

# Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

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Chapter 91:

“You’re disgusting,” Eliza spat. She clutched the pharmacy bag to her chest.

“I saw a car,” Anson said, glancing down the street where the Maybach had just disappeared. A smirk spread across his face. “Maybach. Tinted windows. Looked like Koch’s.”

Eliza turned quickly. The street was empty, rain slicking the dark asphalt.

“He was watching you,” Anson laughed – a cruel, grating sound. “And then he left. He saw us. He saw me holding you, and he ran.”

“He didn’t run,” Eliza said. But a cold knot of doubt tightened in her stomach. Why had he left?

“He abandoned you, Eliza.” Anson stepped closer, his voice dropping to a murmur. “He saw you with me and decided you were damaged goods. He doesn’t want to fight for you. He just wants the easy win.”

“He trusts me,” Eliza said. Her voice lacked the steel it had carried earlier.

“Does he? Or does he just not care enough to get his hands dirty?” Anson let the seed fall.

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“Let’s go inside.” He reached for her elbow.

Eliza sidestepped him. “I’ll walk. It’s two blocks.”

She turned and walked away as the rain began falling harder.

Anson didn’t follow on foot. He got into his car and drove slowly behind her, the headlights casting a long, distorted shadow of her across the wet pavement. He was stalking her, herding her like cattle.

Eliza felt the heat of the lights on her back. She felt trapped. She pulled out her phone. No messages from Dallas.

Did he see? Is he angry?

She reached Hyde Manor. The iron gates loomed overhead, gothic and imposing, like the entrance to a mausoleum.

Inside, Victoria was waiting in the parlor, wrapped in a cashmere shawl. She looked pale, but not dying.

“Eliza! You came!” Victoria exclaimed, extending a frail hand.

Eliza walked over and took it. “I’m here, Victoria.”

Anson entered behind them, shaking the rain from his umbrella. “Family reunion,” he said smoothly. “Just like old times.”

Eliza felt a chill that had nothing to do with the rain. She was in the wolf’s den.

Later that night, in her old guest room — redecorated with unsettling accuracy to how it had looked when she was sixteen — Eliza sat on the edge of the bed.

She texted Dallas.

Safe. Goodnight.

She waited. One minute. Ten minutes. An hour.

Finally, a message came through.

Sleep well.

Two words. No I love you. No Miss you. No Goodnight, wife.

Eliza stared at the screen until it went dark. He was angry. He had seen something, or he hadn't seen enough. The silence from the penthouse felt louder than the storm outside.

The Koch penthouse was quiet, but it wasn't peaceful. It was the silence of a held breath.

Azalea sat on the kitchen counter, kicking her heels against the cabinet doors. Mrs. Higgins chopped vegetables with aggressive force.

"Where is everyone? It's like a morgue in here," Azalea complained.

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“Mr. Koch is at the office. He hasn’t come home for dinner. Again,” Mrs. Higgins said, splitting a carrot clean in half. “Mrs. Koch is away.”

Azalea frowned. She hopped off the counter. “They had a fight. I can feel it. The vibes are rancid.”

She pulled out her phone and called Dallas. No answer.

She called Eliza.

“Hey! Mom!” Azalea chirped.

“Hey, Azalea,” Eliza answered, her voice low.

“Dad is starving,” Azalea lied without hesitation. “He hasn’t eaten all day. Mrs. Higgins made his favorite dim sum, but he won’t come home. He’s at the office, probably wasting away.”

“I’m at Hyde Manor, Azalea. It’s late,” Eliza said, hesitating.

“Please? If he gets an ulcer, that’s on you,” Azalea pressed. “He listens to you. Just drop off the food. You don’t even have to stay.”

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Eliza sighed. She missed him. The cold text from the night before had been gnawing at her all day. She needed to see his face.

“Okay. I’ll go.”

Eliza slipped out of Hyde Manor, telling the night nurse she had a work emergency at the firm. She took a taxi to Koch Tower, stopping at a late-night place to pick up actual dim sum. She arrived at the tower at eleven. The security guard looked up and nodded. “Good evening, Mrs. Koch.”

The elevator ride up felt like an eternity.

The CEO’s office was dark, lit only by the glow of the city skyline and the cold blue light of computer monitors. Dallas stood at the floor-to-ceiling window, looking out at the rain-soaked city, a glass of whiskey in his hand. He looked like a lonely king surveying a kingdom he no longer cared about.

Eliza knocked softly on the glass door.

