

She blinked awake, disoriented. She wasn't on top of the duvet.

She was under the covers.

And she was held in a vice grip.

A heavy arm draped over her waist pulled her back against a hard, warm chest. Legs were tangled with hers. She was the small spoon in a very tight arrangement.

Panic flared for a split second — where am I? — before the smell of cedar and soap grounded her. Dallas.

She tried to inch away, creating a sliver of space.

The arm tightened instantly.

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“Five more minutes,” Dallas grumbled. His voice was deep and rough with sleep, vibrating against her back. He buried his face in the crook of her neck and inhaled slowly, his nose brushing against her skin. “You smell like roses,” he murmured.

Eliza’s heart was racing so fast she was certain he could feel it against his arm.

“Dallas. Wake up. It’s morning,” she whispered.

“Morning, Wife,” he said. His voice was a low rumble against her spine, and the word landed not as a joke but as a simple statement of fact – the way one might say the sky is blue.

The word sent a shiver down her spine.

He finally opened his eyes. There was no grogginess. One second asleep, the next fully alert – blue eyes snapping open, clear and sharp.

He took in their position. He didn't let go immediately.

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“Did I drag you in here?” A hint of amusement colored his voice.

“You held my hand hostage and I fell asleep,” she said, not wanting to admit she had eventually sought the warmth beneath the covers.

He smirked. “A clear case of unlawful imprisonment. I'll have my lawyers contact yours.”

He released her. The loss of warmth was immediate and jarring.

Eliza scrambled out of bed. Her dress from the day before was badly rumped.

“I need to go. Victoria,” she reminded herself, checking her phone. 6:30 AM.

“Shower first. There are clothes in your closet,” Dallas said, sitting up and rubbing his face.

Eliza went to her room – the sage green sanctuary. She opened the closet. It was fully stocked: dresses, blouses, jeans. Everything in her size. Everything her style.

She chose a simple, elegant blue dress. It fit perfectly.

When she came out, Dallas was waiting in the hall, dressed in a sharp charcoal suit, every inch the CEO of Koch Industries again. The vulnerable man from the night before was gone, armored back up.

But the dynamic had shifted. They had slept together – literally. And they both knew it.

They walked to the car in silence.

“Thank you,” she said quietly as they reached the driveway. “For the room. It’s beautiful.”

“It was empty. It needed a purpose,” he deflected, not looking at her.

He opened the passenger door of the Maybach.

“Tonight,” he said, leaning against the door frame, “I’m picking you up for the Sterling party. Seven o’clock.”

“I’ll be ready,” she agreed. She looked at him. “I’m done hiding.”

Dallas nodded, a flash of quiet satisfaction moving through his eyes. He closed the door.

The Maybach glided smoothly down the highway, its interior silent and sealed from the world outside.

Eliza’s phone rang, shattering the quiet. The screen flashed: Anson.

She sighed and pressed answer, putting it on speaker. Dallas glanced over from the driver's seat.

"Where the hell are you? Victoria is asking for you," Anson barked. His voice was tight, agitated.

"I'm at the gate, Anson. Stop shouting," Eliza said calmly. Her voice was steady — bored, even.

"You weren't in your room. The bed wasn't slept in." A beat. "Did you go to him?" Dallas gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles whitening.

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Chapter 105:

“I am a free woman, Anson. I go where I please. I’ll be there in two minutes.” She hung up.

Dallas smiled – a small, sharp thing. “You’re getting better at that.”

He has no power over me anymore. She realized it was true. The fear was gone, replaced by something closer to annoyance.

Dallas stopped the car just out of sight of the main gates of Hyde Manor and turned to her.

“The Sterling party. Seven o’clock. I’ll send a glam team at four,” he said.

“Here? To Hyde Manor?” Eliza laughed, a little nervously. “Anson will flip.”

“Let him.” Dallas’s tone was absolute. “You are Mrs. Koch. You require a team. If he has a problem with it, he can take it up with my lawyers.”

