

# Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 261:

“Did you kill Anson?” she asked cheerfully, tossing a kernel into her mouth. “Please tell me you pushed him into a pond.”

Dallas ignored her. He pulled Eliza toward the stairs.

“Dad! Wait!” Azalea sat up. “I need five hundred dollars. Forrest wants to go to a concert next week. VIP tickets.”

Dallas stopped on the first step. He turned slowly, his expression one of supreme annoyance.

“You are interrupting,” he said.

“It’s an emergency – they’re selling out!” Azalea pleaded. “Please? I’ll do dishes for a month.”

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Dallas took out his phone and tapped the screen three times.

“The concert is cancelled,” he said. “Consider your social life on probation for interrupting.”

“What? Why?” Azalea shrieked, dropping a piece of popcorn.

“Because you are a mood killer,” Dallas said. “Go to your room. Read a book. Don’t talk to me until sunrise.”

“Eliza! Help!” Azalea gasped. “He’s a tyrant! He’s oppressing the youth!”

Eliza giggled, pressing her hand over her mouth to smother it. “Sorry, Azalea. He’s grumpy. Ask again tomorrow.”

Dallas didn’t wait for further debate. He scooped Eliza up into his arms, bridal style.

“Hey! Put me down!” Eliza laughed, kicking her legs.

“Not until tomorrow,” Dallas said, carrying her up the stairs as though she weighed nothing.

“Gross! Old people in love!” Azalea yelled after them, hurling a popcorn kernel at Dallas’s back. It bounced off his suit jacket without effect.

Inside the master bedroom, Dallas kicked the door shut and locked it. The click of the latch was final.

He set Eliza on the bed. The playfulness left his face at once. He loomed over her, loosening his tie.

“You are mine. Say it,” he said.

“I’m yours, Dallas,” Eliza whispered, looking up at him.

“Not Anson’s. Not the Hydes’. Mine.” He kissed her throat, his stubble grazing her skin.

“Only yours,” she breathed, arching into him.

And as she said the words, a small, treacherous voice stirred in the back of her mind – wondering whether he loved Eliza the woman, or only Eliza Solomon, the perfect weapon to wield against his family.

Dallas paused. His eyes caught something on the dresser. The velvet box from Jeannine.

He reached over and opened it. The tiara sparkled in the low light.

“Wear it,” he said.

“The tiara? Now?” Eliza looked at him, uncertain. “It’s silly.”

“I want to see my Queen,” he said, a wicked glint in his eye. “I want to see you wearing my family’s crown.”

Eliza reached for it. Her hands trembled slightly as she placed the heavy platinum band on her head. It felt ridiculous and extravagant and, somehow, deeply charged.

Dallas exhaled slowly as the diamonds settled into her dark hair.

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“Perfect,” he whispered. He leaned in, his lips brushing hers. “This is for the world to see.” He paused, his gaze holding hers with quiet intensity, then gently lifted the crown from her head and set it carefully on the nightstand, where the diamonds continued to glitter at the edge of her vision. “But this,” he murmured, his voice dropping as he drew her into a searing kiss, “is just for me.”

The night faded into shadows and the soft gleam of diamonds.

Downstairs, Azalea sighed and picked up her phone.

Dad cancelled the concert. You're paying, and we're sneaking out, she texted Forrest.

The next day, the sun was shining — a mocking contrast to the exhaustion Eliza carried.

She pulled her car up to the curb of the university campus where Azalea was finishing her sophomore year. It was lunch hour. She had brought a forgotten bento box, or at least that was the excuse. Mostly, she just wanted to check on her.

She scanned the grounds.

She found Azalea by the student union. She wasn't studying for midterms. She wasn't eating.

She was sitting next to a boy. Forrest Lin.

Forrest was leaning close, his hand reaching out to brush a strand of hair from Azalea's face. The gesture was tender and shy. They looked intimate. More than friends.

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Eliza hesitated by the car door. Should she interrupt? Should she play the strict stepmother?