Dallas turned. A flicker of surprise crossed his face — then his expression shuttered, the walls rising.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Azalea said you were starving.” Eliza held up the takeout bag.

Dallas checked his phone. He let out a quiet, humorless sound. “Azalea is manipulating you.”

“I know,” Eliza admitted, stepping into the room. “But I wanted to come.”

She walked to his desk and set the food down. The smell of shrimp dumplings filled the sterile air.

“Are we fighting, Dallas?” she asked directly.

Dallas looked at her. He took a slow sip of whiskey. “I saw him holding you.”

“And you saw me push him away,” she countered.

“I saw his hands on my wife,” Dallas said. His voice was dark and heavy with something that went beyond anger. “That is enough to make me want to tear the world apart.”

Dallas walked around the desk. He ignored the food. He moved with a slow, deliberate grace that made Eliza’s breath catch.

“You shouldn’t be here. It’s late,” he said. But his body language said the opposite – he was standing between her and the door.

“I’m going back to the Manor after this. I just wanted to check on you,” Eliza said.

“Going back to him,” Dallas corrected.

“To Victoria,” she insisted.

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Chapter 93:

“He lives there, Eliza. He breathes the same air. He walks the same halls.” Dallas stepped closer until she could smell the whiskey and cedar of his cologne. “Does it stop him that you lock your door?”

“I lock my door,” she said, the words coming out weaker than she intended.

He reached out and touched her cheek, his thumb brushing her lower lip — rough and warm. “I hate that you are there. I hate that you are under his roof.”

“It’s just a week. Then I’m back. Yours,” she whispered.

The word seemed to snap something inside him.

He set the whiskey glass down on the desk with a thud, gripped her waist with both hands, and pulled her flush against him.

“Mine,” he repeated, his voice a low growl against her ear. “Remember that when he looks at you. Remember who you belong to.”

Eliza’s breath hitched. The heat radiating off him was intense. Her hands found his shoulders and held on.

“I have to go, Dallas. The taxi is waiting,” she said. It was a lie — she had dismissed the car downstairs.

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“Let it wait,” he murmured. He leaned down, his lips brushing against her neck.

His phone rang loudly on the desk, shattering the moment.

Dallas froze. He pulled back slightly, cursing under his breath. He glanced at the screen. Augustina.

He rejected the call.

“I’ll drive you back,” he said, pulling away. He ran a hand through his hair, reassembling his control.

“No. If Anson sees you, he’ll escalate. I’ll take a cab,” Eliza said.

Dallas grabbed her hand. His grip was tight – almost painfully so.

“One week, Eliza,” he said, his eyes blazing. “If you are not back by Sunday midnight, I am coming to get you. With an army. I don’t care about scandals or matriarchs.”

“I’ll be back,” she promised.

She drew her hand away slowly. The friction left a warmth on her skin.

She walked to the elevator.

Dallas watched her go, feeling exactly like a man who had just sent a lamb back into a wolf's den armed with nothing but a promise.

He pressed the intercom button on his desk.

“Weston. Put a security detail on Hyde Manor. Twenty-four hours. I want eyes on every exit. If a fly enters her room, I want to know.”

Eliza stepped into the elevator and pressed the ground floor button. The doors began to slide shut, cutting off the view of Dallas standing in the shadows.

A hand blocked the door. The sensors triggered and the doors bounced back open.

Dallas strode in. The doors closed behind him.

“Dallas?” Eliza backed up until she hit the mirrored wall.

“I changed my mind,” he said.

He hit the emergency stop button. The elevator jolted to a halt between the fortieth and thirty-ninth floors.

The silence was sudden and absolute.

“You can’t leave like that,” he said, moving toward her.

“Like what?” she breathed. Her heart was pounding so hard she thought it might bruise her ribs.

“Like we are friends.” His voice dropped to a growl. “We are not friends.”

He cornered her, placing his hands flat against the mirror on either side of her head.

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Chapter 94:

“We are this,” he said.

He kissed her.

It wasn't gentle. It was a claim — hard, demanding, and desperate. He kissed her like a man trying to brand his name onto her soul.

Eliza melted. She grabbed his lapels and pulled him closer, opening her mouth and letting him in. It was a release of weeks of tension, of fear, of longing that had never been put into words.

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Dallas groaned low in his throat. He lifted her effortlessly, and her legs wrapped around his waist by instinct.

“I want you,” he murmured against her lips. “I want to keep you here. I want to lock the doors and never let you go back to him.”

“I have to go,” she gasped, even as she pressed herself closer.

