

# Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 11:

“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.

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“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.

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.

“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.

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## **Flash Marriage To My Best Friend’s Father**

Chapter 12:

“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.

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“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.

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.

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.”

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# Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 13:

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.

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"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.

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Chapter 14:

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.

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.

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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.

“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.

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# Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 15:

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.

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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.

“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.

“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.”

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## **Flash Marriage To My Best Friend’s Father**

Chapter 16:

“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.

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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.

The chill of the evening finally seeped through their clothes, breaking the spell of the garden. Dallas pulled back at last, though he didn’t let go of her. His hand slid down her arm to grip her fingers, his thumb brushing over her knuckles.

“Come,” he said, his voice shifting from tender to something more grounded, more urgent. “We need to secure this. Tonight. I want no doubts about where you belong.”

He led her out of the garden, away from the dreamy scent of roses and toward the imposing glass walls of the house. Eliza followed, feeling a strange mixture of lightness and gravity. He had given her the poetry in the garden; she sensed he was about to give her the fortress.

They crossed the threshold into the warmth of the living room, but Dallas didn't stop. He guided her straight to the leather-bound reality of his study.

"A home needs a foundation, Eliza," he murmured as he pushed open the heavy oak door. "Not just words. Something real. Something no one can ever take from you again."

The study was warm, smelling of old leather and the expensive scotch Dallas had poured moments ago. A fire crackled in the hearth. Mr. Sterling, Dallas's senior lawyer, was waiting beside the mahogany desk. He looked up as they entered, his expression professional and unsurprised.

"The papers are ready, Mr. Koch," Sterling said.

Dallas guided Eliza to the chair in front of the desk and pressed her down gently by the shoulders.

"This is the second half of the promise," he whispered close to her ear before straightening up.

# Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 17:

The memory of the rose garden was still a warm, impossible glow in her chest — but Dallas's gesture was so unexpected, so quietly profound, that the fountain pen Mr. Sterling placed in her hand now felt heavier than a shovel.

It was a Montblanc, thick and black, resting against the curve of her thumb. The nib hovered over the cream-colored paper spread across the mahogany desk, trembling just enough to blur the shadow it cast.

“The deed to Maple Lake Estate,” Mr. Sterling announced. His voice was dry and professional – the kind of voice that delivered life-altering news as though reading a grocery list. He tapped the signature line with a manicured fingernail.

Azalea was perched on the edge of the desk, swinging her legs. She had already signed a document Mr. Sterling had presented to her – a formal acknowledgment as a potential trust beneficiary, a formality Dallas had insisted upon – with a flourish and a hum that sounded suspiciously like a pop song.

“It’s all yours, Eliza,” Azalea chirped, capping her pen. “Dad was just holding it. Like a really expensive storage unit.”

Dallas stood by the fireplace, one arm resting on the dark mantle, a glass of amber liquid in his other hand. He wasn’t looking at the fire. He was watching Eliza – his eyes dark, unreadable pools that absorbed the light. He didn’t urge her. He didn’t speak. He simply waited, his stillness a stark contrast to the chaotic thumping of her heart.

Eliza looked down at the paper. Eliza Solomon Koch.

For five years, she had owned nothing. Not her bedroom, not her clothes, not even her own time. Everything had belonged to the Hyde family trust. She had been a guest in her own life, perpetually subject to Anson’s whim. Now she was about to own land. A house. A rose garden.

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She pressed the pen to the paper. The scratch of the nib was loud in the silent room – a friction that felt like carving her name into stone.

She signed.

She set the pen down. It rolled slightly and came to rest against the edge of the document with a soft click.

Dallas moved then. He walked to the desk, picked up the document, and handed it to Mr. Sterling.

“File it immediately,” Dallas ordered. “I want the electronic record updated within the hour.”

“Of course, Mr. Koch.” Mr. Sterling snapped his briefcase shut, bowed slightly, and left the room.

Dallas turned back to Eliza. He took a sip of his scotch. “Done. It is legally yours. No one can take it from you. Not the bank. Not Anson.”

The name made her flinch. A phantom weight lifted from her chest — but it was replaced at once by a sudden, dizzying vertigo. She had property. She was safe. She was free. The realization was too large. It expanded in her lungs, pushing out the air, until she felt lightheaded.

