

Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 111:

“Good news?” Eliza asked, sensing the shift in him.

“Justice,” he corrected. He shoved the phone back into his pocket. “Let’s race back.”

Before she could question him, he clicked his tongue and the stallion bolted. Eliza laughed — a sound of genuine, startled joy — and urged Duchess to follow. For ten minutes there was no Anson, no debt, no contract. Just the wind, the speed, and the man riding ahead of her, cutting a path through the world as if clearing the way for her to follow.

When they returned to the stable, Eliza was breathless, her skin glowing. Dallas dismounted first and came to her side. He didn’t wait for her to find the ground — he grasped her waist and lifted her down. Her body slid along the length of his, the friction sending a spark straight through her. Her boots hit the dirt, but he didn’t let go.

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“Happy?” he asked. His eyes had dropped to her mouth.

“Yes,” she breathed.

And it was the truth.

The sun was setting as the black SUV glided back toward the city. The weight of Hyde Manor was gone, replaced by a light, airy sense of freedom. Eliza felt clean.

“I thought we were going to the penthouse,” she said, watching the familiar skyline approach.

“Change of plans,” Dallas replied, his eyes on the road. “The penthouse was mine. We need a place that’s ours.” He signaled the driver to take the exit toward the northern hills, away from the crowded downtown district.

Before she could process that, her phone rang. The screen flashed a name she had hoped never to see again: Anson. She let it ring — it started again immediately, insistent.

“He won’t stop,” Dallas said, his voice flat. “Answer it. On speaker.”

Eliza's hand trembled slightly as she accepted the call. "What do you want, Anson?"

"Where are you?" Anson's voice came out as a ragged bark, tight with fury. "The nurse said you left. For good. You were supposed to stay the week."

"The agreement was fulfilled, Anson," Eliza said, her voice colder than she expected. "There's nothing left for me there."

Dallas reached over and took her hand, his thumb stroking her knuckles — a silent transfer of strength.

"So you just run off to him?" Anson sneered. "Have you seen the news? Or were you too busy playing house to notice the world burning?"

Eliza looked at Dallas, her brow furrowing. "What are you talking about?"

"Chapman Retail!" Anson roared. "The stock has been wiped out. There was a scandal — rumors that Claudine's 'dog' bit a member of the Koch family. The press is eating it up. A 'violent incident' at a private party. Dallas Koch pulled every cent of funding. He's calling in loans. He is ruining her father."

Eliza went still. The air in her lungs turned to ice.

Her dog bit a Koch.

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She touched her cheek, where the faintest trace of a bruise still hid beneath her makeup. The slap. The “dog” was Claudine. The “bite” was the slap. And the “Koch family member” — was her.

A laugh bubbled up in her throat — hysterical, incredulous. He did this. He decimated a retail empire because a girl slapped his wife.

“It must have been a very bad dog,” Eliza said dryly, fighting to keep her expression neutral.

“Don’t play dumb with me!” Anson’s voice cracked with desperation. “Did you tell him? Is this because of you?”

“Tell him what?” Eliza shot back, her voice drawing strength from the solid presence beside her. “That your fiancée is rabid? I think the market figured that out on its own.”

“He’s destroying a legacy over a rumor!” Anson’s voice broke. “That’s not business. That’s personal.”

“Maybe he’s just protecting his own,” Eliza said. Her voice was hard and final.

She hung up. The silence in the car rang with the echo of his rage.

She turned to Dallas. He was watching her, his expression unreadable. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles.

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“He burned a kingdom for a slap,” she whispered, awestruck.

“A queen is not to be touched by peasants,” Dallas replied simply, as if stating a law of nature.

The car began to slow. They were no longer in the city center — they were winding up a private road lined with tall birch trees.

“Where are we?” Eliza asked, the chaos of the phone call receding.

“Arrival,” Dallas said.

