

Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 201:

Anson let out a harsh, dry laugh and shook his head, his eyes darkening with a toxic blend of pity and arrogance. “Free?” he scoffed. “You think you can survive without me? You think he can handle you?” His gaze shifted to Dallas, anger giving way to cold, mocking certainty. “You think you’ve won. But you have no idea what you’ve taken on. She is bound to me, Koch. By ten years of history. By secrets you don’t even know exist.”

“I know enough,” Dallas said. “I know she chose me.”

Anson looked back at Eliza. There was no tearful resignation in his eyes – only obsession.

“You’ll be back,” he whispered, his voice trembling with suppressed rage. “When he fails you – and he will – you’ll remember who really kept you safe. This isn’t over, Eliza. Not by a long shot.”

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He didn't wait for a reply. He turned and walked out of the room — not slumping in defeat, but marching, already fueled by a new and darker plan.

The door clicked shut. His threat lingered in the air like smoke.

Dallas turned back to Eliza, his shoulders easing slightly. "It's over."

"Not yet." Eliza gripped the sheet, her brow creased with worry. "He looked like he already has a plan. And the Solomons — the estate. Buck will still sell it."

"Let him plan." Dallas dismissed the thought with quiet certainty and sat on the edge of the bed. "As for the estate — my team finalized the acquisition of the Solomon estate's debt this morning. While you slept."

"You... bought the debt?" Eliza gasped.

"I am the primary creditor now," Dallas said. "Buck Solomon answers to me. The house, the art — all of it is under my protection. Under our protection."

Eliza stared at him, overwhelmed. "So... you're my landlord?"

“No.” Dallas reached out and wiped a tear from her cheek. “I’m your husband. What’s mine is yours.” He leaned in until his forehead rested against hers. “We’ll burn the house down if you want. Or paint it pink. Turn it into a shelter for stray cats. It’s yours, Eliza.”

Eliza pulled him down and wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her face in his shoulder. He smelled of antiseptic and safety.

“Just hold me,” she whispered.

Dallas held her. But over her shoulder, his eyes stayed fixed on the door where Anson had gone. He knew Anson was right about one thing.

This wasn’t over.

The embrace settled into a quiet, heavy silence. The hospital sounds outside — the squeak of rubber soles on linoleum, the distant drone of the paging system — seemed to fade away, leaving only the sound of their breathing.

Dallas shifted, checking his watch. It was late.

“You should go,” Eliza whispered against his chest, though her hands tightened on his shirt, betraying her own words. “You’re exhausted. Your arm needs rest.” Her eyes drifted to the bandage on his forearm where the knife had sliced him.

“I’m not leaving.” His voice was low, vibrating through her ribs. “The last time I let you out of my sight, you were taken. I’m not making that mistake again.”

He pulled back slightly, glancing at the uncomfortable plastic chair in the corner, then at the narrow hospital bed. He made a decision.

“Scoot over,” he said softly.

Eliza blinked up at him. “Here? The nurses will have a heart attack. It’s against policy.”

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 202:

“I own the hospital wing,” Dallas reminded her, a faint, tired smirk touching his lips. “Let them have a heart attack. I’m staying.”

He kicked off his shoes and shrugged off his ruined dress shirt, revealing a dark undershirt beneath. Then he climbed carefully onto the narrow mattress, mindful of her IV lines and bruises, positioning himself along the outside edge of the bed — a living barrier between her and the door.

He wrapped his good arm around her waist and pulled her flush against his side. The bed was small, forcing an intimacy that felt not just necessary, but grounding.

“Close your eyes, Eliza,” he murmured, his hand moving slowly through her hair. “I’m right here. I’m the wall. Nothing gets past me.”

Eliza buried her face in his neck and breathed him in. The terror of the warehouse, the cold water, the gun — it all began to recede, pushed back by the warmth of his body.

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“He said he has secrets,” she whispered, Anson’s parting threat still coiling in her mind. “About the past.”

