

# Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 61:

Eliza was thrashing in her sheets, the silk tangled around her legs and trapping her.

In her dream, she was back in the attic of Hyde Manor. The air was stifling. Anson was there, locking the door.

“You are nothing without me,” Anson sneered. “You are just a broken doll.”

“No,” Eliza whimpered aloud. Tears leaked from beneath her closed eyes. “Anson – don’t.”

The door to her bedroom opened silently.

Dallas entered. The years in the military had stripped him of the ability to sleep deeply, and he had heard the distress from down the hall. He crossed to the side of the bed and reached out to wake her.

“Anson,” she sobbed.

Dallas froze. His hand stopped inches from her shoulder.

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A flicker of cold fury crossed his face — not jealousy, not hurt, but the ice-cold rage of a predator watching its mate be tormented. She was reliving a horror, and the name of the man causing it was a death sentence whispered in the dark. He wanted to leave, find Hyde, and permanently remove the source of her nightmares from the face of the earth. His pride was irrelevant. Her safety was not.

But she sobbed again — a broken, terrified sound that tore straight through his chest.

Dallas cursed under his breath. He sat down on the edge of the bed, and the mattress dipped under his weight.

“Eliza. Wake up.” He shook her shoulder firmly.

Eliza gasped and sat upright. Her eyes were wide and unseeing in the dark, her chest heaving with shallow, disoriented breaths.

She made out a dark figure. Instinct took over. She reached out blindly.

“Hug me,” she begged, her voice trembling. “Please.”

Dallas hesitated for only a heartbeat. He was her husband. He was her protector.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into his chest. Eliza buried her face in his t-shirt and breathed him in — cedar, rain, and Dallas. The scent grounded her instantly. The nightmare of dust and attics dissolved.

“It was just a dream,” he said. His voice was flat, stripped of sentiment, but his arms were tight and his hand moved in slow circles across her back. “I’m here.”

“Don’t leave,” she whispered.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he promised grimly.

She fell back asleep in his arms, her breathing gradually evening out. Dallas stayed awake, watching the storm outside, hating Anson Hyde with every fiber of his being.

The next morning arrived bright and unforgiving.

Eliza walked into the kitchen feeling groggy but rested. Azalea was at the island, eating cereal. She looked up and her spoon stopped mid-air.

“Whoa.” She pointed with the spoon. “Look at those lips.”

Eliza touched her mouth. It was still tender. She caught her reflection in the toaster – her lips were swollen, a deep rose color.

“Did you two... you know?” Azalea wagged her eyebrows with a wicked grin.

Eliza turned beet red. “No! It was an allergic reaction. To strawberries.”

It was a terrible lie.

# Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 62:

Dallas walked in, fully dressed in a charcoal suit, buttoning his cuffs. He looked impeccable. He poured himself a coffee, and his gaze drifted to Eliza's mouth. A flicker of quiet satisfaction crossed his face.

"There are no strawberries in this house," he remarked calmly.

"Good luck at the interview," he added.

He moved past her and leaned in close, low enough that only she could hear.

“Wear lipstick. Red.” His voice was barely above a murmur. “It’s the color of war. Ross will try to intimidate you. Don’t let him.”

Heat rushed to Eliza’s face. Behind her, Azalea cackled into her cereal bowl.

Dallas left the kitchen, concealing a smirk. He had armed her. Let Liam’s friend see that.

The S&D Design headquarters was a glass monolith piercing the sky – intimidating, cold, and beautiful.

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Eliza stood in the lobby. She wore a sharp black blazer and the red lipstick Dallas had suggested. It felt like war paint. She walked to the reception desk.

“Eliza Solomon. 10:00 AM interview for the Junior Restorer position.”

The receptionist typed on her keyboard, then frowned. “I don’t see your name, Ms. Solomon.”

“I have a confirmation email,” Eliza said, pulling out her phone and tilting the screen forward.

A man in a flashy blue suit crossed the lobby from the elevators. He had slicked-back hair and a practiced sneer.