He leaned over. His hand cupped her jaw, his thumb brushing her cheekbone, and he kissed her cheek — dangerously close to the corner of her mouth.

“Wear the blue dress,” he murmured. “The one with the back.”

Eliza stepped out of the car feeling armored, as though she had a legion walking behind her.

She passed through the gates and entered the manor. Anson was waiting in the grand hall, pacing. He stopped the moment he saw her, his eyes raking over her fresh clothes and the expensive fabric of the dress Dallas had provided.

“You were with him,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

“Yes. He is my husband,” Eliza replied evenly.

Anson laughed — a hollow, bitter sound. “He’s using you, Eliza. You’re so naive. He’s trying to get to the Solomon restoration patents. You know that, don’t you?”

Eliza paused, frowning. “My father’s old formulas? Anson, that’s a desperate reach, even for you. The chemical compounds were unstable. He always said that research was a dead end.”

“Was it?” Anson stepped closer, lowering his voice. “Or does he know something you don’t? Why else would he marry a bankrupt art restorer – for your personality?”

Eliza shook her head. “Nice try, Anson.” She walked past him toward Victoria’s room.

But the doubt lingered for just a second. A flicker. Why did Dallas prepare that room so long ago? Why was he so obsessed?

She pushed the thought away.

Victoria was propped against her pillows, a tissue box at her side. She broke into a series of wet, heavy coughs as Eliza entered. Eliza watched her, a sliver of suspicion coiling in her gut. The cough sounded real – but after the lies about Victoria’s heart, every symptom felt like a performance. Still, she couldn’t risk being wrong, and she needed an excuse to get out of the house.

“Eliza,” Victoria rasped, reaching for a tissue. “Can you go to the pharmacy? I need the new prescription. And perhaps take me for a drive? I need fresh air.”

“Of course,” Eliza agreed.

She didn’t notice the black sedan parked down the street as they left. She didn’t see Claudine Chapman watching from behind sunglasses, tracking Anson’s location on her phone — the signal pinging steadily from Eliza’s car.

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The upscale shopping district hummed with afternoon foot traffic. Eliza parked near a small, manicured park and helped Victoria out of the car.

“I’ll sit here for a moment,” Victoria said, gesturing toward a bench beside a fountain. “You go get the medicine.”

“I’ll get us some water first,” Eliza said.

She headed toward a vendor cart a few hundred feet away. The sun was bright — blindingly so.

Two figures stepped into her path, blocking the sidewalk. High heels. Designer bags. The cloying drift of overly sweet perfume.

Claudine and Celeste Chapman.

“Look who it is,” Claudine sneered. “The stray cat.”

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Eliza sighed. “Claudine. I’m busy.” She moved to step around them.

Celeste grabbed her arm, nails pressing into the skin. “Not so fast. We heard you’re sleeping at Hyde Manor.”

“Trying to crawl back into Anson’s bed?” Claudine’s face twisted with jealousy. “I knew you were a slut.”

“I am caring for Victoria. Anson is nothing to me,” Eliza said, yanking her arm free.

“Liar!” Claudine’s composure cracked. People were beginning to stare. “He talks about you in his sleep – every night! ‘Eliza, Eliza!’”

“That sounds like your problem, not mine,” Eliza said flatly.

Claudine’s expression went blank with rage. Humiliated. Exposed.

She swung her hand.

Crack.

The sound was sickeningly sharp. An open-handed slap landed across Eliza's face. Her cheek burned instantly, and her head snapped to the side.

Eliza stumbled back, her hand flying to her face. She tasted copper.

“Stay away from him!” Claudine shrieked. “Or next time it won't be a hand!”

Eliza looked at her steadily. Her eyes were watering from the pain, but her voice didn't waver.

“You are pathetic,” she said.

“Eliza?” Victoria's voice carried from the bench — she had heard the commotion.

Claudine froze at the sight of her. She seized Celeste's arm. “Let's go.” They scurried away, clicking down the pavement like rats in couture.