“Anson lies,” Dallas said firmly, his chin resting on top of her head. “He tries to control the narrative. Don’t let him inside your head.”

“I love you,” she said — the words slipping out quietly in the dark, as natural as breathing.

Dallas kissed her temple. “I know. Now sleep. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

They fell asleep tangled together in the sterile room. Dallas slept lightly, one hand resting protectively over hers, his subconscious tuned to every footstep in the hall. He didn’t know that outside, the storm had passed — but a different kind of storm was already gathering, one that would walk through that door with the morning light.

Anson entered the room looking impeccable in a fresh suit, though his eyes were tired and bloodshot. The carefully constructed mask of the Hyde heir was slipping. He set a vase of white lilies on the table. “Your favorite.”

Eliza looked at the flowers. Their funereal scent filled the sterile air – a cloying reminder of a past she was trying to leave behind. “They were my favorite when I was twelve, Anson. I like roses now.”

Anson paused, his hand lingering on the vase. “People change. I forget that.”

“Thank you for helping Dallas last night,” Eliza began, keeping her tone polite. She needed to say it – to acknowledge the debt so she could set it down.

“I didn’t do it for him,” Anson said, settling into the chair Dallas had vacated. “I did it because I couldn’t lose you. Again.”

“You never lost me, Anson,” Eliza said, bitterness edging her voice. “You gave me away. To your mother. To Claudine. To your family’s expectations.”

“I saved you!” Anson snapped, his composure fracturing. He stood and began to pace the small room. “You think he’s the only one who ever saved you? Do you remember the fire? The fire at the guesthouse, when you were fourteen? Years after your parents were gone? Who do you think pulled you out of that attic?”

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 203:

Eliza went still. The words hung in the air, dredging a half-forgotten nightmare up from the depths of her memory — a different trauma, a horror entirely separate from the car crash that had killed her parents, but just as real. “The... the firefighter. The report said...”

“There was no firefighter. It was me.” Anson stopped pacing and turned to face her, his expression a maelstrom of pain and resentment. “I was sixteen. I climbed the trellis.”

He unbuttoned his cuff and pushed up his sleeve. A burn scar — ugly and twisted — ran the length of his forearm. A permanent, angry map of a night she only remembered in nightmares.

“I’ve hidden this for ten years,” Anson said, his voice unsteady. “Because my father would have disowned me for risking my life for a Solomon. For walking into a burning building just for you.”

Eliza stared at the scar. The memory flashed back in fragments. The heat. The smoke. A boy's voice, hoarse and coughing: Hold on, El.

"It was you," she whispered. Guilt washed over her, cold and heavy. The hero of a buried, separate trauma was the same man who had become her gilded cage.

"I saved you then. I'm saving you now." Anson stepped closer. "Buck, Margo — they are monsters, Eliza."

"I know," she said.

"No, you don't." He shook his head. "I brought them here. They are in the waiting room."

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"Why?" Eliza recoiled, pressing herself back into the pillows. The mere thought of seeing them made her stitched hand throb with phantom pain.

“To tell you the truth. So you understand why I had to be hard on you. Why I had to control you.”

“Control is not love,” Eliza said, tears pricking her eyes.

“It is when the world wants to eat you alive,” Anson insisted. “Let them in. Hear them out. Then choose.”

“And if I choose Dallas?” Eliza asked.

Anson’s face darkened. “Then I burn the world down.”

He opened the door without waiting for her answer. “Send them in.”

Dallas stepped in immediately, blocking the path. “Time’s up.”

“She wants to see her family, Koch,” Anson said, a smirk on his lips though his eyes were flat and empty.

Eliza gave Dallas a small nod. “Let them in. I need to know.”

Dallas didn't like it — his jaw tightened into a knot of quiet, protective fury — but he moved to the head of the bed and stood there like a sentinel behind her.