Dallas kissed her one last time, stealing the breath from her lungs. Then he let her slide down slowly, her body dragging against his.

He smoothed her hair, running his fingers through the strands he had disheveled. He wiped a smudge from her lip with his thumb.

He turned and released the stop button.

The elevator hummed back to life. They stood in silence, chests heaving, watching the floor numbers descend. 30... 20... 10...

The doors opened at the lobby. The security guard glanced up, took one look at them, and quickly looked away.

“Go,” Dallas said, his voice rough. “Before I stop you again.”

Eliza walked quickly to the waiting cab. Her lips were swollen, her body still humming with electricity.

Dallas returned to the penthouse later, the adrenaline fading and leaving a dull ache in its place.

He heard sobbing from Azalea’s room. He knocked. “Azalea?”

“Go away!” she wailed.

Dallas opened the door. Azalea was sprawled across her bed, mascara streaked down her face, clutching her phone like it was a live grenade.

“I asked him,” she hiccupped. “I asked Liam to come with me to the gallery opening next week.”

Dallas stiffened. “And?”

“He said I’m a wonderful person, but that he’s not available. That his focus is — ‘elsewhere right now.’” She threw a pillow at the wall. “He said it like a business email. It’s because he’s in love with someone else. I just know it.”

Dallas walked over and sat on the edge of the bed. He put an arm around her, the gesture slightly stiff. “He’s an idiot.”

“He’s perfect!” Azalea sobbed into his shirt.

Dallas patted her back. But his mind was already moving. He knew exactly where Liam’s focus lay. He had watched the doctor’s eyes follow Eliza across a hospital room.

A new complication. If Azalea ever figured out that her crush was in love with her stepmother —

Dallas closed his eyes. One war at a time. First Anson. Then the doctor.

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Chapter 95:

Two days passed in a blur of tension and silence. Eliza spent her mornings and afternoons reading to Victoria, whose condition seemed conveniently stable yet persistently frail, and her evenings locking herself in the guest room the moment dinner was cleared. Anson kept his distance, lulling her into a false sense of security.

On the third night, a storm rolled in off the Atlantic.

Thunder rattled the windowpanes — a low, guttural growl that seemed to vibrate through the floorboards. Rain lashed against the glass, cutting the house off from the rest of the world.

Eliza sat up in bed, her spine pressed against the wooden headboard. The book in her lap had been open to the same page for an hour. The words blurred together, meaningless ink on white paper.

The air inside Hyde Manor was always heavy, but tonight it felt suffocating, as though the house itself were holding its breath.

She looked at the door.

She had locked it. She had checked it twice. The click of the deadbolt had been the only sound capable of bringing her heart rate below a panic.

Then the doorknob turned.

It was a slow, deliberate motion. The brass handle rotated to the right, met the resistance of the lock, and stopped.

Eliza stopped breathing. She stared at the handle, her fingers digging into the duvet.

Go away, she pleaded silently. Just go away.

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A metallic scratching sound followed — a key sliding into the mechanism. Anson must have kept master keys to every room in his family's mausoleum.

The lock clicked.

The sound was as loud as a gunshot in the silent room.

The door swung inward, revealing a slice of dark hallway. A figure stepped inside, silhouetted against the dim corridor light.

Anson.

He didn't turn on the light. A flash of lightning illuminated his face for a split second — his eyes were dark and heavy-lidded, his tie loosened around his neck.

The smell reached her before he moved. Scotch. Expensive, aged scotch, and the damp metallic scent of rain.

“Anson.” Eliza pulled the duvet up to her chin, her voice trembling despite every effort to make it hard. “Get out.”

He closed the door behind him. The lock clicked again.

“I couldn’t sleep,” he said. His words were slightly slurred, their edges softened by alcohol. “Knowing you’re just down the hall.” He took a step toward the bed.

“This is my room, Anson. We had an agreement,” Eliza said. Her eyes darted to the nightstand. Her phone.

“It used to be our room,” he corrected, moving closer, his movements uncoordinated but heavy. “Do you remember hiding in here during storms? You were terrified of thunder.”

“We were children, Anson. We aren’t children now.” Eliza shifted back until her shoulder blades met the headboard. “Leave.”

He ignored her. He reached the edge of the bed and sat down. The mattress dipped sharply under his weight, tilting her toward him.

Panic flared in her chest – hot and sharp.

She lunged for her phone on the nightstand. “I’m calling Victoria.”

