

Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 121:

Jared struck the steering wheel with the flat of his hand. “Ask your new family.” He glanced at her in the rearview mirror, his eyes wild and restless. “I was head of security for Chapman Retail. Six figures. Pension. A life. Then your husband decides to nuke the stock for some ‘market adjustment.’ The company folded overnight. I lost everything. My house. My wife left me.”

The realization hit Eliza like a physical blow. The Chapman contingency. Dallas had destroyed Claudine’s family business because Claudine had slapped her. He had burned a kingdom for her dignity.

And now the ashes were choking her.

“He didn’t know about you,” Eliza said, her voice trembling. “It wasn’t personal against you.”

“He didn’t care!” Jared screamed, swerving into the oncoming lane before correcting. “That’s worse! To him, I’m just a number on a spreadsheet. Collateral damage. Well – let’s see how he likes his own collateral damage.”

At the same moment, Dallas walked into the private vault beneath Koch Tower. He bypassed the biometric scanners with an override code only he possessed. The heavy steel door hissed open. Weston ran in behind him, breathless.

“Sir, the board meeting is still in session — they need —”

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“Cancel it. And get Zane on the line.” Dallas didn’t look back. He seized two black tactical duffel bags and began sweeping stacks of high-denomination bills from the shelves, then moved to a separate safe and retrieved a hardened-steel briefcase containing the bearer bonds. “Tell Zane to coordinate with my primary security detail. I want eyes on every route out of the city, but they are not to engage. Surveillance only. No police.” He checked his watch, his mind a cold and furious machine. “The data center breach was a ghost — a diversion. Find out who planted it and who it traces back to.”

Weston stopped. He studied the look on Dallas’s face — a look he hadn’t seen since their time in extraction zones overseas. It was the face of a man who had already accepted that he might die, and no longer cared.

“Is it — her?” Weston asked softly.

Dallas didn't stop loading the bags. The bundles of cash and bonds were heavy and dense. Fifty million dollars. An obscene amount of money. It was nothing. It was paper.

"He took my heart, Weston," Dallas said, his voice fracturing for a fraction of a second before hardening back into steel. "I'm going to get it back."

He zipped the bags, hauled them over his shoulder, and walked.

Zane Sterling met him in the underground garage, a tablet in hand displaying a city-wide surveillance grid. "The team is mobilized and staying dark. We have no visual on the vehicle yet."

"Tracker active on her phone?" Zane asked.

"No," Dallas said, throwing the bags and briefcase into the trunk of the fastest car in his fleet — a matte black Aston Martin. "He turned it off. We wait for the coordinates."

His phone pinged.

Dallas went still. He raised the device. A single location pin dropped onto the map.

The Old Shipyard. Pier 4.

He stared at the screen, his eyes burning with a cold, terrifying intensity. He got into the driver's seat and started the engine. The roar filled the concrete garage like a war cry.

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The warehouse smelled of the ocean — not the fresh, breezy scent of the shore, but the rotting, stagnant smell of dead fish and oil. Wind howled through gaps in the corrugated metal walls, making the shadows shudder and dance.

Jared dragged Eliza across the floor. The wood beneath her feet was soft and pulpy with decay. Through the gaps in the planks, she could see the dark, churning water of the Hudson River twenty feet below.

He shoved her into a rusted metal chair and tied her ankles together, leaving her wrists still bound behind her back.

“Comfortable, Mrs. Koch?” Jared sneered, pacing in front of her. The gun in his waistband gleamed under the single swaying bulb.

He pulled out a digital camera. “Time for an insurance policy.” He hit record. The red light blinked.

Jared grabbed a fistful of her hair and forced her head back. Pain radiated down her neck.

“Tell him you’re scared,” he commanded.

Eliza stared into the black lens. She thought of Dallas. She thought of the way he had looked at her that morning — as though she were the only sunrise he ever wanted to see. She would not give this man the satisfaction of her fear. She would not let Dallas see her break.

“Don’t come, Dallas,” she said, her voice clear and defiant. “It’s a trap.”