Buck and Margo entered. They looked terrified. Buck was sweating through his collar, and Margo clutched her purse with both hands like a shield.

Eliza sat up straighter.

The tribunal begins.

Buck Solomon looked sweaty and small. He avoided Dallas's gaze, staring at his shoes as though they held the answers to his salvation.

"Well? Speak," Anson commanded from the corner, arms crossed, playing the role of a grim puppet master.

"Eliza... about the club... I didn't know Dante would go that far," Buck said, his voice taking on a whining pitch. "He said he just wanted to talk."

“You sold me to him, Uncle Buck. For a land deal,” Eliza said coldly. “Don’t lie to me.”

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend’s Father

Chapter 204:

“I did it for the family! The company is bankrupt! We were going to lose everything!” Buck’s face turned red as his voice climbed.

“There is no company,” Dallas interjected, his tone perfectly calm. “And there is no family. I bought the debt weeks ago.”

Buck went pale. “You... what?”

“It’s not news, Buck,” Dallas said, his voice a silken threat. “You’ve known since the accounts were frozen. Solomon Industries belongs to Koch Group now. Every brick, every share, every piece of your name on it — mine. You are trespassing on my employee’s time.” He let a faint smirk settle on his lips. “I own the mortgage. I own the debt. I own the art.”

Buck’s pallor flushed to crimson. The last vestige of his power had been stripped away, leaving nothing behind but impotent fury. “You ungrateful little brat! You plotted this!” He lunged toward Eliza, forgetting entirely where he was. “Apologize to Dante! Tell the police it was a misunderstanding! Or I’ll—”

Dallas moved faster than thought. He caught Buck by the throat before he could reach the bed and slammed him against the wall. The pictures rattled on their hooks.

“Touch her again,” Dallas said, his voice dropping to a low, steady rumble, “and you lose the hand.”

Eliza watched without moving. She felt no pity. Only disgust.

“I am pressing charges, Buck,” she announced clearly. “For the fraud. For the solicitation.”

“You can’t! I’m your blood!” Buck choked against Dallas’s grip.

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“My blood died in that car,” Eliza said.

“Get him out.” Dallas released Buck and shoved him toward the door.

Security guards – summoned by Zane, who had been waiting silently in the hall – entered and dragged Buck away.

“You’ll regret this! You don’t know the truth!” Buck screamed as he was hauled through the door.

The room fell silent.

“He’s right.” Margo stepped forward, her voice trembling. “You don’t know the whole truth.”

She was holding Sienna's hand. Sienna stood beside her, pale and stripped of her usual arrogance.

"What truth?" Eliza asked, her voice hollow with exhaustion.

"About your parents' accident," Margo whispered. "The car crash."

Anson gave a slow nod from the corner. "Tell her, Margo. Or I release the tapes of your affair with the groundskeeper."

Margo flinched. Anson had dirt on everyone.

"Buck... he didn't just ignore the maintenance reports," Margo began, tears streaming down her face.

"He cut the lines," Sienna blurted out, unable to hold it in any longer.

The room seemed to tilt beneath Eliza. "What?"

“He wanted the insurance money,” Margo confessed through her sobs. “Your parents were supposed to be flying that weekend. They drove home early instead. It was... a mistake.”

“He started it?” Eliza’s voice was barely a whisper. The air left the room. The steady beep of the heart monitor suddenly sounded deafening – a frantic countdown to a truth she couldn’t outrun.

“It was an accident... the timing... he didn’t mean to kill them,” Margo sobbed into her hands, the words a pathetic attempt to soften a monstrous act.

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend’s Father

Chapter 205:

“And the car crash? Three years later? When Eliza was in the car?” Dallas asked sharply, his mind a cold, calculating machine connecting the dots she couldn’t see.

Margo looked down. Her silence was its own confession. “Buck cut the brake lines.”

Eliza gasped — the sound like a physical blow. The phantom sensation rushed back: the falling, the screech of tires that had haunted her nightmares for years, now given a source, a name, a face.