“Problem?” he asked.

“Mr. Ross,” the receptionist said carefully. “Ms. Solomon says she has an interview.”

Gavin Ross. The HR manager. Liam’s squash partner.

Gavin looked at Eliza. His expression wasn’t appraising — it was dismissive.

“Ah. The one connected to the Hyde scandal,” he said, his voice pitched just loud enough for those nearby to hear.

Eliza’s spine snapped straight. “I am applying as Eliza Solomon.”

“We’ve decided not to move forward with your candidacy,” Gavin said smoothly, without so much as glancing at her portfolio. “S&D requires discretion. Your public profile is a bit too messy. We don’t need that kind of drama.”

“Messy? I have a degree and a portfolio,” Eliza said, gripping her leather folder. “This is unprofessional.”

“We received a character reference from Mr. Anson Hyde.” Gavin’s smile was thin and deliberate. “It seems your professional conduct can be volatile. We can’t take that risk.”

Eliza felt the heat rise in her cheeks. Anson. Still pulling strings, poisoning every well he could reach.

“You can see yourself out,” Gavin said, turning away as though she were something to be discarded.

Two uniformed guards took a half-step forward, their presence an unmistakable warning.

Eliza felt tears threatening the corners of her eyes. Not here. Not now. She turned to leave, her dignity in pieces.

The automatic glass doors slid open with a soft whoosh.

A hush fell over the lobby — sudden and absolute.

A woman in her fifties entered. She had silver hair cut in a sharp bob and wore a Chanel tweed suit that cost more than Eliza's entire tuition. She radiated authority the way the sun radiates heat — effortlessly, and without apology.

Augustina Koch. The founder. The matriarch.

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**Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father**

## Chapter 63:

She stopped. Her eyes swept the scene in one practiced pass — the guards, the smug HR manager, the humiliated young woman by the door.

“Mr. Ross.” Her voice wasn’t loud, but it cut through the air like glass. “Why are you harassing my candidate?”

Gavin went pale. He looked as though he might be sick. “Ms. Koch! She isn’t qualified. I was simply protecting the firm’s reputation.”

“Her portfolio came highly recommended,” Augustina stated, walking toward Eliza with calm, unhurried steps. “I’m looking forward to discussing it with her personally.”

She stopped in front of Eliza and looked her over with sharp, intelligent eyes.

“Red lipstick,” Augustina noted. “Bold. I like it.” She turned toward the elevator. “Come with me, Ms. Solomon. The elevator is waiting.”

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She didn't look back at Gavin.

"But — Ms. Koch —" Gavin stammered.

Augustina didn't pause.

Eliza, still stunned, hurried to follow. As the elevator doors slid shut behind them, she caught a last glimpse of Gavin's ashen face.

Augustina turned to her as the car ascended, her eyes kind but razor-sharp. "Don't let small men block your path, dear."

"Yes, ma'am," Eliza said, barely above a whisper.

Once the doors sealed and the lobby disappeared below them, Augustina's professional composure softened by a fraction. "And tell Dallas he owes me lunch," she added, her tone perfectly dry.

Eliza blinked. Dallas. Of course.

The elevator chimed at the top floor.

Augustina's office was a museum of design, architectural models displayed on lit pedestals throughout the room.

She settled behind a massive glass desk. "Show me what you can do," she said simply.

Eliza opened her portfolio. Her hands were trembling, but the moment she began talking about restoration, the nerves dissolved. She laid out her philosophy on preserving the soul of a building while updating its function.

Augustina listened. She asked sharp, difficult questions, testing Eliza's knowledge of materials, of history, of chemistry.

Eliza answered with confidence. She knew her craft.

After thirty minutes, Augustina closed the folder. "You have talent," she said. "Raw, but real."

She paused. “Gavin was an idiot. But Anson Hyde is a powerful enemy. He made calls.”

“I don’t let my personal life affect my work,” Eliza said firmly.