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Jared snarled. “Wrong line, princess.”

He swung his hand. The slap cracked through the empty warehouse. Eliza’s head snapped to the side and the taste of copper flooded her mouth.

The video cut.

Jared tapped his phone. “Sent. To your husband. And just for fun —” He scrolled through her contacts. “A special delivery for your old keeper.”

The file shot across the city’s network — a small packet of digital cruelty dispatched in two directions at once. One copy was bound for a speeding Aston Martin. The other found its mark in the quiet, suffocating opulence of Hyde Manor, where Anson Hyde’s phone buzzed on a mahogany desk.

He pressed play.

He watched the man grab her hair. He heard her brave, defiant voice. Then he saw the slap.

The crystal tumbler in Anson's hand shattered. Whiskey and blood dripped onto the expensive Persian rug.

He rewound the video and zoomed in on the man's face. Solder. The disgruntled guard he'd fired years ago.

"He touched her," Anson whispered. A terrifying rage built in his chest — less about her safety than about the violation of what he considered his. He crossed to his desk, unlocked the bottom drawer, and pulled out a snub-nosed revolver.

His thumb found a number he had memorized long ago.

That chaotic rage traveled through the airwaves and pierced the cold, focused silence Dallas had built around himself inside the roaring Aston Martin. His phone rang — Anson's name blazing on the dashboard display. He answered, the call blaring through the speakers.

"I saw the video," Anson's voice came through, ragged. "Solder sent me the location. The old Chapman docks. Pier 4."

“Stay away, Hyde,” Dallas said, his voice a low growl barely contained over the engine’s scream. “You’ll get her killed.”

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“She is my family!” Anson yelled, the sound of his own engine roaring in the background as he sprinted toward his Porsche. “I’m going!”

“You’re a liability. If you show up —”

Anson threw the phone onto the passenger seat and floored the accelerator. He wasn't going to let Dallas be the hero. Not this time.

“Zane,” Dallas said into his comms, gripping the steering wheel until the leather groaned. “Anson Hyde is inbound to the location — armed and unstable. Have overwatch track him. Do not intercept unless he poses a direct threat to the hostage.”

While two men, driven by two very different kinds of possession, raced toward the same point on the map, the object of their obsession was fighting her own quiet battle in the warehouse.

Eliza watched Jared pace, the sting of the slap still burning in her cheek. She needed to understand him.

“Claudine didn't send you, did she?” she asked softly.

Jared stopped. “That witch? She cut me loose without a dime when the company tanked. Said security was a ‘luxury.’”

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“So this is just about money?” she pressed.

“It’s about showing them,” Jared said, staring down at the dark water through the floorboards. “The rich don’t bleed different. You think you’re gods because you have black cards. But gravity works the same on everyone.”

He checked his watch. A cold, empty smile spread across his face.

“He’s here.”

Eliza’s heart hammered against her ribs.

Jared walked to the edge of the loading bay and cocked his pistol. The sound was loud, mechanical, final. Then another sound cut through the howl of the wind – engines. Not one, but two, approaching from different directions. Tires screeching on gravel.

Jared crossed to the rusted window frame and looked out. His smile widened into something malicious.

“Well, look at that,” he laughed. “Two birds.”

The air at the docks was freezing, carrying the full bite of the Atlantic. Dallas stepped out of the Aston Martin with his hands raised. The duffel bags and briefcase sat at his feet. He wore no jacket — just a black dress shirt that whipped around his torso in the wind.

“I’m here!” Dallas shouted, his voice cutting through the gale. “Let her go!”

Before Jared could respond, Anson’s Porsche screeched to a halt ten yards behind Dallas. Anson scrambled out, a revolver shaking in his hand.

“Drop it, Solder!” Anson yelled, aiming wildly toward the warehouse shadows.

“You idiot,” Dallas hissed under his breath.

Jared stepped out from the darkness of the warehouse entrance. He had Eliza in front of him, his arm locked around her throat and the barrel of his gun pressed hard against her temple.