“He wanted the trust fund. With your parents gone, he became guardian. But the trust didn’t release until you were twenty-five — or dead,” Margo admitted.

“And you knew? You let me live with him?” Eliza stared at her aunt. “I ate at his table. I slept under his roof.”

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“I was scared! He threatened me!” Margo pleaded.

“And Anson?” Eliza turned to him slowly. Her voice had gone dangerously quiet — the calm at the eye of a hurricane. “Did you know?”

Anson held her gaze. “I suspected. That’s why I made a deal with Buck.”

“What deal?”

“I keep his secret. He keeps you alive. And I pay for everything,” Anson said. “I paid him off not to kill you, Eliza.”

“You protected a murderer... to keep me as a pet?” The horror in her voice was absolute. The burn scar on his forearm was no longer a mark of heroism — it was the brand of a jailer. “You let justice sleep for ten years?”

“I protected you from becoming the next victim!” Anson’s voice rose. “If I had gone to the police, Buck would have killed you before they ever arrested him. Or you would have disappeared into the foster system and never been found!”

“He sacrificed everything to keep you safe,” Sienna said from behind him, watching Anson with a strange mixture of jealousy and reluctant awe.

“Get out,” Eliza said to Margo and Sienna. Her voice was flat. Dead.

“But the police—” Margo stammered.

“Go to the station. Confess. Or I will hunt you down myself,” Dallas said. “Zane is waiting in the lobby with the detectives.”

Margo and Sienna fled the room.

Silence settled over what remained. The weight of the truth was crushing. Her parents hadn’t simply died — they had been murdered by her own uncle, their deaths staged as an accident. And Anson, her so-called savior, had used that truth to bind her to him, to make himself indispensable, to build a cage around her one secret at a time.

“Eliza,” Anson stepped forward.

“Don’t.” Dallas moved between them. “She needs time.”

Anson looked at her shattered expression. “I did it for you. I kept you alive.”

“Leave,” Eliza whispered. She didn’t look at him.

Anson stood there for a long moment, waiting for gratitude that would never come. Then he turned and walked out, the door slamming shut behind him.

Eliza stared at the wall. She began to shake.

Dallas sat down on the edge of the bed. He didn't touch her. He simply waited.

She turned to him at last, her eyes wide with a grief that had nowhere left to go. "They're dead because of money."

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 206:

Eliza began to hyperventilate. Her chest heaved, but no air seemed to reach her lungs. The sterile hospital room felt like a tomb, the walls closing in, painted with the lies she had lived for a decade.

“I ate dinner with him. I lived in his house,” she gasped, clawing at her chest. “He killed them.”

“Breathe, El.” Dallas placed his hands on her shoulders. “Look at me.”

“He killed them. And Anson knew. Everyone knew but me.” Tears streamed down her face — ugly, raw sobbing that shook her entire frame.

Dallas pulled her into his chest. “Let it out.”

She screamed into his shirt. A sound of pure grief, of ten years of lies shattering all at once. She struck his chest with her fists — weak, desperate blows. “Why? Why me?”

Dallas absorbed every blow. He only held her tighter. “I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

The pain was too much. It rose inside her like a tsunami, and she needed something to ground herself – something real, something sharp enough to cut through the suffocating fog of betrayal.

She grabbed his forearm. “Dallas... I can’t...”

“I’m here. I’m real.” He offered his arm, understanding what she needed before she could find the words.

She bit down on his forearm. Hard.

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Dallas didn’t flinch. He winced slightly as her teeth sank into his skin, but he didn’t pull away. He accepted the pain as a transfer of her own – a brutal, wordless communion – and stroked her hair with his other hand. “That’s it. Give me the pain. Give it all to me.”

She tasted copper. Blood.

She released him, gasping, and recoiled in horror at what she had done. “I’m sorry – I bit you!”

