

Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

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Chapter 81:

Chaos erupted. The woman shrieked as freezing water soaked through her couture gown. Security guards started pushing through the crowd.

“You little —!” The drenched woman lunged at Azalea, nails aimed at her face.

Eliza moved without thinking. She jumped up and stepped between them, putting her own body in front of Azalea.

The woman's nails raked down Eliza's arm, leaving three livid red scratches.

“Azalea!” Eliza gasped, shoving the woman back.

The crowd parted.

Dallas came through from the terrace. He took in the ice on the floor, the screaming woman, and then his eyes landed on the blood on Eliza's arm.

“Don't. Touch. Them.”

It wasn't a shout. It was a command — low and absolute — and it cut through the music and froze the blood of everyone within twenty feet.

Vanessa Star was efficient. Within seconds she had cleared the area, ushering the soaking wet, screaming women out with the threat of a lifetime ban.

“Show's over! Drink up!” Vanessa called to the gawking crowd.

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In the relative quiet of the managed corridor, Dallas was inspecting Eliza's arm. He held her wrist with great care, but his jaw was locked so tight a muscle was jumping beneath the skin.

It was a small scratch. To Dallas, it was a declaration of war.

“I’m fine, Dallas,” Eliza said, trying to calm him. “Azalea was just defending me.”

Dallas looked at Azalea. His daughter was damp from the splashback, hair plastered to her face, expression caught somewhere between defiance and a flicker of apprehension.

“She called you a gold digger,” Azalea muttered, crossing her arms. “And she insulted you.”

“And you dumped ice on a Senator’s daughter,” Dallas noted dryly.

“She deserved it,” Azalea insisted.

Dallas sighed. He looked from Azalea to Eliza. Then, barely perceptible, a smirk appeared at the corner of his lips.

“Good aim,” he said.

Azalea beamed. The tension broke. Eliza laughed with relief, leaning back against the wall.

Zane walked up, applauding slowly. “Thoroughly entertaining. ‘Mrs. Koch,’ huh? Very official.”

Azalea turned bright red. “It slipped out! It was the heat of the moment!”

She grabbed Eliza’s uninjured arm. “Everyone, meet Eliza – my dad’s Trophy Wife. Look at her, she’s winning,” Azalea joked, covering her embarrassment with humor.

Eliza rolled her eyes. “I prefer ‘Bodyguard.’ I took a scratch for you.”

“You are both a mess,” Dallas said, surveying their ruined outfits. Eliza’s silver dress had wine splashed across it from the scuffle.

“We need to go home,” Eliza said.

“No,” Dallas said, checking his phone. “The paparazzi are outside. Someone tipped them off about the fight. They’ll smell blood, and I won’t let them photograph you like this.” He paused. “Vanessa has a private suite upstairs. We’ll go there.”

He turned to Zane. “There are spare clothes for Azalea in the car. Get them and bring them up.”

“And for Eliza?” Zane asked.

“I have clothes for Eliza here,” Dallas said.

Eliza frowned. “Here? Why?”

“Just come,” Dallas said.

He didn’t wait for an argument. He swept her up into his arms, lifting her effortlessly bridal style.

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“Dallas! I can walk!” she squeaked, grabbing his shoulders.

“You’re injured,” he lied smoothly. It was a scratch, not a broken leg.

“You just want to carry me,” she accused, color rising in her cheeks.

“Maybe,” he admitted.

He carried her to the private elevator. Azalea followed behind, high-fiving Vanessa on the way.

The private suite was a sanctuary of silence and luxury – modern, decorated in dark woods and cream leather, a stark contrast to the chaos downstairs.

Dallas set Eliza down on a velvet ottoman in the center of the room. He went to the wet bar and poured a glass of water. “Drink.”

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Eliza took it. She looked around. The room felt lived-in, yet oddly impersonal.

“Do you —” she hesitated, her voice small. “Do you bring many women here? Is that why you have clothes?”

Dallas paused. He turned slowly, the glass bottle still in his hand.

“Is that what you think?” he asked, his eyes unreadable. “That this is my playground? That I keep mistresses here?”

“You’re a billionaire,” Eliza admitted, looking down at her hands. “It’s a club. It fits the profile.”

Dallas didn’t answer immediately. He crossed to a wall of seamless wardrobes and slid a heavy door open.

“Come here,” he said.

Eliza stood and walked over. She gasped.

The closet was fully stocked. Rows of dresses – cocktail, evening, casual. Coats. Shoes lined neatly along the bottom shelf. She reached out and touched a cream silk dress. It looked familiar. The style was exactly what she liked: elegant, understated, classic.