“Good. Because if you work for me, you belong to S&D. Not Hyde. Not anyone else.” It was a test, and they both knew it.

“I belong to myself,” Eliza corrected.

Augustina smiled – a genuine smile, unhurried and warm. “Correct answer. You’re hired.”

Eliza exhaled, the tension leaving her body all at once. “Thank you.”

That evening, Eliza burst into the penthouse.

“I got it! I got the job!”

Dallas was in the living room, reading a file. He stood as she came toward him. She hugged him impulsively, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Augustina was amazing — she saved me from Gavin, and she hired me!”

Dallas stiffened for just a moment, then wrapped his arms around her waist and held her tight.

“I knew she would like you,” he said into her hair.

He pulled back and reached into his pocket, producing a small velvet box.

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

Chapter 64:

“A congratulations gift,” he said.

Eliza opened it. Inside lay a delicate platinum bracelet – simple and elegant, with a single small charm shaped like a compass.

“Dallas, this is too much,” she protested. “I have a salary now. I can buy my own things.”

“It matches the S&D dress code. Put it on.”

He lifted it from the box and clasped it around her wrist, his fingers lingering a moment over her pulse point. The metal was cool against her skin.

“Did you call her?” Eliza asked, her eyes narrowing slightly.

“I may have mentioned that a talented artist was being unfairly blocked by petty politics,” he admitted.

Eliza's expression fell. "So I didn't get it on merit?"

Dallas gripped her shoulders and looked her directly in the eye. "You got the interview on my recommendation. You got the job on your merit. Augustina doesn't hire charity cases. If you were mediocre, she would have given you tea and sent you home."

Eliza looked down at the bracelet. She felt supported, not controlled. It was a fine line, and Dallas was walking it carefully.

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"Thank you," she whispered. "For believing in me."

"Always," he said.

His phone buzzed on the table. He glanced at the screen, and his expression darkened.

"It's Anson," Dallas muttered. "He knows."

The restaurant was dimly lit and smelled of truffle oil and expensive wine.

Dallas raised his glass. “To the new Junior Restorer.”

Eliza clinked hers against his. She was happy. Truly happy.

“I realized something,” she said, cutting into her steak. “Gavin mentioned a restraining order. Only Anson would say something like that. He tried to sabotage me — even after the hospital.”

“He is a child who breaks toys he can’t play with,” Dallas said darkly. “He is desperate.”

Eliza’s phone rang. She checked the screen.

Victoria Hyde.

Her thumb hovered over the decline button.

Dallas glanced at the screen and nodded. “Answer it.”

Eliza put the phone to her ear. “Hello?”

“Eliza! You have to come. Anson is — he’s in a bad state.” Victoria Hyde’s voice was frantic, her usual composure completely unraveled. “He has a fever of 102. He keeps calling your name. He refuses to go to the hospital unless you tell him to. He’s delirious!”

“I’m having dinner, Victoria,” Eliza said coolly.

“Please! I know he hurt you, but he’s my son — he’s the boy you grew up with! Do you want his death on your conscience?”

The ultimate guilt card, played without hesitation.

Eliza looked across the table at Dallas. He was perfectly calm, cutting his steak with unhurried precision.

“Go,” Dallas said unexpectedly.

Eliza covered the phone. “What? Why?”

“Go and see him.” He set down his knife. “See him weak. See him pathetic. Kill whatever pity you have left. If you don’t go, you’ll spend the night wondering whether he died. Go. Finish it.”

Eliza nodded. She understood. She needed to see the monster without his mask.

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

Chapter 65:

“I’ll be there, Victoria,” she said, and hung up. “I’m sorry, Dallas.”

“Don’t be. I’ll drive you.”

Thirty minutes later, the Maybach rolled to a stop at the gates of Hyde Manor. Rain had begun to fall, slicking the cobblestones to a dark mirror.

“I’ll wait here,” Dallas said.

“You don’t have to.”

“I am not leaving you in that house alone. You have one hour.” It wasn’t a suggestion.