Eliza drew a slow breath. Her face throbbed with a hot, pulsing ache. She caught her reflection in a shop window: a bright red handprint was forming on her left cheek, angry and undeniable.

She bought the water. She returned to Victoria.

“What happened to your face?” Victoria asked, shocked.

“I walked into a branch,” Eliza said.

Victoria’s gaze sharpened, her eyes moving from the perfectly formed handprint on Eliza’s cheek to the placid, branchless trees nearby. She said nothing — but a flicker of knowing disapproval crossed her face before she smoothed it away.

Inside, Eliza was furious. A cold, quiet rage had settled in her gut.

And she had a party tonight.

The Sterling Estate blazed like a beacon against the night sky. Cars lined the long driveway — Ferraris, Bentleys, Rolls-Royces.

Eliza sat in the passenger seat of Dallas's car. The glam team had done their best. Layers of concealer and foundation covered her left cheek, but if you looked closely – really closely – the texture was different from the skin around it.

She was wearing the blue dress. Backless, shimmering like liquid water.

Dallas parked and came around to open her door. His eyes swept over her slowly.

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Chapter 107:

“Perfect,” he said.

He offered his arm and kept his hand on the small of her back as they walked in, his touch steady and grounding.

The party was in full swing. Music pulsed through the rooms; champagne flowed freely. Dallas guided her through the crowd and introduced her to Zane Sterling and his fiancée, Sloane.

“Good to see you out of a nightclub, Mrs. Koch,” Zane grinned, shaking her hand. “Last time we met, you were dodging socialites. You look ready to rule tonight.”

Sloane pulled her into a warm hug. “Ignore him. I love your dress — is it vintage?”

Eliza smiled. “Thank you. It’s a gift.”

She laughed at something Sloane said. The lights in the grand foyer were unforgiving. As her cheek muscles lifted with the smile, the heavy concealer shifted slightly over the swollen skin beneath.

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Dallas was watching her. He caught it.

His eyes narrowed. His body went taut. He leaned in almost imperceptibly.

“Excuse us,” he said to Zane, his tone leaving no room for questions.

He steered Eliza away from the group, guiding her down a private corridor near the restrooms, out of sight of the other guests.

“Dallas? What’s wrong?” she asked, confused.

He pressed her gently against the wall beneath the bright light of a wall sconce.

“Hold still,” he said.

He reached up and drew his thumb firmly across her cheek. The makeup smeared. The bruise beneath — a deep, angry purple-red — was exposed.

Dallas’s expression went terrifyingly blank. The air seemed to leave the corridor.

“Who.”

One word. Deadly quiet.

Eliza trembled slightly at the force coming off him. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Who,” he repeated.

“It was Claudine,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Claudine Chapman.” He tested the name on his tongue like a curse. “She slapped you. And you didn’t tell me.”

“I didn’t want to ruin the night,” she said. “I didn’t want to be the victim again, Dallas. I wanted to be your wife.”

He touched the bruise with feather-light fingers. A flicker of pain — not his own — crossed his face. His hand was trembling with a suppressed rage so violent it felt like a physical presence in the narrow space.

“Nothing is more important than this,” he said. “Nothing.”

He drew a breath. “I’m taking you home.”

“No,” Eliza said.

It surprised them both. She met his furious gaze, her chin held high. “I won’t be chased out of my own debut. I am not weak, Dallas. Don’t you dare treat me like I am.”

He stared at her, a war raging behind his eyes — his instinct to protect her against her demand to be respected. Finally, he gave a single, reluctant nod. He pulled out his phone and typed a message to Weston.

Chapman. Total liquidation. By morning.

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Chapter 108:

He put the phone away. He leaned in and cradled her jaw with both hands, his thumb stroking the unbruised side of her face. He pressed his lips to her forehead – soft, reverent.

“Then we go back,” he said, his voice dropping to a low growl. “Fix your makeup. Stand at my side. And you will hold your head high, as the lady of my house.”