She checked the tag. Her size. Exactly.

She checked a pair of heels. Her size.

“These are all for me?” she whispered.

“I had them stocked three months ago,” Dallas said. “When we signed the contract.”

He was lying. He had ordered the first pieces over a year ago, updating the selection each season, waiting for the day he could bring her here. But telling her

that now would frighten her. Three months was a grand gesture. A year was an obsession.

“I knew there would be nights like this,” Dallas said, stepping behind her. “When the world was too loud and you needed somewhere safe. I wanted you to have everything you needed.”

“You didn’t know me then,” Eliza said, turning to face him. “We were strangers.”

“I knew I wanted to protect you,” he corrected. He placed his hands on her waist. “There are no other women, Eliza,” he said, his voice low and uncompromising. “There never were. This suite has been waiting for you. Only you.”

Eliza felt tears prick her eyes. The depth of care was overwhelming. He hadn’t merely bought her — he had prepared a life for her.

“You built a safe house for me before I even accepted it,” she realized.

“I am a patient man,” he said. He leaned down, his forehead resting gently against hers. “I knew you would come eventually.”

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“Pick a dress,” he murmured. “We have a reputation to salvage. Let’s show them what Mrs. Koch looks like when she isn’t dodging ice buckets.”

Eliza laughed through her tears. She reached for the cream dress she had touched first. “Thank you, Dallas.”

She slipped away to the bathroom to change.

Dallas leaned back against the wardrobe, watching the closed door. He let out a long, slow breath and ran a hand through his hair. He hated lying to her about the timeline. But he would lie forever if it meant she kept looking at him the way she just had – with warmth instead of fear.

Eliza came out five minutes later. The dress fit like a second skin. She looked like someone who had walked through hell and come out untouched.

“Ready?” she asked.

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Dallas held out his hand. “For anything.”

The confidence of the night before — the feeling of his hand in hers as they faced the world together — felt a universe away in the harsh light of morning.

Sunlight sliced through the heavy velvet curtains of the private suite, cutting across the room in a sharp, narrow beam. Dust motes swirled in the shaft of light, their chaotic rhythm matching the sudden spike of adrenaline in Eliza’s chest.

She blinked, her eyes adjusting to an unfamiliar ceiling. Disorientation washed over her — a physical wave of confusion. The sheets were too soft. The air smelled of expensive cedar and something sharper, cleaner. Dallas.

She rolled over and reached out instinctively. The space beside her was empty. The sheets were cool to the touch.

Cold panic pricked at her skin. Had he left? Was last night simply a performance for the public, and now that the sun was up, the cold machinery of their arrangement had clicked back into place?

A sound from the balcony shattered the silence. The scrape of a chair leg against stone.

He was still here.

Eliza released a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. She sat up and scanned the room. Her silver dress from the night before had been draped carefully over a chair, but she wasn't putting that back on. She walked to the wardrobe — the one stocked with clothes he had bought for her — and pulled out a silk robe the color of ice. It felt like cool water against her skin.

She tied the sash tight, armor against the morning, and stepped outside.

The city was waking up below them, a low hum of traffic and life, but up here it was quiet. Dallas sat at a small bistro table, showered and dressed in a crisp white t-shirt and grey sweatpants, his damp hair combed back. It was a domestic look that felt strangely dangerous on him — like finding a tiger lounging in a living room. He was reading from a tablet, his brow furrowed.

“Good morning,” he said, without looking up. His voice was rough, the sound of gravel turning under tires.

Eliza tightened her grip on the railing. “Morning. Did I oversleep?”

She checked her phone. 8:00 AM.

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Chapter 84:

“It’s Sunday. Relax.” He finally looked up and gestured to the empty chair across from him. “Sit.”

A spread was laid out on the table – croissants that looked flaky enough to shatter, a bowl of cut fruit, and a silver pot of coffee. Eliza sat. Her stomach gave a nervous flutter. The intimacy of breakfast felt heavier than the intimacy of the night before. Night was for secrets; morning was for truths.

She reached for a glass of water and drank half of it, letting the cool liquid soothe her dry throat. She set it back down.

Dallas placed his tablet on the table with a soft click. His attention shifted entirely to her, dark eyes tracking her movements with quiet intensity.

He reached across the small table. His hand hovered near the coffee pot for a split second, then changed direction.

He picked up her water glass.

Eliza blinked. “Dallas, that’s mine. I drank from it.”