The trees cleared to reveal a stunning modern estate perched at the edge of a cliffside. It was nothing like the dark, heavy stone of Hyde Manor, nor the cold steel of his penthouse. This house was warm wood, expansive glass, and golden light. The car stopped in the circular driveway.

Dallas got out and opened her door, offering his hand.

“I bought it this morning,” he said, as casually as if he were talking about a pair of shoes. “The penthouse had too many ghosts. This is a clean slate.”

Eliza stepped out and looked up at the structure. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows she could see an open living space, a grand piano, and a view that stretched all the way to the horizon.

“Ours?” she asked, her voice trembling.

Dallas pulled her close, his arm wrapping around her waist. “Yours,” he corrected. “I just live in it with you.”

He led her up the steps to the front door.

“Welcome home, Mrs. Koch.”

The next morning, sunlight flooded the master bedroom of their new home — a stark contrast to the perpetual gloom of Hyde Manor.

Eliza woke alone in the massive bed, but the scent of coffee drifted in from the kitchen.

She checked her phone. A text from Victoria had arrived, sickly sweet and cloying.

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Dearest Eliza, I know things ended abruptly, but there are some of your mother's things here — a few small heirlooms I kept safe for you. I'd love for you to have them. Could you meet me for a quick dinner tonight to pick them up? A neutral place. Lance Harrods, a lovely banker, has offered to host at Le Bernardin. He's a family friend.

The guilt trip. The manipulation. It was a well-worn path. But this time, Eliza saw an opening. The mention of her mother's heirlooms was a lure she couldn't ignore — a final transaction. If she did this, she could retrieve a piece of her past and clear the ledger for good.

She typed back a curt reply: Fine. I will be there for the heirlooms. Nothing more.

She needed to breathe. She needed to see Dallas.

When she arrived at S&D headquarters later that morning, the receptionist didn't ask for ID. She simply smiled. "Mrs. Koch. He's in a meeting, but for you —" She gestured toward the private elevator.

Eliza took it to the top floor. Weston was waiting outside the double oak doors.

"He's just finishing up," Weston said, pulling one open.

Inside, Dallas stood behind his massive desk, reviewing a stack of documents with grim satisfaction.

"The Chapman acquisition is complete, sir," a lawyer was saying. "The assets have been stripped."

“Good.” Dallas didn’t look up. “Leave the shell company. Let them keep the name. It’s worthless now.”

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He raised his eyes. They landed on Eliza, still blazing with the lingering heat of battle – and then, instantly, the storm cleared. His face softened, the tension draining from his shoulders.

“Out,” he said, dismissing the lawyers without glancing at them.

They scrambled past Eliza, clutching their briefcases like shields.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” Dallas asked, leaning back against his desk and crossing his ankles.

Eliza crossed the plush carpet and stopped directly in front of him.

“The dog bite,” she said.

Dallas smirked — a wicked, entirely unrepentant look. “Nasty business. Rabies, I hear. Had to put the animal down.”

“You destroyed her company,” Eliza said. “Her father had nothing to do with it.”

“I adjusted the market,” he corrected smoothly. “They were overvalued. And they produced a defective product.”

Eliza shook her head, a smile pulling at her lips. “Thank you.”

She stepped into his space. She reached up and grabbed his silk tie.

She pulled him down.

It was not a passive kiss. She pressed her lips to his — claiming him, thanking him, tasting him.

Dallas froze for a fraction of a second, caught off guard by her initiative. Then a low sound rose in his throat and his arms wrapped around her waist, lifting her effortlessly onto the desk. Files slid to the floor. An expensive pen rolled off the

edge. He didn't care. He stepped between her knees and deepened the kiss until they were both breathless.

When they finally broke apart, Eliza's forehead rested against his.

"If that's the reward," Dallas rasped, his voice rough, "I should destroy a company every week."

Eliza laughed – and then the reality of her evening came crashing back.

"Victoria set up a meeting for me tonight," she said. "To get my mother's things back. But it's a setup. With a man named Lance Harrods."