Then Forrest leaned in and kissed Azalea — a quick, slightly awkward peck on the lips. Azalea beamed. Her face lit up with a smile so pure and unguarded it made Eliza's chest ache.

Eliza smiled to herself. Young love. Uncomplicated. Sweet.

Her phone rang. The harsh ringtone shattered the moment.

She looked at the screen. Anson.

Her smile faded. She answered, her voice cool. "I told you not to call, Anson. The deal —"

"Eliza." Anson's voice was broken, thick with sobs. "It's Mom. It's Victoria. She's in the ICU."

Eliza froze. "What?"

"The stress — her heart gave out this morning. It's massive." He was crying openly. "She's hooked up to machines. She's asking for you. She keeps saying your name."

"I..." Eliza gripped the phone. "I'm coming."

“Hurry,” Anson begged. “Please.”

She hung up. Her mind raced. He’s lying. He has to be. He’s done this before. But then she remembered his face outside the Plaza — the way his expression had shifted from obsessive hatred to sheer panic when he looked at his phone. That hadn’t been an act.

She glanced at Azalea one last time, the girl laughing now, safe inside her bubble of happiness.

Eliza’s fingers moved quickly across her screen, dialing the main number for Lenox Hill Hospital. An automated voice answered.

“For patient information, press one.”

She pressed one.

“Please state the patient’s full name.”

“Victoria Hyde,” Eliza said, her voice tight.

A pause. “I’m sorry — due to privacy regulations, we cannot release patient information over the phone without a passcode.”

Frustration and panic collided inside her. He could be lying. But what if he wasn’t? What if Victoria was dying, and her last wish was to see the girl she had raised? The weight of that old, heavy obligation pulled tight around her chest.

She texted Dallas: Victoria in ICU at Lenox Hill. Going now. Anson called. I know what you’re thinking, but I have to be sure. Don’t be mad.

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She got back in the car. “Lenox Hill Hospital,” she told the GPS, her heart a leaden weight.

In his office at Koch Tower, Dallas read the text.

He stared at the words. He gripped the expensive fountain pen in his hand until the plastic cracked and ink bled across his fingers in a slow blue stain.

“Anson,” he muttered.

He knew. Even if Victoria was truly ill, Anson was weaponizing it – pulling Eliza back into the darkness just when she had finally stepped into the light.

“Weston!” He hit the intercom. “Get the car. Now.”

Eliza rushed into the hospital waiting room. The smell of antiseptic hit her immediately, triggering unwanted memories of her own stay. Anson was slumped in a plastic chair, his head in his hands. He looked up when he heard her heels on the tile.

“You came,” he whispered, his eyes filling with fresh tears.

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“Where is she?” Eliza asked, breathless.

“Doctors are with her. It’s bad, El.” Anson stood. He reached for her hand.

Eliza hesitated – then let him take it. Just for a moment. Just for comfort.

She didn’t know that five miles away, a black SUV was tearing through traffic, carrying a husband who was done playing games.

The fluorescent lights of the Lenox Hill Hospital hallway hummed with a low, irritating buzz that seemed to vibrate against Dallas’s skull. He stood in the shadows at the far end of the corridor, body rigid, hand gripping his car keys so tightly the metal bit into his palm.

He watched them.

Eliza was sitting on a plastic bench outside the ICU. Her shoulders were slumped, her white suit wrinkled and conspicuously out of place in the sterile hallway. Anson Hyde sat beside her, leaning close, his hand covering hers on her knee.

Dallas felt his pupils contract. The air in his lungs turned to solid glass. The whiskey he'd consumed before leaving the club was warring with the lingering exhaustion from a recent, severe bout of pneumonia, making the scene at the end of the hall swim and distort at the edges. It wasn't only jealousy — it was a physical rejection of the image before him. He had spent months pulling her out of this man's orbit, and here she was, circling him again.

Eliza's head snapped up. She must have felt the weight of his stare, heavy and burning. Her eyes found him in the shadows.

She moved as though she'd been burned. She snatched her hand from Anson's grip and scrambled to her feet.