Eliza’s face was pale, a dark bruise forming on her cheekbone. Her eyes found Dallas’s. There was fear in them — yes — but also an overwhelming relief.

“Put the gun down, hero,” Jared shouted at Anson, “or her brains paint the dock.”

Dallas turned his head slightly, fixing Anson with a glare. “Put it down. Now.”

“I have a shot,” Anson argued, his voice pitched high and unsteady. “I can take him.”

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Chapter 124:

“You don’t!” Dallas roared. “Put it down!”

Anson hesitated, his gaze moving between Jared and Eliza. He saw the terror in her eyes. Slowly, reluctantly, he lowered the revolver.

“Kick it into the water,” Jared ordered.

Anson kicked the gun. It skittered across the concrete and splashed into the dark river below.

“Now the bags,” Jared said to Dallas.

Dallas kicked the duffel bags forward and slid the briefcase after them. They came to rest ten feet from Jared.

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“The money and the bonds,” Dallas said. “Take it. Leave.”

Jared didn't look at the money. He looked at Dallas — at the power radiating off him, the tailored shirt, the unbowed defiance in his posture.

“Kneel,” Jared commanded.

The wind whistled through the cranes.

Dallas went still. He was a king. Kings did not kneel. He had built an empire on never bowing to anyone.

Jared pressed the gun harder into Eliza’s temple. She whimpered – a small, broken sound.

Dallas dropped.

His knees struck the concrete hard. He didn’t flinch. He didn’t look away. He knelt in the dirt with his eyes locked on Jared’s face.

“You too, Hyde,” Jared said, swinging the gun toward Anson.

Anson stared at the filthy ground. He looked at Eliza. Trembling with rage and humiliation, he knelt beside Dallas.

“Look at the high and mighty,” Jared gloated, pulling out his phone with his free hand and hitting record. “You destroyed my life for a rounding error. Now I own yours.”

“You have what you came for,” Dallas said, his voice low and dangerous. “Let her walk.”

“I’m going to kill you all,” Jared said, with the casual ease of a man deciding what to have for dinner. “But first – the husband chooses.” He smiled, a grotesque expression in the dim light. “Her – or him?” He leveled the gun at Anson.

“Take me,” Dallas said instantly. “Let them go.”

“Wrong answer,” Jared growled. “I hate martyrs.”

He moved the gun away from Eliza’s head and trained it on Anson.

Eliza’s eyes dropped to Dallas’s hand resting on his thigh. His fingers were tapping a restless rhythm against the fabric of his trousers. Tap-tap – tap-tap-tap. It wasn’t a code she knew, but a language she felt in her bones. It was the rhythm of his impatience – the sound he made just before he acted, in the boardroom or in traffic. It meant: The waiting is over.

It was a signal.

Do something.

Jared's attention had shifted to Anson. His grip on her loosened slightly as he prepared to fire.

Eliza didn't think. She didn't calculate. She reacted.

She lifted her foot — clad in the heavy leather boot Dallas had bought her for the restoration site — and brought it down on Jared's instep with every ounce of strength she had.

Bone crunched.

Jared howled, the sound ripping through the night. His aim wavered.

“Tango is destabilized — take the shot!” Dallas screamed into his wrist comm, launching himself forward from his knees.

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Chapter 125:

A suppressed crack echoed from the top of the rusted crane looming overhead. From his perch, the lead marksman on Dallas's team watched the target stumble, the angle for a clean headshot vanishing in an instant. The man was flailing — a danger to the hostage. He took the only shot available: a high-risk disabling strike to the shoulder holding the weapon.

The bullet struck Jared and spun him violently. The impact threw him backward, off balance — but his hand was still tangled in the ropes binding Eliza's arms.

“No!” Dallas yelled, sprinting across the concrete.

Jared fell backward over the edge of the rotted dock. And he took Eliza with him.

“Dallas!” Eliza screamed, the sound tearing from her throat.

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Splash.

They hit the black, freezing water with a bone-jarring impact.