“I know,” he said. His voice dropped an octave.

He held her gaze with a gravitational pull she couldn't resist and began to rotate the glass slowly in his hand. The faint smudge of her pink lipstick came into view at the rim. He stopped rotating when the mark was facing him. Then he lifted the glass, placed his lips exactly over the pink stain — covering her mark with his own — and drank the rest of the water. His throat worked as he swallowed, his eyes never leaving hers.

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Heat exploded across Eliza's face and rushed up her neck. It was an indirect kiss, blatant and possessive — more intimate, somehow, than if he had simply leaned over and kissed her mouth. It was a statement. I take what is yours. I consume what you touch.

He set the empty glass down. The sound of glass on metal rang in the quiet air.

“I thought —” Eliza stammered, her voice unsteady. “Azalea said you were a germaphobe. She said you hate sharing.”

“I am. Usually,” Dallas said. He leaned back, a ghost of a smirk playing at his lips. “Exceptions apply.”

Eliza was speechless. Her hands trembled in her lap. She grabbed a croissant just to have something to hold, tearing it into pieces without eating any of it.

Dallas's phone buzzed on the table, cutting through the tension.

He glanced at the screen, and the smirk deepened into a genuine smile. "Azalea. She wants to know if I behaved last night."

Eliza let out a nervous laugh, the sound a little brittle. "She's very protective. She really loves you."

"She loves you," Dallas corrected. He looked at her, his expression softening. "You're good with her, Eliza. She listens to you."

"She's a good kid. You raised her well," Eliza said softly. She looked at him — truly looked at him — and saw the man who had taken in a dying friend's child without hesitation. "You're a wonderful father to her."

The air on the balcony shifted instantly. The temperature seemed to drop ten degrees.

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Dallas froze. His hand, which had been reaching for the coffee pot, stopped mid-air. His eyes darkened, the pupils dilating until the irises were nearly black.

“Don’t call me that,” he warned. His voice was low and rough, vibrating with something that wasn’t quite anger.

Eliza paused, confused. “What? ‘Father’? Why?”

“You are not Azalea,” Dallas said. He leaned forward across the small table, closing the distance between them. “And when you say it, it means something entirely different.” He paused, his voice dropping to a whisper that scraped against her nerves. “Unless you mean it in a very different context.”

Eliza choked on a piece of croissant. She coughed violently, her face turning a deep crimson. The implication hit her like a physical blow.

Dallas watched her over the rim of his coffee cup, hiding a smirk.

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“Eat,” he said, standing. “We leave in ten minutes. I have a meeting, and you have a day off.”

He walked back into the suite, leaving Eliza alone on the balcony with the empty water glass and a heart beating so fast she felt dizzy.

Monday morning at S&D Design felt less like a creative studio and more like a bomb disposal unit where someone had just cut the wrong wire.

The air was thick with tension and stale coffee and something that smelled distinctly like fear.

Eliza sat at her desk, trying to focus on a restoration timeline for a cathedral in Brooklyn, but the shouting from the main floor made it impossible.

“Who approved these finish schedules? The material specifications are completely wrong for a heritage site! Do you have any idea what that means?”

Wayne, the Design Director, stood in the center of the open-plan office, his face a dangerous shade of purple. He held a large sample board in his fist, shaking it like a weapon.

“If a single inspector checks this, the entire project gets shut down! We’ll be liable for millions in delays and compliance violations! Who signed this?” Wayne roared.

He hurled the board onto the floor. It skidded across the polished concrete and came to a stop at Eliza’s feet.

She looked down. A project code was stamped in the corner: HYDE ESTATE RENOVATION — PHASE 2.

Her stomach dropped. This was Anson’s project.

Near the window, Dave Miller, a quiet junior architect, was shaking — pale and clammy. Eliza knew Dave. He was in the middle of a messy divorce and had filed

for bankruptcy last month. He had been distracted, making small errors. But this was catastrophic.

“Well? Who signed off on this?” Wayne demanded, scanning the room.

Dave opened his mouth. Tears were welling in his eyes. He looked like a man standing at the edge of a ledge. If he confessed, he would be fired. With his finances already destroyed, that would break him entirely.

“I did.”

The voice was cool, utterly bored, and cut through the panic like a knife.

Bella Rose stepped forward. Her neon pink hair was a bright beacon in the grey office. She was chewing gum, looking completely unbothered.

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Eliza shot to her feet. “Bella? No – you were on site visits last week –”

Bella fired her a sharp look, eyes narrowing. Shut up.