"Dallas?" Her voice was thin, cracking under the strain of the day.

Anson rose slowly. He adjusted his cuffs and smoothed the fabric of his shirt. He didn't look guilty. He looked comfortable — like a man who belonged there, in the tragedy, beside her. A faint, almost imperceptible smirk touched the corner of his mouth before he replaced it with an expression of somber concern.

Dallas walked forward. His dress shoes struck the linoleum with a hard, rhythmic clack. Click. Click. Click. Like a countdown.

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Eliza moved toward him, her hands fluttering nervously. “Victoria – the doctors are still in there. It’s critical. They said her heart–”

Dallas raised a hand. The motion was sharp, cutting her off.

“I don’t need a medical report,” he said, his voice stripped of warmth. “I can see you’re busy. With family.” He placed deliberate weight on the word. His eyes moved past her to Anson.

Anson met his gaze. “She needed support, Koch. It’s her foster mother. It’s a difficult night.”

“I’m sure,” Dallas replied, his tone flat.

The ICU waiting room door swung open. A doctor in blue scrubs stepped out, looking exhausted.

“Family of Victoria Hyde?” he called.

“Here,” Anson stepped forward.

“She’s stabilizing, but she’s asking for Eliza specifically,” the doctor said, glancing at his clipboard. “She’s very agitated. We need to keep her calm.”

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Eliza froze. She looked at the doctor, then back at Dallas. Her eyes were wide and pleading, torn between the duty she felt toward the woman who had raised her and the tightly controlled fear written across her husband's face.

"Dallas, I—" she started, reaching for him.

Dallas looked at her outstretched hand, then at the doctor waiting by the door. He saw the trap with perfect clarity. If he forced her to leave, he was the monster denying a dying woman her final wish. If he stayed, he was a spectator to her past.

"Go," Dallas said.

He reached out and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. His fingers were cold.

"Dallas, please stay," Eliza whispered. "Just wait for me."

"I'm not going in there," he said, withdrawing his hand. "The air in here makes me sick."

"Mrs. Koch?" the doctor pressed. "She's waiting."

Eliza looked at him one last time, desperation etched into every line of her face. "I'll be quick. I promise."

She turned and followed the doctor through the double doors. Anson fell into step behind her, pausing just long enough to glance back at Dallas. He said nothing. He didn't need to. The closing doors sealed them inside together.

Dallas stood alone in the hallway.

He turned and walked to the elevator. He punched the down button. When the metal doors slid shut, enclosing him in the mirrored box, he watched the floor numbers drop.

His fist lashed out and slammed into the steel wall with a deafening thud.

The pain in his knuckles was sharp and grounding. It was better than the feeling in his chest.

Forty minutes later, the interior of the black SUV was dark, lit only by the faint glow of the dashboard. Dallas sat in the hospital parking lot, staring up at the fourth floor. The lights were still on.

She hadn't come out.

He pulled out his phone and dialed.

"Zane," he said when the line connected. "The usual place. Don't bring anyone."

Zane Sterling, his lawyer and oldest friend, didn't ask questions. "Give me twenty minutes."

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The private club was dim, smelling of aged leather and cigar smoke — a quiet sanctuary for men with too much money and too many problems. Dallas sat in a corner booth, a bottle of Japanese whiskey on the table already a quarter empty.

Zane slid into the seat opposite him. He looked at the bottle, then at Dallas's face.

“If you want someone to disappear, there are cleaner ways,” Zane said, loosening his tie. “You don't have to drown yourself first.”

Dallas poured another glass. The amber liquid swirled. “She chose him.”

“She chose her dying stepmother,” Zane corrected, his voice measured. “Don't confuse the two. You know Eliza — she's loyal to a fault. It's one of the things that worries me most about her, but it's also why you love her.”

“Anson is in there with her,” Dallas said, taking a long drink, the burn doing nothing to numb him. “He's using that old woman as a shield. He's trapped her.”