Anson was faster. His hand shot out and snatched the device before her fingers could reach the screen. He tossed it casually onto the armchair across the room, where it landed with a soft thud on the velvet cushion.

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Chapter 96:

“Don’t involve her,” he said, his voice dropping an octave. “This is between us.”

“There is no us,” Eliza snapped. “There hasn’t been for years.”

Anson looked at her. In the dim light, his expression shifted — the anger dissolving into a twisted, pathetic nostalgia that was somehow more frightening than his rage.

“You still look the same,” he whispered. “My Eliza.”

He reached for her hand where it clutched the blanket. His fingers were cold and clammy.

Eliza reacted on instinct. She slapped his hand away. The sound cracked sharply through the room.

“Don’t touch me,” she hissed.

Anson pulled back as if burned. His face hardened. The nostalgia vanished, replaced by the familiar, ugly sneer of possession.

“You let him touch you,” he spat. “That sterile robot Koch. You let him put his hands on you.”

“He is my husband,” Eliza said coldly. “You are nothing to me. Know your place.”

The insult landed. Anson’s jaw tightened.

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He moved suddenly, lunging forward and grabbing her shoulders, pinning her against the headboard. His grip was bruising, his thumbs digging into her collarbone. The world narrowed to the stench of whiskey and his crazed eyes, inches from hers.

“I can make you forget him,” he muttered, leaning in. “I can make you remember who you really belong to.”

Eliza didn’t think. She didn’t hesitate. She drove her knee hard into his stomach.

Anson let out a wet, breathless groan and doubled over, his grip releasing as he clutched his midsection.

Eliza scrambled out of bed on the other side. Her feet hit the cold floorboards. She grabbed the heavy brass lamp from the nightstand and ripped its cord from the wall socket.

She held it like a club, chest heaving.

“Get out!” she screamed. “Get out, or I will scream so loud the neighbors in the next county will hear me!”

Anson straightened slowly, still clutching his side. He looked at the brass base in her hand, then up at her eyes.

He saw genuine fear — but he also saw hatred. Pure and unadulterated.

It seemed to sober him.

He stepped back, raising his hands in a mocking gesture of surrender. “You’re making a mistake, Eliza,” he said, his voice raspy. “He doesn’t love you. He’s using you.”

“The only mistake was coming back here,” Eliza said, her voice shaking with adrenaline. “Touch me again, and I leave tonight. Victoria or no Victoria. Deal or no deal.”

Anson held her gaze for a long moment. Then he turned and stormed out, slamming the door so hard the pictures on the wall rattled in their frames.

Eliza rushed to the door. She didn't trust the lock anymore.

She grabbed the heavy oak chair from the desk and jammed it under the door handle, wedging it tight against the floor.

She backed away until her legs gave out and she sank down against the wall, pulling her knees to her chest.

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She retrieved her phone from the armchair and tried to call Dallas, her thumb shaking as she tapped his name. The call wouldn't connect. Just static. She tried a text. A red Not Delivered warning appeared. She opened a browser. Nothing.

A low hum, almost imperceptible, seemed to emanate from the walls.

A signal jammer.

The realization hit her like a physical blow. This wasn't a drunken impulse. Anson had planned this. He had isolated her.

She ran to the window, hoping to see the headlights of the security detail Dallas had assigned to shadow her. The driveway was dark. The dense treeline of the Hyde estate swallowed everything.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway again — heavy and uneven. They stopped directly outside her door.

Eliza held her breath and gripped the brass lamp until her knuckles went white. The doorknob jiggled. The chair groaned under the pressure, but it held.

“You can’t hide in there forever, El,” Anson’s voice came through the wood, muffled and slurred. A heavy thud against the wall followed, then the sound of him stumbling away down the hall.

She wasn’t safe. She was trapped in a dead zone with a drunk man who believed he owned her. But she knew the layout of this house better than anyone. Morning would bring the staff – the cook, the cleaner.

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Witnesses.

Eliza didn’t sleep. She sat with her back against the wall farthest from the door, the lamp in her lap, watching the handle and counting the seconds until sunrise.

The first grey light of dawn filtered through the curtains, finding Eliza exactly where she had been all night – sitting on the floor, wide awake, her eyes gritty with exhaustion.

The house was silent. The terrifying footsteps had ceased hours ago.

Eliza moved slowly, her limbs stiff. She stood, quietly dismantled her barricade, and winced as the chair scraped lightly against the floor. She didn't change her clothes. She threw her coat over the navy blazer she had worn the day before, grabbed her bag, and opened the door a crack.