“I checked the final design package on Thursday,” Bella said, shrugging. “I missed the historical compliance code. My bad.”

Wayne turned his full fury on her. He looked genuinely confused – Bella was their best Graphic Lead. “You? You’re usually competent.”

“I’m human. Fix it or fire me,” Bella said, crossing her arms. She was betting on her own value. She knew she was harder to replace than Dave.

Wayne fumed. He dragged a hand through his thinning hair. “Fix it. By tonight. And you’re off the bonus list for the quarter.”

He stormed off, kicking a trash can on his way into his office.

The room exhaled.

Dave collapsed into his chair and put his head in his hands, sobbing quietly. “Bella – why?”

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Bella walked over and pulled a tissue from his own desk. “You have kids, Dave. I have a cat. I can afford a pay cut. Stop crying – it’s gross.”

Eliza crossed the room, her heart swelling with admiration and dread in equal measure. “That was insane. And incredibly brave.”

“It was stupid,” Bella admitted, popping a bubble. “But I hate watching grown men cry. It ruins my vibe.”

Eliza looked down at the sample board on the floor. The Hyde Estate.

“This is Anson’s project,” she said, unease coiling in her gut. “If the client finds out there was a compliance violation – even a corrected one – Wayne will need to offer someone’s head to save the contract. He’ll fire someone for real.”

“Yeah. And Anson Hyde is a litigious nightmare,” Bella noted. “He’d sue S&D just for sport.”

Eliza knew Anson. He wouldn’t just sue. He would use this to wound the firm, to wound Augustina, and by extension to wound Dallas. And he would dismantle Bella in the process.

“I need to make sure Anson doesn’t blow this up,” Eliza said. Her hands had gone cold.

“Eliza, don’t,” Bella warned. “He’s toxic.”

“He’s my problem,” Eliza said.

She pulled out her phone. Her thumb hovered over a blocked contact. She unblocked it.

Anson Hyde sat in his leather chair, nursing the bruise on his forehead. His phone buzzed.

He looked at the screen. Eliza.

A slow, predatory smile spread across his face. He had received the preliminary report from his insider at S&D ten minutes ago – he had known about the error before Wayne did. He had simply been waiting for the leverage to ripen.

He answered on the first ring.

“Hello, Eliza. Ready to talk?”

“We need to meet. About the project.” Her voice was clipped and professional.

“I have an opening for dinner,” Anson said, glancing at his empty schedule. “Le Bernardin. 8 PM.”

“Fine.” The line went dead.

Anson set the phone down. “Got you.”

Le Bernardin was quiet – the kind of expensive silence that money buys to keep the world out. Eliza entered the private dining room, her heels sinking into the plush carpet.

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Chapter 87:

Anson stood as she entered. He looked tired, the bruise on his forehead concealed beneath makeup, but his eyes were sharp and glittering with triumph.

“You came,” he said.

“I’m here for my team, Anson. The error has been fixed,” Eliza said immediately. She didn’t sit down.

Anson poured wine into two crystal glasses, the sound of the liquid obscenely loud in the quiet room. “Sit down, Eliza. You look expensive.”

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His eyes moved over her outfit – a cream silk blouse and tailored trousers from the wardrobe Dallas had provided. Jealousy flared in his gaze. She looked like a Koch.

Eliza perched on the edge of the chair, ready to bolt.

“The error is significant,” Anson said, taking a slow sip. “Negligence involving safety regulations. I could sue S&D for breach of contract. I could demand the lead designer be fired and blacklisted.”

“Bella took the blame, but it wasn’t her. It was a junior architect going through a personal crisis. Don’t punish her,” Eliza said. Her hands were clenched in her lap.

“I don’t care about Bella Rose,” Anson said. “I don’t care about the architect.” He leaned across the table. “I care about you.”

He paused, letting that sit. “I can overlook the mistake. I can ensure no one gets fired. I can even double the renovation budget – which would make you look exceptional at S&D.” He spread his hands. “I’m offering you a great deal.”

Eliza’s eyes narrowed. “What do you want?”

“Come home,” Anson said.

“I am married, Anson. I have a home,” Eliza stated. “Dallas is my home.”

Anson slammed his glass down. Wine sloshed over the rim and spread across the white tablecloth like a stain. “That penthouse is not your home. It’s a cage. He bought you.”

He took a breath and reached composure back with visible effort. Then he pulled a medical file from his jacket pocket and slid it across the table.

“Victoria is sick. Really sick this time,” he said. His voice dropped, and for once it sounded genuine.