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Chapter 114:

The temperature in the room dropped ten degrees.

Dallas pulled back. His hands on her waist tightened – not painfully, but with a grounding, deliberate force. His eyes went dark, the blue turning to slate.

“She’s using your mother to pimp you out to a banker?”

“It’s for Victoria,” Eliza explained, seeing the dangerous glint in his eyes. “She’s holding my mother’s heirlooms hostage. I have to go, Dallas. It’s the last string they have to pull – the last debt I need to settle so I can leave that part of my life behind completely.”

Dallas paced the length of his office, dragging a hand through his hair. “Lance Harrods. The man is a walking calculator. He doesn’t date – he acquires assets.”

“I’ll get the heirlooms, reject him, and leave,” she promised.

“Weston will drive you,” Dallas decided, stopping in front of her. “I’ll be in the follow car.”

“You can’t. It’s strange,” Eliza argued. “Husbands don’t shadow their wives on dinners with other men.”

“I’m not shadowing you. I’m monitoring my asset,” he said, his voice cold. It was not a negotiation.

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That evening, the silence inside the Rolls-Royce was thick enough to choke on. Weston drove with stoic precision. Eliza sat in the back, Dallas beside her — a silent, imposing storm cloud. They pulled up to Le Bernardin, one of the most exclusive restaurants in the city.

“One hour,” Dallas warned as the valet opened her door. “If you aren’t out, I’m coming in.”

Eliza entered the restaurant. Lance Harrods was seated at a corner table, checking his watch.

“You’re two minutes late,” Lance said without looking up from his tablet.
“Efficient, but not perfect.”

Eliza sat down. “Traffic.”

Lance ordered for both of them without asking her preference. Then he got straight to business.

“Victoria says you’re fertile and educated. Good stock,” Lance said, cutting his steak.

Eliza choked on her water. “Excuse me?”

Lance slid a manila folder across the table. “The prenup.”

“I haven’t even ordered a salad and you’re proposing?” Eliza asked, incredulous.

“Why waste time? I need a wife for my Senate run next year. Voters like family men. You need — whatever orphans need. Security. Money.” He waved a dismissive hand.

Eliza opened the folder. It was insulting. A literal schedule of “marital duties” and public appearances. There was also a clause assigning him full control over all “Solomon family assets, tangible or intellectual,” upon marriage. Anson had been right.

She covertly photographed the page titled Section 4: Heirs and texted it to Dallas with the caption: This is what they think of me.

Outside, in the follow car, Dallas looked at his phone. He zoomed in on the clause: Heirs to be produced within 24 months. He zoomed in further on the asset clause.

He gripped the armrest until it creaked. His jaw was set so hard a muscle ticked violently in his cheek.

Inside, Lance continued. “You’ll quit your job, obviously. Restoration is a hobby, not a career for a Senator’s wife.”

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Chapter 115:

“Obviously,” Eliza said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

She was about to stand and leave when she noticed a familiar face at the entrance.

Anson. He was alone.

He spotted Eliza immediately. His eyes narrowed and he made straight for their table – but before he reached it, a second figure darted past him, her movements frantic and desperate.

Claudine. She looked like a wreck – pale, jittery, her eyes rimmed with red. She was clearly following him.

“What is this?” Anson demanded, ignoring Claudine trailing at his heels. He glared at Lance.

Anson ignored Claudine’s tug on his sleeve and fixed Lance with a withering stare.

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“Harrods,” Anson said. “You’re dining with my – family.”

“Fiancée, potentially,” Lance corrected, gesturing to the folder with his steak knife. “If she signs.”

Anson snatched the folder and scanned the page. His expression darkened with every line.

“Three heirs? Mandatory relocation to D.C.?” He tore the page from the binder with a violent rip. “She’s not a broodmare, Harrods.”

“Hey – that’s a legal draft!” Lance protested, half-rising from his chair.