Eliza stepped out into the rain and opened her umbrella. She looked back at the car. Dallas’s silhouette was visible through the tinted glass, still and steady. Her anchor.

She turned and walked toward the manor. It looked like a haunted house now — dark and imposing, stripped of the grandeur she had once accepted as normal.

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A maid pulled the door open before she could knock. “Miss Eliza! Thank God.”

Eliza stepped inside. The air smelled of sickness, old dust, and secrets.

She made her way up the stairs. One last time.

Anson’s bedroom was stifling. The curtains were drawn, trapping the heat inside.

Anson lay in the center of the massive bed, pale and drenched in sweat, his hair plastered to his forehead. When he saw Eliza, his eyes lit up with a feverish brightness.

“Eliza,” he rasped. “You came.” He tried to sit up and fell back against the pillows.

Eliza stood at the foot of the bed. She didn’t sit. She kept her coat on.

“Go to the hospital, Anson. Stop acting like a child.”

“I needed to see you,” he wheezed. “That man — Koch — he’s dangerous.”

“He saved my life. You watched me choke,” Eliza reminded him, her voice without mercy.

“I froze! I’m human!” Anson’s voice cracked. “He’s a machine. A killer. I looked into him, Eliza. There are gaps in his file. Years just missing.” He pressed on, trying to plant seeds of doubt. “There are rumors — blood money, dirty deals. He is using you to get to me. To the Hyde family assets.”

Eliza laughed. It was a dry, hollow sound.

“The Hyde family is crumbling, Anson. Dallas doesn’t need you. He is leagues above you.”

Anson sat up, fueled by a sudden surge of feverish anger. “You are sleeping with the enemy! You are a whore for his money!”

The mask slipped. The sick boy vanished. The abuser remained.

Eliza stepped back. She felt nothing – no love, no pity, only a clean and quiet disgust.

“There it is,” she said. “The real Anson.”

She straightened. “I came to say goodbye. Don’t call me again. Don’t use your mother to call me.”

“If you leave, I’ll ruin your career!” Anson jabbed a trembling finger at her. “I’ll blacklist you!”

“You already tried,” Eliza said. “Gavin Ross at S&D.”

Anson went still.

“I got the job anyway.”

“You got into S&D?” He looked genuinely stunned.

“On my merit,” she said. “Something you know nothing about.”

She turned and walked out.

“Eliza!” Anson screamed.

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

Chapter 66:

In a burst of feverish rage, he swept his arm across the nightstand. It was a clumsy, weak motion, but enough to send a porcelain vase tumbling to the floor. It shattered with a sharp crack just as she crossed the threshold. The effort left him gasping, and he collapsed back against the pillows, trembling with exhaustion.

Eliza didn't flinch. She walked down the stairs.

Victoria was waiting at the bottom. "Is he all right?"

"He's fine. He has enough energy to throw things," Eliza said flatly.

She opened the front door. The rain had stopped.

She looked toward the gate.

The Maybach was gone.

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Panic spiked in her chest. Dallas had left?

Then she noticed the bright red convertible parked in the driveway, its top down despite the damp air. Azalea Koch was in the driver's seat, wearing sunglasses in the dead of night.

"Get in, loser. We're going for tacos," Azalea called over the rumble of the engine.

Eliza blinked. "Where is Dallas?"

"He had a situation. He sent the cavalry." Azalea grinned. "That's me. Hop in."

The convertible sped down the highway. The wind whipped Eliza's hair around her face, stripping away the smell of Hyde Manor from her skin.

"Did you kill him?" Azalea asked casually, shouting over the rush of air.

"No. But I think I killed the memory of him," Eliza said. She felt lighter. Free.

"Good. He's trash," Azalea nodded.

They pulled into a roadside taco stand, its neon lights buzzing in the darkness. They ordered three tacos each and settled on the hood of the car.

“Anson said Dallas is dangerous,” Eliza said, studying her taco. “That he has a dark past. Gaps in his file.”