Eliza froze. She looked at the file. It was a cardiologist’s report. Arrhythmia. Stress-induced cardiac failure.

“What?” she whispered.

“Her heart. The doctor says she needs rest and peace. She keeps asking for you,” Anson said. “She raised you, Eliza. You can hate me, but you can’t hate her. She’s dying.”

He reached into his jacket again and produced a second, thicker folder. He laid it beside the first. It was labeled Solomon Industries – Final Liquidation Report.

“And there’s this,” he said, his voice cooling. “Loose ends from your father’s company. Unsettled debts with some very unsavory lenders. Allegations of fraud that were buried with him. It would be a shame if any of that became public. It would destroy his name. Your name.”

Eliza felt the walls of the private room pressing inward. One week. Back in that house. Back in the place where her spirit had been slowly crushed over a decade.

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Chapter 88:

But if she refused? Bella would be fired. Dave would be ruined. Her father's legacy would be dragged through the mud. And if Victoria was truly ill – guilt, heavy and familiar, settled in her chest like a stone.

“Separate rooms,” she said. “No games. And I tell Dallas.”

“Tell him whatever you like. Just be there tomorrow,” Anson said, his smirk returning. He knew he had won. Her conscience had always been her weakness.

Eliza stood. Her legs felt heavy. “One week, Anson. That’s all. If you try anything, I leave.”

“I’ll have your old room ready,” he said.

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Eliza turned and walked out without touching the wine.

Anson watched her go. He picked up his glass and raised it in a quiet toast to the empty chair. “One week is all I need to break him.”

He reached for his phone and dialed. “Claudine? Proceed with phase two. She’s coming back.”

The penthouse was silent when Eliza returned — a vast, open silence that felt nothing like the stifling quiet of Le Bernardin.

Dallas was on the sofa, a book in his hand, but his eyes were fixed on the door. He looked up as she entered.

“You’re late. I tried to pick you up from the office. Security said you left at six,” he said. His tone was neutral, but his body was rigid.

“I had a client dinner,” Eliza said, omitting the rest. She wasn’t ready to say Anson’s name. Not yet.

She walked into the living room but didn’t sit beside him. She took the armchair, placing deliberate distance between them.

“Dallas, I need to talk to you.”

Dallas felt the shift immediately. He closed the book and set it down. “Go ahead.”

“Victoria Hyde is ill. A heart condition.” Eliza twisted her hands together. “I saw the medical report. It looks serious.”

“I can have the best specialists in the country at her door by morning. I can have a hospital wing named after her before the week is out,” Dallas offered at once.

“She needs me,” Eliza said softly. “Her daughter.” The word felt wrong in her mouth, but it was the role she had played for so long.

“I’m going to stay at Hyde Manor. For a week.”

The temperature in the room plummeted.

Dallas stood. It was a fluid, predatory motion. “No.”

“This isn’t a request, Dallas. She raised me. I owe her this,” Eliza said, rising to meet him.

“You owe Anson nothing. This is his doing,” Dallas said, his voice cold and razor-sharp. “He is manipulating you. Again.”

“It’s not just Victoria,” she confessed, her voice cracking. “There’s a situation at S&D. A mistake was made on his project. He’s threatening to have Bella fired. And he has documents — about my father’s company. Old debts, old allegations. He’ll destroy my father’s reputation if I don’t go back for a week. To keep Victoria calm.”

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Dallas turned to the window, his back to her. He looked out at the city he owned, the city he controlled, and understood that he couldn't control this. He couldn't fight a battle waged against a ghost. Anson wasn't threatening her life; he was threatening her father's memory — a wound Dallas knew he had no power to close.

"You are choosing them," he said. He didn't turn around.

"I am choosing to protect my friend and my family's name. I'll be back in seven days," she promised.

She crossed to him and placed her hand against his back. The muscles beneath his shirt were stone, rigid with suppressed rage.

“Trust me?” she asked.

Dallas turned. His eyes were full of storm clouds – grey, turbulent, dangerous. “I trust you,” he said. “I don’t trust him.”

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He stepped closer, looming over her. “If he touches you, Eliza – if he so much as breathes wrong in your direction – the contract won’t save him. I will burn that house to the ground with him inside it.”

“I can handle Anson,” she said. Too confidently.

Dallas didn’t reply. He walked past her toward the bedroom, and the air in his wake felt freezing.

“Pack your bags. My driver will take you,” he said over his shoulder.