Dallas didn't break stride. He reached the edge of the dock and dove into the darkness without a moment's hesitation.

Anson scrambled to the edge and peered into the void, paralyzed. “Eliza!” he shouted – but his feet stayed planted on the safety of the concrete.

Underwater, the world became chaos. The cold was a physical assault, a thousand needles driving into Dallas's skin all at once. It was pitch black.

He forced his eyes open, salt stinging them, waiting for them to adjust. He saw the thrash of bubbles.

Eliza was sinking. The weight of her soaked clothes and the ropes dragged her steadily downward. Jared, bleeding and panicked, was kicking against her, using her body as a raft to keep himself afloat.

Dallas drove himself downward, his powerful strokes cutting through the current. Rage fueled him. Oxygen was a luxury. Reaching her was not.

He tackled Jared – seized the man by the throat and wrenched him away. Jared struck out in desperation, but Dallas was a force beyond stopping. He delivered a single, brutal strike to Jared’s temple. The man went limp and began to sink into the dark.

Dallas turned to Eliza. She was barely thrashing now. Her eyes were wide, staring into the void. A thin stream of bubbles escaped her lips – her last breath.

He reached her. He pulled the tactical knife from his ankle sheath and cut – precise, desperate slashes through the ropes at her wrists and the cord at her ankles.

She didn’t move. Her eyes drifted shut. Her mouth opened, drawing in water.

Dallas grabbed her waist, pulled her flush against him, and kicked hard for the surface, his lungs burning as though filled with acid.

Don't you dare die. Don't you dare.

They broke the surface. Dallas gasped, air rushing into his starved lungs. He choked, spitting saltwater.

"I've got you," he rasped, holding her head above the water. She was limp in his arms, heavy and cold.

He swam to the rusted iron ladder on the side of the pier. His security chief was already there, reaching down. He hauled Eliza up by her jacket and laid her onto the dock. Dallas pulled himself up and collapsed beside her.

"She's not breathing!" Anson yelled, hovering over her, his hands uselessly flapping.

Dallas shoved him hard in the chest. "Back off!"

He positioned himself over Eliza, tilted her head back, and cleared her airway. He interlocked his hands over her sternum.

“Come on, Eliza,” he growled. “Breathe.”

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Chapter 126:

He pushed. One, two, three, four. He felt a sickening crack beneath his palms — the cartilage of a rib giving way. He didn’t stop.

He pinched her nose and covered her mouth with his own, breathing life into her. Her lips were ice cold.

He pumped again. He would break every bone in her body if it meant her heart would beat.

“Don’t leave me,” he choked – a broken, guttural sound that stilled every man on his team. Dallas Koch did not cry. “Please, Eliza.” He breathed into her again.

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A convulsion wracked her body. Water expelled from her lungs. She coughed – a violent, hacking sound – and then gasped, choking on the sweet, freezing air.

Dallas sat back on his heels, his chest heaving.

Eliza opened her eyes. They were unfocused, glassy. The world was spinning.

“Hospital,” Dallas ordered, his command voice returning, though it shook at the edges. “Now.”

He gathered her shivering, soaked body into his arms, holding her as though she were glass that had already shattered – carefully, completely, as if the pressure of his grip alone could keep her from breaking further.

The hospital room was dim, lit only by the rhythmic green glow of the heart monitor. The air smelled of antiseptic and floor wax.

Eliza drifted in a gray fog. Her chest ached with every breath — a sharp, bruising pain from the CPR. She felt heavy, anchored to the bed by exhaustion and trauma.

Outside the room, chaos reigned. Dallas, still in his wet clothes, water pooling around his expensive shoes, was being held by a police officer.

“I need to see her,” Dallas demanded, his voice raw.

“Mr. Koch, we need your statement regarding the shooting,” the officer insisted, blocking the door. “It’s procedure. And the doctors are still assessing her.”