The hallway was empty.

She moved like a ghost down the stairs, every sense sharp and alert. Her only goal was the front door. Get to the car. Get out of the jammer's range.

She rounded the corner into the foyer and stopped.

Victoria was already at the dining table, sipping tea from a delicate floral cup, perfectly composed.

Eliza considered making a run for the door, but Victoria looked up.

“You look tired, dear,” Victoria said, her voice eerily normal. “Did the storm keep you up?”

Eliza tightened her grip on her bag and stepped into the doorway, keeping the exit in her peripheral vision. “Something like that.” She didn’t pour coffee. She didn’t sit. She stood ready to move.

The heavy double doors across the room opened. Anson walked in.

He looked terrible — sallow skin, bloodshot eyes, moving stiffly, favoring his left side. He froze when he saw Eliza standing there, fully dressed and clutching her bag.

“Going somewhere?” he asked, his voice rough.

“Leaving,” Eliza said sharply. “Move out of my way.”

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“Sit down, Eliza,” Anson said, the venom of the previous night worn away to something hungover and uncertain. He shook out his napkin and sat.

“No,” Eliza said.

Anson looked up, his eyes narrowing. “Excuse me?”

“I said no.” She took a step back toward the front door. “I don’t take orders from you, Anson. Not anymore.”

Anson slammed his fork down. “Is this about last night?”

Victoria looked between them, blinking. “What happened last night?”

“Ask your son,” Eliza said coldly. “Or don’t. I don’t care.”

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Anson shoved back his chair, the legs scraping loudly against the parquet. “You’re being dramatic. I came to check on you.”

“You cut the phone lines,” Eliza said, her voice rising. “You jammed the cell signal. You locked me in.”

“Technical difficulties,” Anson scoffed, waving a hand — but his eyes darted away. “The storm —”

“The storm didn’t install a military-grade signal jammer in the west wing,” Eliza cut him off. “You broke into my room. You were drunk. And you put your hands on me.”

Victoria gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. “Anson?”

“She’s lying,” Anson said quickly, his face flushing. “She’s hysterical.”

“I don’t love you, Anson,” Eliza said.

Her voice was quiet, but it carried through the large room like the toll of a bell.

The silence that followed was absolute.

Anson looked as though she had struck him. “What?”

“I don’t think I ever really did,” Eliza continued. “I think I was just grateful. I was a child who needed saving, and you were there. But gratitude isn’t love. And control isn’t protection.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying.” Anson moved around the table. “You love me. You’ve always loved me.”

“I love Dallas.” The words felt strange in her mouth — like a language she was suddenly fluent in. They felt right. They felt like a shield. “He treats me like a person, not a possession. He asks before he touches me. He respects me.”

Anson's face darkened to a violent shade of purple. "He bought you! He paid for you like a piece of furniture!"

"He saved me," Eliza said softly. "From you."

She turned and walked out of the dining room without looking back. She pushed open the heavy front door and stepped into the cool morning air. As she descended the front steps, her phone erupted with a flood of incoming messages. She was out of the jamming zone.

Five miles away, the atmosphere at the Koch family estate was equally tense.

Dallas sat in the library, enduring the mandatory Sunday brunch his parents imposed — a ritual he usually avoided. Today, he had been summoned.

Augustina Koch, his aunt and co-founder of S&D, cornered him by the fireplace.

"Sloane told me," Augustina said, her voice low and sharp. "About the marriage. Is it a merger? A tax shield? Why wasn't the board informed?"

Dallas poured himself a coffee from the silver service and took a measured sip, his face impassive. His mind was elsewhere — specifically on the security report he had received twenty minutes ago.

“It’s a marriage, Augustina. Not a corporate acquisition.”

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Chapter 99:

“To the Hyde orphan?” Augustina scoffed, adjusting her silk scarf. “She’s a gold digger, Dallas. Everyone knows she played Anson for years, milked that family dry, and then jumped to a bigger ship. She saw an opportunity and she took it.”

Dallas set his cup down on the saucer. The porcelain rattled. Coffee spilled over the rim.

He turned to his aunt. His expression was terrifyingly calm.

“Watch your tone,” he said. His voice was soft, but it carried the weight of a sledgehammer. “You are speaking about my wife.”

Augustina blinked. “I’m simply stating facts, Dallas. She has no assets. She has no name.”

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“She isn’t a gold digger,” Dallas said, stepping closer. “She doesn’t know how much I’m worth. She has never asked for a single thing beyond the contract.”