“Then go get her,” Zane grabbed the bottle before Dallas could pour again. “You're her husband. Walk in there, throw Anson out a window, and take your wife home.”

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Dallas laughed — a dry, humorless sound. “What’s the point of dragging her out if her head is still in that room? If she feels guilty? I don’t want a hostage, Zane.” He set his phone on the table. The screen was dark. “She hasn’t texted. Not once.”

“Maybe her phone died,” Zane offered. “ICUs have terrible reception.”

“Or maybe she’s holding his hand again,” Dallas said, staring at the device. “Maybe she’s remembering why she loved him for ten years.”

“Stop it,” Zane said sharply. “You’re spiraling. You’re deciding the outcome before the game is played.”

Dallas didn’t answer. He just watched the phone.

In the hospital room, Eliza was frantic. Victoria had crashed again, nurses swarming in from every direction. Eliza had been pushed into the corner, her presence suddenly irrelevant to the controlled chaos around the bed. Her phone was in her purse, the battery dead since she’d arrived. She had no charger. She had no way to reach him.

Back at the club, hours passed. The bottle emptied.

“If she doesn’t come home tonight...” Dallas murmured, his speech slightly slurred, his eyes losing focus.

“She’ll come home,” Zane said firmly. “Unless Anson locks her in a tower.”

Dallas didn’t smile. He had a feeling in his gut — dark and twisting — that the tower was exactly where she was headed.

It was three in the morning when Eliza finally walked out of the hospital. Her eyes were gritty with exhaustion, her body running on nothing. Victoria was stable, but the doctors had advised staying close.

“The doctor wants you nearby for the next twelve hours,” Anson said, his voice carefully threaded with concern as he walked her toward the exit. “In case anything changes. You should rest at the estate — it’s closer.”

“I need to go home to Dallas,” Eliza said, pulling out her dead phone and fumbling with it uselessly. “He’ll be worried. I’ll call him from a landline.”

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“You can’t,” Anson said smoothly. “The storm’s knocked out the phone lines in this part of the building. And you look like you’re about to faint. Just sleep at the estate for a few hours. Go home in the morning when you’re fresh. Dallas will understand – it’s an emergency.”

Eliza wavered. Her body felt like lead. The thought of finding a taxi, the long ride into the city, the inevitable conversation with Dallas – it was too much.

“Just a few hours,” she conceded. “I need to call him the second I get there.”

She went back to the Hyde estate. She collapsed onto the bed in the guest room, fully clothed, and was asleep before her head reached the pillow.

She forgot to try the landline.

Anson stood in the hallway. He looked at the closed door for a long moment, then took out his phone and texted a contact saved as Suki.

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Stand by.

He pocketed the phone and walked away, leaving the small, powerful signal jammer he had placed in the hallway outlet still plugged in — ensuring her digital prison remained intact.

Three days later, the S&D office was a blur of activity. Eliza sat at her drafting table, staring at the blueprints for the Lynn Institute restoration. Her eyes were rimmed with red, dark circles bruising the skin beneath them.

She felt like a zombie.

Bella Rose dropped a coffee cup onto her desk with a loud thud.

“You look like death,” Bella said bluntly, leaning against the partition. “Did Dallas drain the life out of you, or are you fighting dragons at night?”

Eliza wrapped both hands around the warm cup, grateful for the heat. “I haven’t seen Dallas in three days.”

Bella raised an eyebrow. “Trouble in paradise?”

“He’s working late,” Eliza said. The lie tasted stale even as she said it. “And I’ve been at the hospital with Victoria. Or at the Hyde estate because it’s closer. When I go back to the penthouse to change, he’s either gone or asleep – in the guest room.”

It wasn’t bad timing. Dallas was avoiding her. Since the night at the hospital, he had become a ghost, answering her texts with single words. Busy. Fine. Meeting.

He was punishing her.

“You need to fix that,” Bella warned. “Men like Dallas Koch don’t do ‘space’ well. They do resentment.”

“I know,” Eliza sighed. “I’m going to video call him tonight. I’ll make him talk to me.”