“And tomorrow,” he promised, “Claudine will wish she had lost her hand.”

Eliza looked at him and saw the monster beneath the man – the ruthless, vindictive king of industry. And she was not afraid.

She felt safe.

She reapplied powder from her clutch, masking the pain once more. When she looked up, Dallas offered his arm.

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“Ready?”

“Ready,” she said.

They returned to the party. Dallas did not leave her side for a second. He glared at anyone who ventured too close, a silent, immovable wall between her and the rest of the world.

The return to the ballroom was a trial by fire, but Eliza walked through it unscathed.

With Dallas’s hand firm on her waist, the whispers that had followed her arrival died away. She watched the shift in their eyes — from curiosity to respect, and perhaps a trace of fear. Dallas made it clear: to disrespect her was to challenge him.

For two hours, she played the part perfectly. She charmed investors, laughed at the dry jokes of board members, and met the occasional jealous glance with serene indifference.

But the adrenaline was fading, and exhaustion was settling in its place.

The party wound down around midnight. It had been a success. Eliza had been accepted, scrutinized, and approved by the elite.

As the crowd thinned near the bar, a tipsy guest stumbled backward, crashing into a passing waiter. The tray pitched forward. Champagne cascaded down the back of Eliza's dress, soaking through the delicate, shimmering fabric.

"Oh my god — I am so sorry!" the guest stammered, recoiling under Dallas's darkening glare.

"It's fine," Eliza said quickly, stepping back.

"Go change in the guest suite." Sloane appeared at her elbow, smoothly dissolving the tension. "I have a spare gown in the closet. You can't go home soaking wet — it's freezing outside."

The heavy oak door of the guest room muffled the noise of the dying party. Eliza stood before the mirror, reaching behind her to unzip the blue dress.

The zipper was stuck. A section of the wet, delicate fabric had caught in the teeth.

She struggled, twisting her arms behind her back, wincing as pain shot through her tired shoulders. "Come on..."

The door opened.

Dallas entered. His tie was loosened, and he looked as weary as she felt. "Ready to go?"

"I'm stuck. Literally." She sighed and turned her back to him, letting her arms drop. "The zipper."

Dallas crossed the room. "Let me see."

His warm fingers brushed her bare spine. Eliza shivered.

“You are tense,” he said.

“It’s been a long day,” she whispered.

He worked the zipper slowly, deliberately. He freed the trapped fabric, and the zipper slid down with a soft hiss. The dress loosened, pooling at her waist.

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Chapter 109:

He went still. The smooth curve of her spine, her skin exposed and vulnerable to the cool air — he didn’t look away.

Instead of stepping back, he pressed a kiss to her shoulder blade.

Eliza gasped. “Dallas...”

“You were perfect tonight,” he murmured against her skin. His hands moved to her waist, his thumbs tracing slow circles against her hips.

He turned her around. The dress had slipped from her shoulders, held in place only by her hands clutching the front.

He looked at her. There was hunger in his eyes – raw, unmasked hunger. Beneath it lay a possessiveness that both frightened and thrilled her.

“We should go home,” she said, her resolve dissolving.

“Which home?” he asked. “Hyde Manor?”

The reality came crashing back. The spell of the evening broke.

“Yes,” she said. “I have to finish the week. Two more days.”

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Dallas exhaled — a sound of deep, barely contained frustration. He pulled her dress back up, his hands lingering on her skin as if reluctant to let go. “Two more days,” he agreed. “Then you are mine completely. No more games. No more separate houses.”

He zipped her up.

The silence that followed was charged, almost unbearable.

They walked to the car without a word. The drive was smooth, the city lights blurring past the windows like streaks of fire.

In the back seat of the Maybach, Dallas reached for her hand. He turned it over slowly, playing with the silver wedding band on her finger, twisting it round and round.

“By the way,” he said, still looking out the window, “I have a surprise for you on Monday. Something to get the air of this place out of your lungs.”

“Another room?” she joked, trying to lighten the mood.