Azalea froze mid-bite. She lowered her taco.

“Anson is an idiot,” she said. “But he’s not entirely wrong.”

Eliza’s heart dropped. “What do you mean?”

“I mean you know the basics of his past,” Azalea said, her playful demeanor disappearing entirely. “But Anson twists everything. Dad has seen things. Done things. In the war.”

“He was in the military?” Eliza asked. She had known he’d been “away,” but the details were a carefully guarded fortress.

“Special Ops. The scary kind,” Azalea said. “Ghost stuff. But that doesn’t make him bad. It makes him loyal.”

She looked at Eliza. “You know I’m 19, right? Dallas is 32.”

Eliza did the math. “He had you at 13?”

Azalea laughed. “Exactly. Biologically impossible, unless he was a very precocious child.”

“I know I’m not his biological daughter,” Eliza said softly. “But Anson was trying to make it sound like Dallas was some kind of predator.”

Azalea’s face hardened. “That’s because Anson is a monster who assumes everyone else is too. Let me tell you what actually happened.”

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# Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 67:

She paused, her voice softening. “My biological father was his Captain. Zane Asher. He died saving Dallas. In a raid.” She turned the taco over in her hands. “My mom was sick. Cancer. She had no one — no money, no family. Dallas didn’t just come back and marry her. He came back from hell, a decorated hero everyone wanted a piece of, and all he cared about was finding us. He held her hand while she died, and he promised her he would protect me. He adopted me and fought his entire family — Ferd and Jeannine — to keep me. He gave me the Koch name so I would be safe. So I would be a Koch heir.”

Eliza was speechless. The narrative of the cold, ruthless capitalist — it was all a cover.

“He is the most honorable man I know,” Azalea said fiercely. “And he loves you, Eliza. I’ve never seen him look at anyone the way he looks at you. He never loved my mom, not like that. That was duty. You are desire. You are his life.”

A wave of emotion hit Eliza so forcefully she nearly slid off the hood of the car — guilt for doubting him, and awe at the weight of what he carried alone.

“He never told me,” Eliza whispered.

“He doesn’t brag about being a hero. He thinks he’s a monster because he survived. He thinks he’s broken.” Azalea looked at her. “You need to tell him he’s not.”

Eliza nodded. She shoved the rest of her taco into her mouth, wiped her hands, and straightened.

“Take me home,” she said. “To him.”

Azalea grinned. “Buckle up.”

Eliza entered the penthouse. It was quiet, the lights low.

She found him on the balcony.

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Dallas was leaning against the railing, looking out at the city skyline. He was smoking a cigarette — a habit she had never seen him indulge in. It was a sign of extreme stress.

Eliza walked out. The wind was colder up here.

He turned and flicked the cigarette away into the night.

“You’re back.” His voice was guarded, but his eyes, though shadowed, scanned her face for any lingering trace of distress. “How is Hyde? Did he cause any more trouble?”

Eliza didn’t answer immediately. She walked up to him and stopped inches away.

“Pathetic,” she finally said, her voice quiet, tinged with a new and exhausted kind of weariness for Anson. “Sick, but nothing I couldn’t handle.” She looked directly into his eyes, her own filled with a complex mixture of shock, awe, and a strange aching tenderness. “Azalea told me everything.”

Dallas stiffened. “She talks too much.”

“She told me the truth about her father. And about you,” Eliza said, her gaze searching his face, trying to reconcile the cold CEO with the man Azalea had described. “Is it true, Dallas?”

Dallas looked away, back toward the city. "It was a long time ago."

"She told me you married a dying woman to save a child," Eliza continued, a tremor entering her voice. "That you raised her alone. That you gave her your name to protect her." She stepped closer and placed her hand flat against his chest, right over his heart. It beat steady and strong beneath her palm. "Is that what happened?"

"I did what was necessary," Dallas said, dismissing it. "Captain Asher saved me first. It was a debt."