Dallas looked at the bite mark. It was bleeding, a perfect circle of her teeth pressed into his flesh. "It's fine. It proves you're alive." He wiped the blood with his thumb, smearing it slightly. "It proves we're here."

Eliza collapsed against him, utterly spent. The hysteria had broken, leaving only a dull, hollow ache in its place.

"I want them to pay," she whispered. "All of them."

"They will. I promise." Dallas kissed the top of her head. "I will ruin them."

"Even Anson?" she asked.

Dallas was quiet for a moment. "He saved you. But he also caged you."

"He's not my savior," Eliza said, the words settling with a quiet finality. "He's my jailer. He kept the truth to keep me."

"Then we break the jail," Dallas said.

A nurse entered, stopped short at the sight of blood on Dallas's arm. "Mr. Koch! Your arm!"

"I scratched it on the bedframe. Leave us," Dallas said smoothly.

The nurse looked unconvinced, but she produced an antiseptic wipe and a bandage from her pocket and set them on the tray before backing out of the room.

Dallas cleaned the bite mark quickly, wincing at the sting of the alcohol, and wrapped it. Eliza stared at the bandage. "I'm a monster."

"You're a survivor," Dallas said. "And you're mine. This is nothing."

They lay together in the narrow hospital bed, the silence between them heavy — but shared.

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 207:

The next day, Eliza was discharged. She wore large sunglasses to hide her swollen eyes and a simple black dress that felt like armor.

“I want to go to the police station,” she told Dallas as they walked out through the hospital entrance. “To file the report on Buck.” Her voice was steady, stripped of the fragility of the day before – the voice of a woman with a purpose.

“Zane is meeting us there with the lawyers,” Dallas said, guiding her toward the waiting car.

Anson was waiting beside his silver Aston Martin in the parking lot. He looked disheveled. He hadn't slept.

“Eliza,” he called out, moving toward them. “We need to talk about the defense. Buck will try to blame the fire on faulty wiring. I have the inspection reports from ten years ago.”

“I have Dallas’s lawyers,” Eliza said, walking past him without breaking stride.

Anson caught her arm. “I’m trying to help you finish this. I have the files!”

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Dallas stepped in and broke Anson’s grip with a sharp chop. “She said no.” He shoved Anson back.

“You think you’ve won, Koch?” Anson’s frustration boiled over, his voice cracking. “She’s only with you because she’s broken. You prey on weakness. What happens when she’s strong again – will you still want her then?”

“She’s with me because I don’t treat her like a broken doll to be fixed,” Dallas said. “I treat her like a partner.”

“I gave up everything for her! My family’s honor! My freedom!” Anson shouted. “I lived with the guilt for ten years!”

“You gave up nothing. You kept secrets to keep control,” Dallas said. “You wanted her dependent on you – so dependent she couldn’t leave.”

Anson swung at him. It was a desperate, sloppy punch driven by exhaustion and heartbreak. Dallas dodged effortlessly and landed a clean cross to Anson’s jaw.

Anson went down to the asphalt. He didn’t get up right away. He sat there, pressing the back of his hand to his bleeding lip.

Dallas stood over him. “You didn’t pull her from that fire to give her a life, Anson. You saved her to own her.”

Anson looked up at Eliza.

She stood by the car door. She didn’t look away. She didn’t flinch.

“Is that true?” she asked softly. “Did you want me to be helpless?”

Anson said nothing. He couldn’t lie to her anymore. The truth was written plainly in his eyes – the desperate, consuming need to be her entire world.

“Goodbye, Anson,” Eliza said.

She got into Dallas’s car. Dallas took the driver’s seat, and they pulled out of the parking lot without looking back.

Anson remained on the ground, watching the taillights shrink and disappear into the distance. Then he laughed — a single, broken sound that startled a passing nurse into a wide berth.

“I won’t let you go, El,” he whispered to the asphalt. “Not ever.”