“I need air,” Eliza whispered. She stood, her chair scraping against the hardwood floor.

“Eliza?” Azalea’s eyes flashed with concern.

“I’m fine,” Eliza managed. “Just — overwhelming. I’ll be right back.”

She turned and walked quickly through the French doors onto the back terrace.

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# Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 18:

The evening air hit her face – crisp, smelling of damp earth, pine needles, and the distinct mineral scent of the lake. It was grounding. She moved past the infinity pool and across the manicured lawn, her feet carrying her instinctively toward the water. The sun was setting, casting long bruised shadows across the grass.

She reached the old wooden pier. It was the only part of the estate Dallas hadn't modernized. The planks were weathered and grey, groaning softly under her weight as she walked to the end. She wrapped her arms around herself and stared at the dark water below. This was hers. The water, the trees, the silence.

The low rumble of an engine – too aggressive for these quiet country roads – cut through the peace. It grew closer, then abruptly died.

Eliza froze. The hair on the back of her neck rose.

“Dallas?” she called out, her voice thin above the sound of the lapping water. But she already knew it wasn't his car.

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A door slammed. Footsteps crunched on the gravel path from the main road — not the driveway. Whoever it was had come from outside the gates.

A figure emerged from the shadow of the trees. He was wearing a bespoke navy suit ruined by mud up to the knees, his tie loose, his collar unbuttoned. He looked as though he had waded through the shallows and trekked through the forest to get here.

Anson Hyde.

Eliza stepped back. Her heel caught on a gap between the planks, and she grabbed the wooden railing to steady herself, her heart hammering against her ribs. He looked manic — eyes bloodshot and rimmed with red, his usually immaculate hair falling into his face.

“You shouldn’t be here, Anson,” Eliza said. Her voice shook, but she forced volume into it. “This is private property.”

Anson laughed. It was a hollow, scraping sound with no humor in it.

“Did you really think a new car would be enough to disappear?” he asked, stepping onto the pier. “I have people, Eliza. When you vanished from the gala, my investigator tracked Koch’s helicopter. There’s only one place he flies to for ‘privacy.’ Connecting the dots wasn’t hard.”

He took a step closer, positioning himself between her and the path to the house. Eliza was trapped – water on one side, the man who had been her jailer on the other.

“That was a lifetime ago,” she said, her knuckles white on the railing.

“You think a piece of paper makes you safe?” Anson sneered, gesturing toward the house where the lights burned warmly. “You think signing a marriage license with that machine makes you safe?”

Eliza squared her shoulders. She thought of the deed. She thought of her name on the paper.

“It makes me the owner,” she said, her voice dropping an octave. “And it makes you a trespasser.”

Anson’s face shifted. The sneer dissolved into twisted, desperate pleading – the expression he used when he wanted her forgiveness. The gentle mask.

“Eliza, please,” he said, extending one hand. It was dirty. “I’m trying to save you. Koch is a monster. He destroys companies for sport. He’ll destroy you.”

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## Flash Marriage To My Best Friend’s Father

Chapter 19:

He took another step. The pier creaked beneath him. “Come back to the guest house,” he whispered. “I’ll call off the engagement. I’ll end things with Claudine. We can go back to the way things were.”

Eliza looked at his outstretched hand. It was the same hand that had placed a diamond ring on Claudine Chapman’s finger while she watched. The same hand that had signed the orders restricting her allowance. She felt nothing – no

longing, no nostalgia. The haze that had covered Anson for years, the belief that he was her tragic, star-crossed love, evaporated completely. All she saw was a man in muddy shoes who didn't know how to accept no for an answer.

"You are delusional," she said coldly.

Anson's face hardened. His jaw clenched. "Don't make me force you to see reason, Eliza," he growled.

He lunged forward.

Eliza reacted on instinct. She yanked her hand back as Anson's fingers brushed her wrist.

"Don't touch me!" she screamed.

Anson didn't stop. He stepped closer, invading her space, pressing the air out of the atmosphere between them. He smelled of sweat, expensive cologne, and desperation.

"What did you give him, Eliza?" Anson asked. His voice dropped to a low, dirty whisper that made her skin crawl.