Inside the room, Anson sat in the chair beside the bed. He had gotten in while Dallas was being questioned. He hadn’t bothered with flimsy excuses — he had made a single call to a member of the hospital’s board of directors, a man who owed the Hyde family a significant favor. The order came down to the nurses’ station: Mr. Hyde was to be considered family and given access. It was a gross overreach. In the chaos, it had worked.

Eliza stirred. Her hand, searching blindly, found a warm hand resting on the bedrail.

She gripped it.

Her vision was blurred, swimming with shadows. She made out the silhouette of a man. Broad shoulders. Dark hair.

Her mind, desperate for comfort, supplied the identity. The man who had jumped. The man who had breathed life back into her.

“You came,” she rasped, her voice barely a whisper.

Anson went still. He looked down at her hand gripping his. Guilt flickered in his eyes, but he didn't pull away.

“Eliza?” he said softly.

The door handle turned. Dallas pushed it open, having finally cut through the red tape.

He stopped dead.

He saw Eliza clutching Anson's hand. He saw Anson leaning over her, his posture close and protective.

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Chapter 127:

Eliza squeezed the hand tighter, her eyes half-closed, still lost in the haze of concussion and medication. "I love you," she whispered. The words were weak but perfectly clear. "I love you so much. Don't leave me."

She was talking to the man who had saved her. She was talking to her husband.

But Dallas — exhausted, hypothermic, and emotionally stripped bare — didn't know that.

The words hit him like a physical blow, tearing through the armor he had just barely rebuilt. He stood frozen in the doorway, water dripping from his cuffs onto the linoleum floor.

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She loves Anson. Even after I saved her. Even after I nearly died for her — she wakes up, sees him, and tells him she loves him.

Anson looked up. He saw Dallas standing in the doorway. He saw the devastation in his eyes — a look of total, absolute defeat.

Dallas's expression went blank. The light behind his eyes died. He turned without a sound and walked away.

The door clicked shut.

Eliza blinked, fighting the blur. Her vision cleared slightly. She focused on the face in front of her.

It wasn't Dallas.

"Anson?" she asked, confusion flooding her voice.

She pulled her hand away as if she had been burned. She looked around the empty room.

"Where is Dallas?" she asked, panic rising in her chest.

Anson looked at the closed door. He saw the opportunity. It was cruel. It was petty. He was desperate.

"He left, Eliza," Anson said.

"Left? But — I told him —" She was confused. Hadn't he been here?

"He was here. Just for a moment," Anson lied smoothly. "He saw us. And he left."

Eliza's heart sank like a stone. He left? Did he hear me? Does he not care?

"Why?" she whispered, tears leaking from the corners of her eyes.

"He said the debt is paid," Anson said, twisting the knife. "He said the contract is fulfilled."

Eliza closed her eyes. The sharp pain in her ribs was nothing compared to the hollow ache opening up inside her.

He saved me to pay a debt. Not because he loves me.

The silence in the room was heavy and suffocating.

Dallas walked into their apartment on the Upper West Side still soaking wet. His clothes clung to his skin, freezing and heavy, but he felt nothing. He left a trail of water across the marble floor.

He walked straight to the bar.

He grabbed a bottle of Macallan 50 — a collector's item, worth more than most cars. He didn't bother with a glass. He uncorked it and drank straight from the bottle.

The liquid fire burned his throat, searing the back of his mouth. It was a welcome sensation. The only thing that felt real.

I love you.

Her voice echoed in his head, over and over. A loop of torture. I love you. Don't leave me. Spoken to Anson Hyde.

Dallas roared. He hurled the bottle across the room. It smashed into a Ming vase, shattering both. Amber liquid and porcelain shards exploded outward.

He grabbed a heavy crystal lamp and drove it into the mirror above the fireplace. Glass rained down.

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Chapter 128:

“Five years,” he laughed — a bitter, broken sound. “Five years of waiting. Of planning. And she still chooses him.”

He collapsed onto the leather sofa, shivering violently. The adrenaline had worn off and the hypothermia was creeping back in. He didn't care. Let the cold take him.