Claudine stepped forward, her voice shrill. “Let her sign it, Anson. It gets her out of your hair. Isn’t that what we want?”

“Shut up, Claudine,” Anson said, without looking at her.

Claudine flinched. The humiliation was public. Heads turned at nearby tables.

“Why don’t you join us?” Anson pulled a chair from an empty table and sat down, uninvited.

“Anson, don’t,” Eliza said, her hand tightening on her napkin.

“I insist. I want to hear how Lance plans to support you.” He settled into the chair with the ease of a man who considered every room his own.

Claudine sat as well, seething. Under the table, she kicked Eliza’s shin – hard.

Eliza recoiled, grimacing, but stayed silent. She wouldn’t give Claudine the satisfaction of a scene.

“So, Eliza,” Claudine began, pouring herself a generous glass of Lance’s wine, “does the prenup cover your extensive history? I’m sure Lance would like to know about your proclivities.”

“My history is cleaner than your father’s audit report,” Eliza replied, her voice cool and sharp.

Lance laughed, caught off guard. “She’s sharp. I like that.”

Anson glared at him. “She is not for you.”

“No?” Lance leaned back, studying him. “Because you want her? That’s the rumor, isn’t it – the obsession.”

Silence fell over the table like a guillotine blade.

Claudine’s glass trembled in her hand. Wine sloshed over the rim.

“She was raised under the Hyde roof,” Anson said, his voice dropping low. “We protect our own.”

“I’m a Solomon,” Eliza said, rising from her chair. “And I’m leaving.”

“Sit down,” Anson commanded.

“No,” Eliza said.

Her phone buzzed inside her clutch. A text from Dallas: Time’s up.

“My ride is here,” she said.

“The husband?” Lance sneered. “The one who lets his wife go on dates? Doesn’t sound like much of a man.”

“He’s very real,” Eliza said, meeting Anson’s gaze directly. “And he’s losing patience.”

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She walked away. Anson moved to stand and follow — but a waiter materialized out of nowhere, stepping neatly into his path with a leather bill folder.

“The check, sir?” the waiter asked, with perfect innocence.

Eliza slipped out the door.

Eliza stepped out into the cool night air, the adrenaline of the confrontation draining away at once.

As it faded, a sharp, twisting pain stabbed through her lower abdomen.

She doubled over, gasping. It wasn't just a cramp — it was a full spasm. The stress of the past few days combined with her cycle had created a perfect storm of agony. She leaned against a lamppost, one hand clutched to her stomach.

Lance burst out of the restaurant behind her, waving the folder. “Eliza! The deal — you didn't say yes or no!”

“I can't marry you, Lance,” she gasped, squeezing her eyes shut against the pain.

“Why? The money is good. The position is elite,” he argued, entirely oblivious to her posture.

“Because I love someone else,” she said, her voice strained but clear enough for the whole street to hear.

“The invisible husband?” Lance scoffed. “He doesn't exi—”

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A car door slammed. Heavy, rapid footsteps struck the pavement.

Dallas emerged from the shadows like a thundercloud — jacketless, sleeves rolled up, his face a mask of dark fury.

“She said no,” Dallas growled.

Lance stepped back, instinctively retreating from the sheer size and radiating aggression of the man. Recognition crossed his face. “Koch,” he stammered. “This is your...?”

Dallas ignored him. His eyes had already found Eliza — pale, hunched, her hand pressed to her stomach. The fury vanished from his face, replaced by raw, frantic alarm. He was at her side in an instant.

“Eliza? Are you hurt? Did they touch you?”

“It hurts,” she whimpered, unable to straighten up.

He didn’t ask questions. He didn’t hesitate. He lifted her into his arms, bridal style, and turned toward the car.

“Hospital?” he asked urgently.

“No — just — cramps,” she managed, burying her face against his chest. He smelled of cedar and soap.

Dallas paused for a fraction of a second as understanding settled over him. He nodded.