A sharp pang of hurt bloomed in Eliza’s chest. He was shutting down – retreating behind the walls of ice he had built to survive his past.

“Dallas —”

“Go, Eliza. Before I change my mind and lock you in this tower,” he warned.

The next morning, Eliza stopped by Bella’s desk at S&D.

“The project is safe,” Eliza whispered. “Anson signed off on the corrections.”

Bella looked relieved, but her eyes dropped to Eliza’s suitcase and narrowed.
“What did you trade, Eliza?”

“Nothing I can’t handle,” Eliza smiled, forcing the brightness into it. “I’m just house-sitting for a week.”

“You’re walking into a trap,” Bella said flatly.

“I know,” Eliza said.

Outside, a black town car waited at the curb. Across the street, in a parked Maybach, Dallas watched Eliza load her bag and get in.

He gripped the steering wheel until the leather of his gloves creaked. His knuckles were white. He watched his wife drive away toward the enemy, and for the first time in years, he felt a flicker of something he had almost forgotten.

Fear.

The solarium of the Koch family estate was filled with orchids and the scent of old money. Augustina Koch sat in a wicker chair, sipping tea. Across from her sat Sloane Sterling, Zane's fiancée.

"You won't believe what Zane let slip after three martinis last night," Sloane whispered, leaning in.

Augustina looked bored. She adjusted her silk scarf. "Zane talks too much. Usually about golf."

"Dallas is married. Legally. Registered at City Hall."

Augustina dropped her porcelain cup. It struck the saucer with a violent crack and shattered into three pieces. Tea bloomed dark across the white tablecloth.

“He married her?” Augustina hissed. “I knew he was obsessed — he admitted as much to me — but to legally bind himself to that charity case? The one Anson discarded like rubbish? Without consulting the family?”

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Chapter 90:

She was on her feet, pacing the room, her voice dangerously low. “She’s playing him. She failed to secure the Hydes, so she aimed for a king. This is a power play — for our money, our name.”

She grabbed her bag. “I need to see this for myself. Where is he?”

A café near Hyde Manor. Evening.

Dallas sat in the back of his Maybach, parked in the shadows of an alleyway across from a pharmacy. He shouldn't be here. He had promised to let her handle it. But the tracking dot on his phone had been stationary for twenty minutes.

He watched through the tinted window.

Eliza walked out of the pharmacy clutching a white paper bag. She looked tired.

Then a figure stepped out from the shadows. Anson.

Dallas's hand went to the door handle. His entire body coiled like a predator spotting a rival near his mate. The sound that rose in his chest was barely human.

Anson stepped forward and grabbed Eliza by the shoulders. From Dallas's angle — through the rain-streaked glass and the distance — it didn't read as an attack. It looked like an embrace. It looked like Anson was pulling her in, and Eliza was simply standing there, letting him.

“Sir.” Weston’s voice came from the front seat, tight and controlled. “Ms. Koch’s car is approaching. Red convertible. Three o’clock.”

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Dallas froze. He looked in the rearview mirror.

Augustina’s bright red vintage Mercedes was rounding the corner, moving fast.

If she saw Dallas here — intervening in a street confrontation with Anson Hyde — the secret marriage would detonate tonight. His aunt would go after Eliza publicly. She would destroy Eliza’s position at S&D before Eliza had any chance to prove herself.

He had to choose: save Eliza now and expose her to the full force of the Koch family’s wrath, or wait.

His gaze snapped back to the street. He watched Eliza’s body shift — a subtle transfer of weight he recognized from their sessions together. Her right foot lifted and came down hard on Anson’s instep.

Anson flinched. His grip loosened. Eliza shoved him back a step, her face a mask of cold fury.

She was fighting. She didn't need saving in this particular moment — she needed him to win the war. He could protect her better by remaining a ghost. For now.

But the image of Anson's hands on her shoulders burned into his retinas like acid.

“Drive. Now,” Dallas ordered, his voice hollowed out and deadly.

“But, sir —”

“Drive.”

The Maybach slid into traffic just as Augustina's car sped past, missing them by seconds.

Dallas stared straight ahead. His chest heaved with suppressed violence. He had left her there. He'd had to. But it felt like severing his own arm.

“Anson Hyde,” he muttered to the dark interior of the car. “You have a death wish.”

“Don’t touch me!”

Eliza shoved Anson away with both hands. The force of it surprised him and he stumbled back.

“I am here for Victoria. Not you,” she said.

Anson rubbed his foot where she had stomped — again. “You’re feisty now. I like it. Did Dallas teach you that?”

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