"Anson said you were dirty. Cold," she whispered.

"I can be," Dallas warned. He looked down at her, his eyes intense. "I have killed men, Eliza. I have done things that would give you nightmares."

"To protect people," she countered.

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# Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 68:

“You are not cold, Dallas. You are burning,” she said, feeling the heat radiating through his shirt.

Dallas covered her hand with his. His fingers were rough and calloused. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I want you to know I’m not afraid of your past,” she said. “And I’m proud to be your wife. Even if it started as a contract.”

Dallas stared at her. The walls he had built since boyhood were crumbling.

“Proud?” he repeated, as though the word were in a foreign language.

“Yes,” she smiled. “My husband is a hero.”

Dallas pulled her into a hug – desperate and tight. He buried his face in the crook of her neck, breathing her in deeply.

“I am no hero, Eliza,” he murmured against her skin. “I am just a man who wants to keep you safe.”

“That’s enough for me,” she replied.

They stood together in the wind, held in the quiet of the moment – until his phone buzzed sharply against the railing, shattering the stillness. Dallas pulled back, his expression hardening as he looked at the screen.

“It’s started,” he said grimly. He turned the phone so she could see.

It was a financial news alert.

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“Your uncle,” Dallas said, his voice dropping to a low growl. “He’s cashing out. Trying to run before the creditors take everything.”

The next morning, the black Maybach was waiting in the garage.

Dallas opened the passenger door for her. Weston was nowhere to be seen.

“You don’t have to drive me. I can take a cab,” Eliza said, adjusting her blazer. It was her first day at S&D.

“I want to. It’s your first day,” Dallas said.

He got in the driver’s seat. He looked different today – lighter, as though the weight of his secret had finally lifted from his shoulders.

He rested a hand on her thigh as he drove. It was possessive and warm. Eliza didn’t push it away. She covered it with hers.

They talked about S&D. Dallas offered insider advice about Augustina.

“She hates sycophants. Be honest, even when it’s uncomfortable,” he said. “And never apologize for having an opinion.”

They arrived at the underground garage of the S&D building. Dallas parked in a secluded spot away from the elevators and cut the engine. Silence filled the car.

“Nervous?” he asked.

“A little,” she admitted. “Everyone will be watching me now. The Hyde charity case who is somehow Mrs. Koch.”

“Let them talk,” Dallas said. “Then show them your work. Silence them with excellence.” He leaned across the center console. “And if anyone gives you trouble – tell them who your husband is.” A smirk played at the corner of his mouth.

Eliza laughed. “I thought you preferred to operate from the shadows?”

“When it comes to you, I’ve changed my mind. I want everyone to know,” he whispered.

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## Flash Marriage To My Best Friend’s Father

Chapter 69:

He kissed her — softly at first, then deeper, hungrier. Eliza’s hands tangled in his hair. The car felt small and hot, and the center console was a barrier she wanted to climb over.

Dallas pulled back, breathing hard, his pupils blown wide.

“We should stop. Or you’ll be late,” he warned.

Eliza glanced at her watch. “Five minutes.”

“Five minutes is not enough for what I want to do to you,” Dallas said, his voice dropping to a growl.

Eliza felt heat flood her face.

“Tonight,” she promised, her voice a low murmur.

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Dallas’s eyes darkened, a possessive fire igniting in their depths. “Tonight won’t be about a contract, Eliza. It will be about us.”

“I know,” she breathed, her heart hammering with the truth of it.

She opened the door and stepped out, her legs unsteady beneath her.

“Have a good day, Mr. Koch,” she called, glancing back with a small wave.

Dallas watched her walk to the elevator, her pencil skirt cutting a sharp silhouette under the garage lights. He gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles went white.

Tonight, he echoed.

Stepping out of the Maybach and into the lobby of S&D Design felt like stepping out of a warm bath and into a freezer. The safety of being completely enveloped by his presence in the car now felt a world away.