He carried her to the Rolls-Royce, walking past Lance, who stood gaping on the sidewalk. He settled her gently into the back seat and climbed in beside her.

“Weston, go,” he said.

He placed his large, warm hand on her lower stomach, directly over the source of the pain. The heat seeping through her dress brought immediate relief.

“Is this all right?” he asked, his voice rough with concern.

“It helps,” she whispered, letting her head fall back against the seat.

The car merged into traffic.

“You heard me,” she said suddenly, eyes still closed. “About loving someone else.”

Dallas went still beside her. The hand on her stomach paused for a single heartbeat.

“I heard,” he said. His voice was carefully guarded.

“It wasn’t a lie this time,” she admitted softly.

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Dallas looked at her. His heart hammered against his ribs — a frantic, unsteady rhythm. He wanted to say it back. He wanted to say it loudly, without reservation. But the fear held his tongue: the fear that she was only grateful, only vulnerable, and that the words would mean something different in the morning.

Instead, he tightened his arm around her shoulders and drew her closer.

They arrived at their new home on the cliffside. Dallas carried her from the car to the living room sofa, the city lights twinkling in the distance through the glass walls. He wrapped her in a cashmere throw and stepped back.

“Stay. I’ll be back,” he said.

Twenty minutes later, he returned carrying three large plastic bags from CVS. He set them on the coffee table and emptied the contents.

It was a mountain of supplies — he had clearly swept the entire aisle into his cart. Every brand of tampon and pad available. Boxes of chocolate. A heating pad. Midol. Advil.

He set up the heating pad with focused efficiency, plugging it in and tucking it behind her back. Then he went to the kitchen and returned with a mug of hot cocoa.

Eliza stared at the pile. “You bought the whole store.”

“I wasn’t sure what you needed,” he said, unwrapping a chocolate bar with grave concentration. “I wanted to be prepared for any contingency.”

The electronic lock on the front door beeped, followed by the sound of the heavy door swinging open.

Dallas looked up, frowning.

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Azalea burst in. “Daddy! I heard you left the office in a panic — oh.” She stopped, taking in Eliza on the sofa and the mountain of feminine hygiene products arranged across the coffee table.

A grin spread slowly across her face.

“Wow,” Azalea said, picking up a box. “He really did it. Brute force logistics.”

Dallas glared at her. “Azalea. Out.”

“He called me last month asking for a full tactical breakdown on feminine care,” Azalea whispered loudly to Eliza. “I told him every woman is different and he should just ask. He said asking was inefficient and demanded a data-driven solution. I guess this is it.”

“A data-driven solution?” Eliza looked at Dallas.

He grabbed a throw pillow and hurled it at Azalea. “Go home.”

Azalea dodged, already laughing. “You two are adorable! Bye!” She pulled the door shut behind her with a cheerful slam.

Silence settled back over the room. Dallas looked embarrassed, the tips of his ears faintly red.

“Logistics,” he muttered, avoiding her eyes.

A wave of warmth moved through Eliza that had nothing to do with the heating pad. She had confessed her love on a public street — a raw, terrifying act of vulnerability. And this man, this titan of industry, had responded not with words, but with an overwhelming, practical, almost absurd display of care. It was so much, so fast. The old part of her — the part trained by the Hydes to see every kindness as a transaction — scrambled to categorize it, to make it safe.

“You are such a good man, Dallas,” she said, her voice softer than she intended.

Dallas winced slightly. Her praise landed like an assessment, not an endearment.

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“You take your duties so seriously. All of them,” she fumbled, reaching for words deep enough to hold her gratitude – and finding only ones that imposed distance, words that kept the overwhelming reality of his care at arm’s length from her own fragile heart.

Dallas’s face fell. The softness in his eyes hardened into something brittle.

Duty.

He had just heard her confess her love on a street corner, and now she was framing his desperate, single-minded care as a contractual obligation. He wanted to be her lover, her world. She was making him her caretaker.