Inside the car, Eliza reached over and took Dallas’s hand.

“It’s finally over,” she said, letting her head fall back against the seat.

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 208:

“The past is over.” Dallas squeezed her hand, his eyes steady on the road. “The future is us.”

The drive from the hospital was short and silent — a necessary decompression after the violence of the parking lot. But Dallas hadn't turned the car toward the penthouse. He had driven straight to the precinct. There would be no rest until the legal iron curtain dropped on the Solomons.

Inside, the weight of what they were doing settled over Eliza. The police station was a cold, impersonal place of beige walls and stale coffee. She felt a strange detachment as she sat in a small interview room — Dallas at her side, two of his most formidable lawyers across the table.

Zane had already delivered a mountain of digital evidence: financial records, timelines, and security logs that painted a damning picture of Buck Solomon's greed.

Eliza recounted everything, her voice even and clear. She spoke of the club, of Dante Luna, of the threats. Then she spoke of the fire. She relayed Margo's confession, the words feeling foreign in her mouth, as though they belonged to someone else's life. With every sentence, she felt a weight lifting — a decade of buried grief and confusion finally being given a voice.

Dallas never spoke, but his presence was a fortress. He held her hand beneath the table the entire time, his thumb moving slowly across her knuckles — a silent, steady source of strength. He watched the detectives with careful, unreadable eyes, making certain they treated her with the respect she deserved.

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After two hours, it was done. The lead detective, a woman with tired but kind eyes, closed her notebook. "We have Margo and Sienna Solomon in custody. Their accounts corroborate yours. We've issued a warrant for Buck Solomon's arrest on multiple counts, including conspiracy to commit murder."

Walking out into the harsh afternoon sun, Eliza blinked. The world seemed sharper somehow, the colors more vivid. "He'll be arrested," she said, more to herself than to Dallas.

"He's already been apprehended." Dallas guided her toward the car. "Zane put a tracker on him the moment he was thrown out of the hospital. He was trying to board a private jet to a non-extradition country."

Of course he was. Dallas left nothing to chance.

“What now?” she asked as they drove away from the station.

“Now,” Dallas said, merging onto the highway that led away from the city, “we get away. Just for a few days. No phones, no lawyers, no ghosts.”

He didn’t tell her where they were going. She didn’t ask. For the first time since she was a child, she didn’t need to know the plan. She only needed to be with the man who had become her anchor in the storm.

They drove for hours. The city skyline shrank in the rearview mirror until it dissolved entirely, replaced by rolling hills and dense forest. Dallas drove with easy confidence – one hand on the wheel, the other still holding hers. The silence in the car wasn’t empty; it was full of unspoken understanding.

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 209:

He finally turned onto a long gravel driveway that wound through a thicket of pine trees. At the end of it sat a modern cabin of dark wood and vast panes of glass, overlooking a serene, mist-covered lake.

“Where are we?” Eliza whispered, awestruck.

“My place,” Dallas said simply. “No one knows it exists but me. And now, you.”

Inside, the cabin was minimalist but warm. A large stone fireplace dominated one wall, and the furniture was comfortable and unassuming – a place built for escape, not for show. It was a reflection of the part of Dallas he kept hidden from the world.

He lit the fire. The crackling flames chased away the evening chill. He didn't push her to talk. He simply existed with her in the quiet space, making sandwiches from a fully stocked kitchen and pouring two glasses of wine.

They ate sitting on a thick rug in front of the fire. The trauma of the past few days felt a world away.

“I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop,” Eliza confessed, staring into the flames. “For something else to go wrong.”

“There are no more shoes.” Dallas’s voice was soft. He gently took her bandaged hand, his fingers tracing the edges of the gauze. “The people who hurt you are gone, or they’re in a cage where they belong. The fight is over.”

“Is it?” She looked at him, her eyes searching his. “Anson...”

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“Anson is a ghost. He only has as much power as you give him,” Dallas said. “And right now, he has none. Here, in this place, there is only us.”