Hours passed. The sun began to rise, painting the city in cruel shades of pink and gold.

The elevator doors opened. Augustina Koch rushed in.

“Dallas! The hospital called — they said you signed out against medical advice! Are you out of your mind?”

She stopped. She took in the wreckage — the shattered glass, the reek of expensive scotch saturating the air — and then Dallas himself, curled on the sofa, pale as death.

“Dallas?” She crossed to him and pressed her hand to his forehead. “My God, you’re burning up.”

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Dallas opened his eyes. They were red-rimmed and empty.

“She loves him, Auggie,” he slurred.

“Who? Eliza?” Augustina frowned.

“She looked at him. She held his hand. She said it.” Dallas closed his eyes again, turning his face into the leather cushion. “I heard her.”

“You misunderstood,” Augustina said sharply. “She was concussed. She was traumatized.”

“I was there! I heard it!” he shouted, his voice cracking. He coughed — a wet, hacking sound that rattled his chest.

Augustina pulled out her phone and dialed Dr. Liam Sumner.

“Get over here,” she ordered. “He has acute hypothermia and what looks like developing pneumonia. And he’s heartbroken.” She hung up and reached for a cashmere blanket, draping it over him.

“You idiot,” she whispered, brushing the damp hair from his forehead. “You saved her life. You jumped into the Hudson in November. And you’re going to let Anson Hyde take the credit?”

Dallas caught her wrist. His grip was weak.

“Let her go,” he whispered. “If she wants him — let her go.”

He passed out.

Augustina looked at her nephew — the strongest man she knew, the man who made Wall Street tremble, undone by a girl.

Her eyes narrowed.

I'm going to find out the truth.

She left Liam to tend to him when he arrived and headed straight for the elevator. She needed to look Eliza Solomon in the eye.

Meanwhile, at the hospital, Eliza stared at the door. Waiting.

Anson played the attentive companion, feeding her ice chips.

“Here,” he said softly.

Eliza turned her head away. She felt hollow. The hero was gone, and the silence from Dallas was louder than any rejection she had ever known.

Sunday morning light filtered through the hospital blinds, harsh and unforgiving. Eliza sat up in bed, her head pounding. Every breath sent a jolt of fire through her ribs.

Anson was asleep in the visitor's chair, his head lolling back. He looked exhausted – or maybe he was simply playing the part.

The door flew open.

Azalea burst in, her eyes red and her face blotchy from crying.

“Eliza!” She rushed to the bed and hugged her carefully, mindful of the ribs.

“Azalea,” Eliza breathed, hugging the girl back. It felt grounding.

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Chapter 129:

Anson woke with a start. "Azalea, keep it down. She needs rest."

Azalea ignored him completely. She pulled back and looked at Eliza. "I was so scared. Daddy is —" She stopped, biting her lip.

"How is Dallas?" Eliza asked, gripping Azalea's arm. "Is he all right? Why hasn't he come?"

"He's sick," Azalea said, tears spilling over. "Really sick. Liam is at the apartment. He says it's severe pneumonia from the water."

Eliza froze. "The water?" She looked at Anson. "You said he stayed on the dock. You said he paid the debt and left."

Anson stiffened. He stood and straightened his wrinkled jacket. “I said he was safe.”

“Safe?” Azalea spun on him. “He jumped in! He fought Jared underwater! He cut the ropes! He gave her CPR on the dock while you – you stood there and watched!”

Eliza turned to Anson. The betrayal settled in her stomach like ice.

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“You let me believe he didn’t care?” she whispered. “You let me believe he left me?”

“I helped!” Anson said, his voice rising. “I drove there! I was there!”

“But he jumped,” Eliza said.

The realization washed over her. The silhouette she had seen through her blur of concussion and cold. The strong hands. The desperate voice pleading, Don't leave me.

It was Dallas. It had always been Dallas.

"Get out, Anson," she said. Her voice was low and shaking with rage.

"Eliza, I'm your family," he pleaded, reaching for her.