He paused, letting the silence stretch.

“I chased her,” he said. He watched the lie settle in the air — a necessary armor for Eliza’s reputation. The truth, that she had come to him broken and desperate, offering herself in a contract, was a vulnerability he would never expose. The world would believe he had conquered. It was a better story. It was a safer one for her. “Not the other way around.”

Augustina's eyes widened. "You? Chased?"

Dallas Koch didn't chase. He acquired. He conquered. He didn't chase.

"I wanted her," Dallas said simply. "So I pursued her. If you disrespect her, you disrespect me. And you know what happens when people disrespect me."

Augustina stepped back. She had watched Dallas dismantle competitors for less. She had never seen him protective over another person in her life.

"Fine," she said, smoothing her skirt and reassembling her composure. "If you're so certain of her — bring her to the Sterling party on Friday. Introduce her to society properly. Let's see if she survives our world."

"She will thrive," Dallas said.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. A text from Eliza: I'm out. Driving to the apartment.

Dallas exhaled a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. He glanced at the status report from his security chief: Signal re-established. Target mobile. Team holding at gate — stand down?

Last night, the signal from Hyde Manor had gone dark. His team had been minutes away from breaching the perimeter gates and starting a public war with the Hydes when Eliza's tracking dot began moving again on the map. She had handled it herself.

His confidence returned, stronger than before.

"She will be there," Dallas told his aunt. "And she will outshine everyone."

Night had fallen by the time Eliza shut down her computer at S&D headquarters. The open-plan office was deserted, the only light coming from the city skyline through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

She had buried herself in blueprints and vendor contracts for twelve straight hours. It was the only way to silence the echo of Anson's voice in her head.

But now, with the work done, the dread returned. The thought of going back to Hyde Manor made her skin crawl.

She couldn't do it. Not tonight. Her own apartment felt too empty, too exposed. She needed to breathe.

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Chapter 100:

She texted Victoria: Meetings ran late. I'll stay in the city tonight to be close to the office. See you tomorrow.

She didn't wait for a reply. She took the elevator to the garage, got into her car, and drove. But she didn't drive to a hotel.

Her hands moved automatically on the wheel, guiding the car toward an address etched in her memory. The address on the key Dallas had given her weeks ago.

Maple Lake.

It was an hour from the city, down a winding road through dense forest. As she approached, she half-expected the gate to be locked, but the tall iron gates swung open on their own, recognizing her license plate. Dallas must have pre-programmed it.

The driveway was lined with ancient maples, their leaves rustling in the wind. The house emerged from the darkness — a stunning structure of glass and stone suspended over the edge of the lake.

She parked. The house was dark, save for a soft, warm glow coming from the backyard.

She walked around the side of the house. The air was cooler here, crisp and clean.

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Then the smell hit her. Roses — a singular, powerful fragrance.

She stepped into the backyard and gasped. It was even more beautiful than she remembered. A sea of white blooms in the moonlight, hundreds of them, their pale petals like captured stars. Winchester Cathedrals. Her mother's favorite.

In the center of the garden, sitting on a stone bench facing the lake, was a figure. The tip of a cigar glowed orange in the dark.

Eliza stopped. "Dallas?"

He didn't jump. He didn't turn around immediately. He took a slow drag, exhaled a plume of smoke, and then turned his head.

She walked closer, gravel crunching under her boots. "Insomnia?"

"Something like that," he said. His voice was rough and tired. He stubbed the cigar out in a crystal ashtray on the bench beside him.

"I couldn't stay there," Eliza admitted, wrapping her arms around herself. "It felt like a cage."

"I know," he said. He shifted on the bench, making space.

Eliza sat down beside him. She didn't touch him, but she could feel the heat radiating from his body. It was grounding.

"They're blooming early this year," she said, gesturing to the rows of white roses. "You kept them alive."

"The gardener did. But I chose the varieties," he said. He nodded toward a small, separate plot near the water's edge, where a cluster of different blooms glowed softly in the moonlight. "I added those recently."

Eliza recognized the delicate, apricot-colored cups immediately. "Juliet Roses? Those are incredibly rare."

"The white ones are a memory," Dallas said, his voice dropping. "Those are for you."

Eliza's heart gave a traitorous flutter. She ignored the implication and kept her eyes on the black water of the lake.

The silence between them wasn't heavy. It was comfortable. After the violence and accusations of the last twenty-four hours, the quiet settled over her like a balm — and the words tumbled out before she could stop them.

“I told Anson I love you,” she blurted.

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