Eliza blinked at the sudden shift. “What?”

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“Dallas Koch doesn’t do charity,” Anson spat. “He doesn’t marry orphans for love. Did you sell him your body? Or just your pride?”

The accusation landed like a fist to the stomach. It knocked the wind out of her.

“He is my husband,” Eliza stammered, backing up until her calves struck the wooden bench at the end of the pier. “Not my pimp.”

“Husband?” Anson scoffed, looking at her with a pity that felt more like contempt. “He’s using you. He wants access to the Solomon trust. Your father’s patents were just the key. He needs your signature to unlock assets your father hid offshore. That’s the only reason he pulled you out of the gutter.”

Eliza’s mind raced. A hidden trust? Her father’s lawyers had said everything was gone — liquidated to pay creditors. But her father had always been secretive. What if Anson was telling the truth? A seed of doubt, cold and sharp, took root in her chest. Why had Dallas married her? Why the roses? Why the kindness? Was it all a long con for some fortune she didn’t even know she possessed?

“You’re a gold digger, Eliza,” Anson continued, watching the hesitation move across her face. “Climbing the Koch ladder. I thought you were innocent. I thought you were pure. But you’re just expensive.”

“At least he pays for what he values!” Eliza shouted, the words tearing from her throat. “You just stole from me! You stole my home, my life, my dignity!”

Anson’s face twisted with rage. The vein in his forehead bulged. He grabbed her by the shoulders, his fingers digging hard into her flesh through her sweater.

“You belong to the Hyde family!” he yelled, shaking her. “You belong to me!”

Eliza’s head snapped back. The world spun – water, trees, Anson’s distorted face wheeling around her.

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# Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 20:

“Let go!” she screamed. The sound carried over the water and echoed off the distant hills.

Anson didn't let go. Instead, he pulled her into an embrace — suffocating, violent, crushing her against his chest and burying his face in her hair.

“I can forgive you,” he whispered into her ear, his breath hot and close. “Just say you made a mistake. Just say you want to come home.”

The smell of his cologne — once the scent of safety — now sent bile rising in her throat. He was gaslighting her, trying to rewrite reality, trying to convince her that his cage had always been a sanctuary.

Eliza felt a surge of adrenaline, raw and primal. She lifted her foot and brought her heel down, hard, onto the bridge of Anson's muddy shoe.

She felt the impact shudder up her leg.

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Anson yelped. “You ungrateful little —”

He loosened his grip, stumbling backward, but his hand still clutched her forearm. His other hand rose, palm open, as if to strike.

Then a brilliant white light bleached the scene, pinning Anson in its beam. Blinding. Coming from above.

A low mechanical hum filled the air and grew rapidly louder — like a swarm of angry hornets. Eliza looked up. Hovering twenty feet above the water, its black casing sleek and menacing against the twilight sky, was a security drone. A synthesized voice, devoid of all emotion, boomed from its speaker.

“You are trespassing on private property. Cease contact with the resident immediately. Authorities have been alerted.”

Anson was breathing hard, his eyes wild. “He doesn’t love you!” he shouted, spittle flying from his lips. “He’s a machine! A cold, heartless machine!”

“And you are a liar!” Eliza shouted back.

She wrenched her arm free, balled her hand into a fist, and braced herself — prepared to fight for her life if it came to that.

Snap.

A twig broke. Louder this time. Closer.

Anson went still. He turned slowly toward the shore.

A figure stood at the base of the pier, silhouetted against the warm lights of the house. He wasn't running. He was walking — but with a slow, deliberate stride that promised violence.

Anson turned his head slightly at the noise.

It was the only opening Eliza needed. She didn't use her fist. She twisted her body, channeling every ounce of fear, every year of humiliation, every silent dinner where she had been treated like a ghost, into her right arm.

She swung.

CRACK.

The sound of her palm connecting with Anson's cheek echoed across the lake like a gunshot — sharp, clean, and deeply satisfying.

Anson's head whipped to the side. A bright red handprint bloomed instantly on his pale skin. He stumbled backward, his heel catching the edge of the pier, his arms wheeling to keep himself from toppling into the water.

“Get off my land,” Eliza said. The voice didn't sound like hers. It was deeper. Steadier. It sounded like Dallas.

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