"Get. Out." She pointed a trembling finger at the door. "Now."

Anson glared at Azalea, his jaw tight. He grabbed his coat and stormed out.

Eliza took Azalea's hand. "Why hasn't he come? If he saved me – if he cares –"

Azalea looked down at the linoleum. "Aunt Auggie says he thinks you don't want him."

"What? Why would he think that?"

“He came here. Yesterday. Before he got sick.” Azalea’s voice was small. “And then he went home and drank until he passed out. He kept saying — he kept saying you chose Anson.”

Eliza’s breath caught. The memory surfaced: waking up, the hand she had reached for, the words that had slipped out of her before her eyes could focus.

I love you.

“Oh my God.” Eliza covered her mouth. “He heard me. He heard me tell Anson I loved him. But I thought it was him — I was half-blind.”

“I need to see him.” She swung her legs toward the edge of the bed. A sharp, blinding pain tore through her chest and she cried out, falling back against the pillows.

“You can’t walk,” Azalea said gently, easing her back. “You have a concussion and cracked ribs. You’ll pass out.”

“Then call him. Please,” Eliza begged. “I need to tell him.”

Azalea pulled out her phone, dialed, and put it on speaker.

It rang. And rang. And rang.

You have reached the voicemail of Dallas Koch.

“He shut everyone out,” Azalea said, hanging up. “Weston took his phone.”

Eliza sank back into the pillows, tears streaming down her face.

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Chapter 130:

He had saved her life. He had nearly died for her. And she had broken his heart entirely by mistake.

Monday morning. The door opened and Augustina Koch walked in.

She looked impeccable in a cream suit, her hair perfectly coiffed, but there were dark circles under her eyes. She carried an air of judgment that lowered the temperature in the room.

“Mrs. Koch,” Eliza greeted her nervously, trying to sit up straighter.

“Eliza,” Augustina said coolly. She didn’t ask how Eliza was feeling. She drew the chair closer and sat. “We need to talk about Dallas.”

“Is he all right?” Eliza asked at once.

“He’s alive,” Augustina said bluntly. “Physically. Liam has him on a powerful antibiotic drip, but it will take time to work. Emotionally – he is a crater.”

Eliza looked down at her hands. “I know he saved me. I know I confused things.”

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“Confused?” Augustina raised an eyebrow. “You told Anson Hyde you loved him while holding his hand. That is not confusion. That is cruelty.”

“I thought it was Dallas!” Eliza said, her voice rising. “I couldn’t see. I felt a hand and I thought it was my husband.”

Augustina studied her face, searching for a lie. She found only desperation.

“Do you love him?” Augustina asked. The question hung in the air, heavy and absolute. “Dallas?”

Eliza went still.

She thought of the prenup. She thought of the “debt.” She thought of the way he had walked out without a word, convinced she wanted Anson. She thought of what he had said to Augustina: Let her go.

If she said yes and he wanted to be free — was she only trapping him? Was she just a burden, a girl who always needed saving?

“I don’t want to hurt him anymore,” Eliza faltered.

“That is not an answer,” Augustina pressed.

“If he wants to be free — if he believes I love Anson — maybe it’s better,” Eliza said softly, tears falling onto the sheets. “Maybe he deserves someone who isn’t broken.”

“Better?” Augustina stood up abruptly, her chair scraping loudly against the floor. “He almost died for you, and you think a divorce is better?”

“I didn’t say divorce!” Eliza sobbed. “I just — I don’t want to be a burden. I don’t want him to stay out of obligation.”

Augustina looked at the crying girl. She heard the self-doubt, the fear of not being enough. But filtered through the raw fury of an aunt who had watched her nephew choose to drown rather than lose this woman, it sounded like an excuse. Like a surrender. He needed a woman who would fight for his kingdom — not a girl who would abdicate out of fear.

Her voice turned to ice. “I see. You are still the girl who needs saving — not the woman who stands by him.”

She turned toward the door. “I will tell him you want what is better for him.”

“Wait!” Eliza called out — but the door closed.

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