He leaned in and kissed her — slow and deep. It was a kiss that tasted of wine and woodsmoke and promise. Not a kiss of passion or desperation, but of peace. The first breath after breaking the surface of the water.

That night, Eliza slept more deeply than she had in years. There were no nightmares of fire or falling cars. She woke to the pale light of dawn filtering through the floor-to-ceiling windows, illuminating dust motes drifting lazily in the air.

Dallas was already awake, settled in an armchair by the window, a cup of coffee cradled in his hands, watching her. There was a raw vulnerability in his gaze she had never seen before.

“You watch me sleep,” she said, her voice still husky with sleep.

“It’s my new favorite pastime,” he admitted without a trace of embarrassment. “Better than watching the stock market.”

She smiled — a real, unburdened smile. She stretched, feeling the pleasant ache of muscles that had finally unclenched after a decade of tension. Her eyes drifted to his forearm, where the bandage from the night before had been replaced by a clean sterile dressing. The bite mark. A shadow of shame crossed her face.

“Dallas, your arm... I’m so sorry.”

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 210:

He set his coffee down and came to sit on the edge of the bed, taking her hand. "Eliza, look at me. You were in an agony I can't even begin to imagine. You needed an anchor, and you found one. Don't ever apologize for surviving." He touched the mark lightly through the dressing. "This is a reminder — that you're a fighter. That when the world tried to break you, you bit back."

His words washed away the last of her guilt, replacing it with a fierce, possessive love. This man didn't see her as broken. He saw her as strong.

"What happens when we go back?" she asked.

"We build," he said. "Solomon Industries is a wreck, but its bones are good. We rebuild it under your name. You decide its future — you take the symbol of your family's greed and turn it into something new. Something good."

The idea was both terrifying and exhilarating. To take the company that had been the reason her parents were murdered and reshape it into a legacy they would have been proud of — it was a form of justice more profound than any prison sentence.

“I don’t know how,” she admitted.

“I do.” His thumb moved slowly across her palm. “And I’ll be with you every step of the way. As your partner.” He paused, his expression turning serious. “In every sense of the word.”

They spent two more days at the cabin — talking, walking by the lake, slowly piecing together the foundations of their future. For Eliza, it was like learning how to breathe again. For Dallas, it was like coming home to a place he hadn’t known he’d been searching for.

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On the third day, they drove back to the city. The peace of the cabin followed them, a protective bubble against the noise and chaos waiting ahead.

As they pulled up to Koch Tower, a media circus was already in full swing. News vans and reporters clogged the entrance, cameras flashing like a swarm of angry fireflies.

“What’s this?” Eliza asked, shrinking slightly in her seat.

“The Luna family’s cartel connections have been leaked to the press,” Dallas said, his face impassive. “And an anonymous source tipped them off about Buck Solomon’s arrest in connection with a murder. They’re hungry.”

“Anonymous source?” Eliza raised an eyebrow.

“Zane has been busy,” Dallas said, a faint smirk crossing his lips.

He didn’t pull into the underground garage. Instead, he parked directly in front of the main doors, got out, came around, and opened her door. He held out his hand.

“They’re going to ask questions,” Eliza said, her heart quickening.

“Let them.” His eyes locked with hers. “We have nothing to hide. You have nothing to be ashamed of. You are not the villain in this story. You’re the survivor.”

She took his hand.

Together, they walked toward the flashing lights. The reporters surged forward, voices colliding over one another.

“Mrs. Koch, is it true your uncle murdered your parents?”

“Mr. Koch, what is your involvement in the Luna takedown?”

“Eliza, how does it feel to finally have justice?”

Eliza flinched at the barrage, but Dallas’s grip was firm and steady. He didn’t push through the crowd. He stopped, turned to face them, and drew a protective arm around Eliza’s waist.

The shouting fell away, the press holding its breath in anticipation.

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