“Something like that,” he said, a quiet, mysterious smile crossing his face. “A new beginning.”

Eliza squeezed his hand and looked out at the passing lights of the city.

Two days. She just had to survive two more days.

Monday morning arrived with a sky the color of bruised slate. Eliza stood on the steps of Hyde Manor, her bag slung over her shoulder, the damp air clinging to her skin. This was it – the final morning. The weekend had been a blur of Victoria’s passive-aggressive sighs and Anson’s oppressive silence. She felt like a diver holding her breath, waiting to break the surface.

A low rumble announced his arrival. It wasn’t the sleek, silent Maybach. A black SUV, massive and imposing, crunched up the gravel drive.

The window rolled down. Dallas sat behind the wheel in aviator sunglasses and a navy polo shirt that stretched tight across his chest. He looked less like a CEO and more like something dangerous and capable.

“Get in,” he said. His tone left no room for argument.

Eliza hesitated, glancing back at the house. “Victoria has a physical therapy session at ten. I told her I’d be here to settle the final nursing invoice —”

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“Victoria has a nurse, a maid, and a son with nothing better to do than lurk in hallways,” Dallas cut her off. He leaned across the center console and pushed the passenger door open. She climbed in, and as she settled into the seat his arm brushed warmly against her leg, sending a jolt through her. “Your contract there is fulfilled. You have a husband.”

The word husband hung in the air, heavy and absolute. Eliza shut the door.

The interior smelled of leather and him — cedar and something sharp, like ozone. As they pulled away and left the iron gates behind, the physical knot in her chest loosened, just a fraction.

They drove north, away from the city’s concrete grip, into the rolling green hills of Westchester. The silence between them wasn’t empty; it was comfortable, charged with the memory of Saturday night’s near-intimacy.

“Where are we going?” she asked as the skyline disappeared in the rearview mirror.

“Somewhere you can breathe,” Dallas said, his eyes on the road. “You’ve been fighting a war in a closet, Eliza. You need open space.”

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They turned onto a private lane lined with ancient oaks. A discreet, elegant sign read: Koch Stables.

When they parked, the air was crisp and smelled of hay and damp earth. A groom led two horses into the paddock – a massive black stallion tossing its head with impatient energy, and a white mare, graceful and calm.

“This is Midnight,” Dallas said, patting the stallion’s neck. The beast settled instantly under his hand. “And that is Duchess.”

Eliza studied the mare. It had been years. “I haven’t ridden since I was twelve. Before the bankruptcy.”

“Muscle memory,” Dallas said, walking toward her. “Trust me.”

He gripped her waist – his hands large, warm, and certain – and lifted her effortlessly, guiding her foot into the stirrup. For a moment her body was flush against his, her face inches from his neck. She could feel the steady, powerful thrum of his heartbeat.

“Up,” he murmured.

She swung her leg over. Sitting in the saddle, the world looked different — she was higher, removed from the ground where all her problems lived.

They rode out onto the trails. The rhythmic thud of hooves on the dirt path was hypnotic. The wind whipped Eliza's hair back and cooled the heat in her cheeks. Dallas rode beside her, controlling the powerful stallion with nothing more than a shift of his weight and a light hand on the reins. He looked like a king surveying his kingdom — relaxed, dominant, completely in his element.

They stopped at a ridge overlooking the valley. The trees were turning, a tapestry of burnt orange and gold. Eliza drew a deep breath, filling her lungs with air that didn't taste of medicine or old money.

“Why this?” she asked, looking at him. “Why today?”

Dallas shifted in his saddle, gazing out over the horizon. “Because for the last month, you've been surviving. I wanted you to remember what it feels like to just live.”

His phone buzzed in his pocket. He ignored it.

It buzzed again — persistent, insistent.

He pulled it out and glanced at the screen. A text from Weston. Just two words: It's done.

A dark, terrifyingly satisfied smile touched the corners of his mouth. It didn't reach his eyes, which remained cold as glaciers.

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