That evening, the Hyde estate was quiet. Victoria had been discharged and was resting in her wing of the house, demanding constant attention. Anson had made it clear — in a voice threaded with false concern — that any undue stress, such as Eliza suddenly leaving, could trigger another episode. It was a veiled threat, a gilded cage, and Eliza could feel its bars closing in. That was why she had stayed one more night. Just one more.

She sat on the bed in her old room, freshly showered and changed into cotton pajamas. She studied her reflection in the phone screen, trying to look less exhausted, and dialed Dallas on FaceTime.

It rang. And rang. And rang.

Just as she was about to give up, the screen connected.

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Dallas's face appeared. He was in his study at the penthouse, the lighting dim, half his face cast in shadow. He looked tired too – jaw set hard, tie undone.

“Hey,” Eliza said softly, her voice trembling slightly. “You answered.”

“I’m working,” Dallas said. His voice was flat, stripped of the warmth she was desperate for. He wasn’t looking at the camera – his eyes were fixed on something on his desk.

“Are you still angry?” she asked, fighting to keep the desperation out of her tone. “I miss you.”

Dallas looked up. His eyes were dark and unreadable. “You’re still at his house.”

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“Victoria needs me,” Eliza said, the old excuse tasting stale even as it left her mouth. “But she’s better. I’m coming home tomorrow. For good. I promise.”

Dallas stared at her. For a moment, the mask slipped. She saw the hurt beneath the anger.

“I want pasta,” he said suddenly. “The kind with the spicy sauce you make.”

Eliza’s heart leaped. It was an olive branch — small and grudging, but it was there.

“I’ll make it,” she promised, smiling. “Tomorrow night. I’ll make a huge pot. And we can—”

The door to her bedroom opened.

No knock. No warning.

Eliza turned instinctively. The phone shifted in her hand, the camera angling toward the doorway.

Anson walked in.

He was wearing loose grey sweatpants and a white t-shirt, his hair damp as though he had just showered. He looked comfortable. Domestic. In his hand he held a steaming mug.

“Eliza,” he said, his voice soft and intimate. “Mom wanted you to have this before you sleep. Warm milk. She insists — you know how she gets when she’s not obeyed. We wouldn’t want to cause another incident, would we?”

Eliza froze. The sight of him — dressed for bed, walking into her room without knocking, carrying warm milk — was a scene from a marriage. A life she didn’t have with him.

“Anson!” She scrambled up, clutching the phone to her chest and trying to cover the lens. “I’m on the phone! Get out!”

Anson stopped, his expression shifting to one of confused, wounded innocence. “I’m sorry. I thought you were done. I just wanted to make sure you were comfortable.”

The word hung in the air, heavy with implication. Comfortable. In his house. In her old room.

Eliza spun the phone back around to face her.

“Dallas, he just walked in, I didn’t—”

The screen was black.

Call Ended.

Eliza stared at the phone. Cold, sharp panic spiked through her chest. She hit redial.

User Busy.

He had declined the call.

She tried again.

The subscriber you are calling is currently unavailable.

He had turned his phone off.

Eliza lowered the phone slowly. She turned to look at Anson. He was still standing there, holding the mug, a picture of innocent concern.

“Did I interrupt something?” he asked.

“You did that on purpose,” Eliza said, her voice shaking with barely contained rage. “You didn’t knock. You never bring me milk.”

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Chapter 268:

“I’m just trying to take care of you, El,” Anson said, setting the mug on the nightstand. “He’s so temperamental, isn’t he? Hanging up just because I brought you a drink.”

“Don’t call me El,” Eliza snapped. “Get out. Get out of my room.”

Anson raised both hands in surrender. “Okay. Okay. Drink the milk. It helps.” He turned and walked out, closing the door softly behind him.

In the hallway, his expression shifted. The concern evaporated, replaced by a cold, satisfied sneer. He pulled out his phone. Suki had been on his payroll for months — a ghost in the machine, studying Eliza’s mannerisms, her walk, her style. A quick review of the estate’s security feed from Eliza’s arrival had confirmed her attire. The rest had been simple theater.