He stood up abruptly. “Get some sleep. I have work to do.”

He crossed to his study and closed the door with a quiet, definitive click.

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Eliza sat alone, genuinely confused. Why was he angry? She had thanked him.

Wednesday morning found Anson Hyde in his study, staring into a cold, dark fireplace. A crystal glass of scotch sat untouched on the desk beside him.

His phone lay next to a manila folder labeled Dallas Koch – Movements.

“He was at the pharmacy last night,” the PI’s voice crackled over the speakerphone. “Buying women’s products. Large quantities.”

Anson gripped the edge of the desk. “He’s living with her?”

“It appears so. He carried her into the new estate on the north shore. She didn’t come out.”

Anson hung up. He picked up the glass and hurled it at the fireplace. It shattered, shards of crystal raining across the hearth.

The door opened. Claudine entered. She looked worse than she had at the restaurant – hair unwashed, eyes wild and unfocused. She didn’t even notice the broken glass.

“Anson, my father needs a loan,” she begged. “The bank froze everything. Dallas blocked our credit lines.”

“Get out, Claudine,” Anson said without turning.

“We are engaged! You have to help!” She rushed toward him, her voice climbing to a scream.

Anson turned. His eyes were dead.

“We were a merger, Claudine. Your stock is zero. The merger is void,” he said coldly.

Claudine stumbled back as the words landed. “You used me,” she breathed, the realization spreading across her face. “To make her jealous. That’s all I was.”

“And it failed,” Anson said, the cruelty in his voice as clean and precise as a blade. “Because you are annoying, and she is – Eliza.”

Claudine raised her hand to slap him.

Anson caught her wrist in midair. He squeezed until she whimpered.

“Don’t touch me.” He threw her hand back.

Claudine stumbled. She stared at him with pure, undiluted hatred.

“I curse you, Anson Hyde,” she hissed. “You will never have her. You will die alone in this cold house, rotting with your mother.”

She ran out, sobbing.

Anson stood alone in the silence. His eyes drifted to the photo of Eliza on his desk – one he had stolen from her room years ago.

“She loves someone else,” he said, mimicking her voice from the street.

“No,” he muttered, tracing her face with one finger. “She’s just confused. I need to remind her.”

He picked up his burner phone and dialed.

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“This is Anson Hyde,” he said. “I need information. There was a security guard — worked at the estate years ago, fired for negligence. Jared Solder. Find out where he is and what he’s been doing. I want to know if he holds a grudge.”

Saturday evening. Dallas stood in the foyer of the Koch Family Estate when Augustina cornered him.

“You moved out of the penthouse?”

“I moved in with my wife,” he said, adjusting his cuffs.

Augustina studied him, something shifting in her expression. “You’re serious about her. It’s not just the contract.”

“Listen to me very carefully,” Dallas said, his voice dropping low, a clear warning beneath the calm surface. “It was never just a contract. I’ve wanted her for five years.”

“Five years?” Augustina’s eyes widened. “Since the gala? But she was with Anson.”

“I waited. I planned. And now I have her.” His voice was quiet and absolute. “She is not a pawn in our family’s games. She is the endgame. Stay away from her.”

“Does she know?” Augustina asked, visibly shaken.

Dallas checked his watch. Nine o’clock. “I’m telling her tonight.” He straightened his jacket. “I’m already late.”

At the S&D Studio, Eliza finished the last inventory sheet and set down her pen.

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“See you Monday!” Bella Rose called out, pulling on her coat.

Eliza locked up and checked her phone. A message from Dallas:

On my way. 10 mins. Weston got a priority alert at the downtown data center — a potential breach. He had to divert the primary detail. I’m coming myself. Stay inside.

Eliza frowned. A flicker of her newfound independence chafed at the instruction. The street outside looked quiet, the lights were on, and the air through the glass felt tempting after hours indoors. She decided to wait just outside the door — only for a moment, only for the fresh air.