The ergonomic chair at her desk was technically perfect – lumbar support, adjustable armrests, a mesh back that breathed. To Eliza, it felt like a cage made of expensive plastic and judgment.

She sat at her designated desk in the open-plan office. The air conditioning was set to a temperature that could preserve meat. Around her, the hum of productivity was aggressive – furious typing, hushed phone calls that sounded like hostage negotiations rather than discussions about architectural supplies, and a conspicuous absence of eye contact.

A stack of manila folders landed on her desk with a flat, heavy thud, cutting through the ambient noise like a gunshot.

Eliza didn't flinch, but her heart delivered a single hard kick against her ribs. She looked up.

A woman with severe glasses and a tight bun stood over her. This was Sarah, a senior associate who had made it clear within the first hour that she considered Eliza an unwelcome distraction rather than a colleague.

"Morning," Sarah said, her voice thin and sharp. "Augustina asked that all new hires familiarize themselves with our past restoration projects. You can start by organizing these chronologically. It should give you a solid foundation."

The task was condescendingly simple, its delivery coated in professional ice. Eliza rested her hand on the stack of files. The paper was cool and rough beneath her palm. She could feel the eyes of three junior designers burning into the back of her neck. They were waiting for her to crumble – waiting for the charity case to call her rich husband.

Eliza forced a smile. It felt tight on her face. "I think I can manage, Sarah. Happy to help."

Sarah sniffed, disappointed by the lack of drama, and marched away.

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# Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 70:

Eliza exhaled slowly and opened the first file. It was grunt work – mindless archiving that an intern would complain about. But she was here. She was working.

Her phone buzzed against the white laminate of the desk. She glanced at the screen.

Sender: Husband.

The word sat there, heavy and possessive. She had changed his contact name during the drive, a flustered acknowledgment of the weight of his claim on her. Now, seeing it in the sterile office, it felt illicit.

She slid the phone into her lap and opened the message.

I am still thinking about the car. Are you?

Heat flooded her instantly – starting in her stomach and rushing up to her cheeks, hot and prickly. The memory of the morning drive came crashing over her: the leather seats, the rain against the glass, his hand sliding up her thigh, the deliberate press of his thumb against her skin.

She bit her lip and glanced around guiltily. Sarah was aggressively typing three desks away. The normalcy of the office felt like a lie.

Eliza's fingers hovered over the screen. She shouldn't reply. She was working. She was a professional.

She typed quickly. I am working, Mr. Koch.

She placed the phone face down.

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It buzzed again immediately, rattling the desk.

Work hard. I expect a progress report tonight. In person.

Her breath hitched. In person. The implication had nothing to do with spreadsheets or architectural renderings. It was about the promise she had made in the car. Tonight. She locked the phone. Her heart hammered against her sternum, and the mundane office suddenly felt charged with a secret electricity — a tether pulling her straight out of this cold room and toward the man waiting in the penthouse.

The transition from the office to the penthouse was jarring.

Eliza arrived at 6:30 PM. The lights were dimmed, casting long, soft shadows across the marble floors. The air didn't smell of toner and stale coffee. It smelled of cedar, expensive leather, and something warm — red wine.

Soft jazz drifted from invisible speakers, low and unhurried, a saxophone melody that felt like a caress.

Dallas was home early.

He walked out of the kitchen with his suit jacket gone and his tie absent, the top button of his white shirt undone to expose the hollow of his throat. He held two glasses of red wine. He looked devastatingly at ease, and completely dangerous.

“Welcome home,” he said. His voice was a low rumble that she felt in the soles of her feet.

He walked toward her and didn’t stop until he was inside her personal space. He handed her a glass, his fingers brushing hers as she took the stem — deliberate, a spark that shot straight up her arm.

“Did you finish your filing?” he asked.

Eliza took a sip of wine to cool her suddenly dry throat. The liquid was rich and heavy. “How did you know?”

“I know everything that happens in that building,” he reminded her. His eyes were dark, tracking the movement of her throat as she swallowed.

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