He typed a message to Suki.

Phase one complete. You're up.

Eliza threw her clothes into her bag without bothering to fold them. She had to get back to the penthouse. She had to explain.

She tried Dallas's cell again. Straight to voicemail. Desperate, she dialed the landline at the penthouse.

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"Hello?"

It was Azalea. Her voice was thick and wet. She had been crying.

"Azalea?" Eliza zipped her bag shut. "Is Dallas there?"

"He left," Azalea sobbed into the receiver. "He came out of the study and smashed a bottle of wine against the wall. Red wine. It's everywhere. It looks like a murder scene."

“Where did he go?” Eliza asked, her heart hammering.

“I don’t know!” Azalea wailed. “He just stormed out. He looked scary, Eliza. Like he wanted to hurt someone.”

“Why are you crying?” Eliza paused. “Are you okay?”

“Forrest—” Azalea hiccuped. “Forrest is leaving. He joined Doctors Without Borders. He’s going to Africa next week. He broke up with me. He said we’re on ‘different paths.’”

“Oh, Azalea...” Eliza felt a pang of sympathy, but she couldn’t hold onto it. “I’m coming home. Stay there.”

“We’re cursed,” Azalea wept. “The Kochs are cursed. Nobody stays.”

Eliza hung up. She grabbed her bag and ran downstairs.

Outside, the sky had broken open. Rain lashed against the windows of the manor, and thunder rolled in the distance.

Anson was waiting in the foyer.

“Where are you going?” he asked, stepping into her path.

“Home,” Eliza said, attempting to push past him. “Move, Anson.”

“It’s pouring. The roads are dangerous,” he said, his voice perfectly reasonable. “Wait until morning.”

“I don’t trust you,” Eliza said. “I need to talk to my husband.”

Anson laughed softly. “Talk? You think talking will fix what he thinks he saw?”

“He saw nothing!” Eliza snapped. “He heard you being a creep!”

“He saw a man in your bedroom at night,” Anson corrected her. “And now—” He glanced toward the large bay window overlooking the garden. “Now he’s going to see something else.”

“What are you talking about?” Eliza frowned.

Anson didn't answer. He simply pointed to the window.

Eliza looked. The garden was pitch black, the rain turning the world into a blur. She saw nothing but her own reflection and the dark shapes of the hedges.

"There's nothing there," she said.

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Chapter 269:

But miles away, in a dimly lit booth at Zane's private bar, Dallas's phone buzzed.

He picked it up. A new message from an unknown number.

It was a photo.

Grainy, taken from a distance through the rain, but the subject was unmistakable. The Hyde estate garden. A silhouette of two figures standing beneath the patio overhang, illuminated by the soft light spilling from the house. The woman was wearing the exact pajamas Eliza had been wearing on the video call ten minutes ago — the messy bun, the curve of her neck.

She was in Anson's arms. They were kissing. Deeply. Passionately.

Dallas stared at the photo. The woman's hand was tangled in the man's hair. It looked like surrender. It looked like love.

It was Suki, of course. She had a similar frame to Eliza, and tonight she wore a wig styled precisely to match Eliza's hair, and the pajamas Anson had purchased specifically for this moment. In the dark, in the rain, in a photograph — she was Eliza.

"God," Zane breathed, leaning over Dallas's shoulder. "Is that — is that from tonight?"

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"Ten minutes ago," Dallas said. His voice sounded hollow, as though it were coming from somewhere far away.

"She's lying to you," Zane slammed his hand on the table. "She says she's taking care of the old lady, and she's out there kissing her ex in the rain?"

Dallas closed his eyes. He felt the bile rise in his throat. “Pour me another.”

“No.” Zane took the glass away. “You need to go confront her.”

“Confront her?” Dallas opened his eyes. They were cold and empty. “Why? To hear more lies? The picture doesn’t lie, Zane. She’s wearing the clothes I just saw her in.”