The street was still. A streetlight overhead stuttered and flickered.

A white van sat parked across the road, its headlights dark. The driver's silhouette was just visible behind the windshield.

A chill moved through her. She took a step back toward the door.

The van's side door opened. A man climbed out, dressed in a maintenance uniform. He moved toward her with unhurried purpose, and as he passed beneath the flickering light, recognition jolted through her like a current.

Jared Solder. The security guard Anson had fired years ago after a bitter argument.

"Jared?" she asked, her voice edged with confusion. "What are you doing here?"

"Miss Solomon?" he said, grinning. The grin was wrong. Predatory.

"It's Mrs. Koch," she corrected, instinctively.

"Even better," Jared said. He pulled a rag from his pocket.

Eliza turned to run. He lunged.

The rag hit her face. A sharp chemical stench flooded her nose. She kicked him hard, but his grip was iron. Her phone clattered to the ground.

Darkness took her.

Jared threw her into the back of the van. Tires screeched as he sped away.

Five minutes later, the Rolls-Royce pulled up to the curb. Dallas stepped out, holding a bouquet of Juliet Roses – her favorite.

The studio was dark. No Eliza.

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Chapter 120:

Unease prickled through him. The false alarm at the data center had felt too convenient from the moment it came in. A setup.

He looked down.

On the sidewalk, illuminated by the stuttering streetlight, lay her phone. The screen was shattered. Beside it, a scuff mark carved into the pavement told the rest of the story.

The flowers dropped from his hand. The delicate apricot petals scattered across the concrete like drops of blood.

Dallas sank to his knees. He picked up the phone.

A sound tore from his throat — a roar of pure, primal terror that echoed through the empty street.

She was gone.

He stared at the shattered screen, its backlight flickering like a dying pulse. The Juliet rose petals lay soft and apricot-colored around his boots, their delicacy obscene against the violence of the scene.

His own phone buzzed in his jacket pocket.

No name on the caller ID. Just: Unknown.

Dallas didn't breathe. He didn't blink. He slid his thumb across the glass and felt a shard open his skin. He didn't feel it.

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“Mr. Koch,” a voice said — distorted, metallic, fed through a synthesizer. “Did you find the flowers?”

“If you touch her,” Dallas said, his voice terrifyingly calm, stripped of all inflection, “I will flay you alive. I will make you beg for death, and I will deny you that mercy.”

“She’s fine,” the voice taunted. “For now. But she’s delicate, isn’t she? A little bruised.”

A sound came through the speaker. Faint. Muffled. But Dallas knew it better than his own heartbeat — a whimper, a stifled struggle against a gag.

Eliza.

His hand tightened around the phone until the frame groaned. His knuckles turned the color of bone. The traffic noise, the city lights, the cold wind — all of it ceased to exist. The world narrowed to a single point.

“What do you want?” Dallas asked.

“Fifty million,” the voice said. “Cash and untraceable bearer bonds. You have two hours.”

“Done.” No hesitation. No negotiation.

“And come alone,” the voice warned. “I see a cop — I see one of your private security men — she bleeds.”

“I said done.”

“Wait for the coordinates.” The line went dead.

Dallas didn’t roar again. The time for that was over. He rose and sprinted back to the Rolls-Royce, his movements precise and lethal.

“Vault,” he ordered Weston as he threw himself into the back seat. “Now.”

The back of the van smelled of rust, gasoline, and old sweat. Eliza lay on the metal floor, her wrists bound behind her back with zip ties that bit into her skin. A strip of duct tape covered her mouth, tasting of chemical adhesive.

The van swerved violently, throwing her shoulder against the wheel well. Pain shot down her arm, sharp and hot.

Jared Solder reached back and ripped the tape from her mouth with a cruel jerk. Eliza gasped, her lungs burning.

“Why?” she croaked, her throat raw.

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