Back at the estate, Eliza shouldered her bag and pushed past Anson.

“I’m leaving,” she said.

Anson stepped aside, his manner shifting with sudden, easy compliance. “Fine. I’ll have the driver take you. I don’t want you crashing in this weather.”

Eliza hesitated, suspicious of the change — but she didn’t have time to analyze it. “Fine.”

She ran out into the rain and into the waiting car.

Anson stood in the doorway, watching the taillights dissolve into the dark.

From the shadows of the garden, a figure emerged — shivering, soaked, clutching a wig in one hand.

“Did you get it?” Anson asked, not looking at her.

“The photographer said it’s perfect,” Suki replied, her teeth chattering. “The lighting was just right.”

Anson pulled a check from his pocket and flicked it toward her. It fluttered to the wet ground.

“Good job, Suki,” he said. “Now get inside before you catch a cold. You have a bigger performance coming up.”

“Will he believe it?” Suki asked, bending to pick up the check. “It was just a shadow.”

“Doubt is a weed, Suki,” Anson said, closing the door. “Once you plant it, it grows in the dark. Any shadow becomes a ghost.”

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The morning sun was brutal, piercing through the floor-to-ceiling windows of the penthouse. Eliza sat on the edge of the sofa, holding a cold compress to Azalea’s forehead.

Dallas hadn’t come home.

Azalea groaned, shifting beneath the blanket. “My head is exploding. Why is the sun so loud?”

“You drank half a bottle of tequila,” Eliza said gently. “Drink the water.”

“Men are trash,” Azalea mumbled, sitting up and wincing. “Forrest left this morning. He texted me from the airport. ‘It’s better this way.’” She let out a hollow laugh. “Coward.”

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She looked at Eliza with bloodshot eyes. “And Dad is trash too. Uncle Zane called me. He said Dad is destroying himself at his club. He said he’s not coming home.”

Eliza felt a chill that had nothing to do with the air conditioning. “What else did Zane say?”

Azalea hesitated, biting her lip. “He said... you’re not worth it. He said you’re a liar.”

Eliza stood up. "I need to find him."

The doorbell rang — sharp and demanding. Eliza crossed to the door quickly, hoping, praying it was Dallas.

It was Zane.

He looked terrible. Unshaven and rigid, his usual easy manner replaced by a wall of hostility.

"Zane," Eliza breathed. "Where is he? Is he okay?"

Zane didn't answer. He reached into his jacket pocket, produced a cream-colored envelope, and pressed it against her chest.

"He told me to give you this."

Eliza took it with trembling hands. She opened the flap.

It was an invitation. Heavy cardstock. Gold lettering.

Serena Q's Gallery Presents: The Lost Works of Diana Solomon.

Eliza stared at it. Her mother's art. The exhibition she had dreamed of. She frowned at the line below. Theme: Hidden Layers – The Unseen Art of Restoration. A strange subtitle. It sounded less like Serena and more like Anson's penchant for melodrama. He must have insisted on it as a condition of his sponsorship.

"Why is he giving me this?" Eliza asked. "Is he coming?"

"He said," Zane's voice was thick with disdain, "that if you still remember who you are, you should go. But if you're too busy playing the part of Anson Hyde's woman, then stay home."

"His woman?" Eliza recoiled as though she had been struck. "Zane, you know me. I'm his wife. I love him."

"I thought I knew you," Zane said coldly. "Until I saw the photo."

"What photo?" Eliza demanded.

“Don’t play dumb.” Zane stepped back. “I’ll see you at the gallery tonight. And Eliza? If you bring Anson, I will break his jaw in front of the art critics.” He turned and walked toward the elevator.

“Zane!” Eliza called after him.

The doors slid shut.

She stood there, gripping the invitation. A photo. Anson had taken a photo. Of what? The milk scene? That wouldn’t be enough to cause this. She pulled out her phone and dialed Anson.

“Hello, sister,” he answered on the first ring.

“What did you send him?” Eliza demanded. “What lies are you spinning?”

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