

Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 141:

Mrs. Albright produced a lease from her purse with impressive speed. Eliza signed. She was now, officially, a tenant of a shell company owned by Dallas Koch.

“Welcome home, dear.” Mrs. Albright pressed the heavy brass key into her palm.

Eliza smiled, feeling a genuine weight lift from her chest. “My own place.”

While Eliza went to check the water pressure in the bathroom, Azalea texted Dallas: Bird in the cage.

Dallas texted back: Good job. The Porsche is yours.

Eliza returned from the bathroom. “I should invite Dallas to dinner. To show him I’m safe. To show him I can do this.”

Azalea suppressed a laugh behind a well-timed cough. “Yeah. Great idea.”

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Eliza looked around her new kingdom, feeling the quiet pride of independence.

She had no idea she was living in Dallas's dollhouse.

Zane Sterling sat in a leather armchair at the Sterling Club, swirling a martini.

“You won't believe what Dallas did,” he told Vanessa Star, who was touching up her lipstick in a compact mirror.

“Bought another island?” Vanessa guessed.

“Bought an entire apartment complex just to rent one unit to his wife for pennies,” Zane laughed. “He bought The Aurelia.”

Vanessa choked on her drink. “That's — psychotic. And sweet.”

“He’s monitoring the thermostat remotely,” Zane said, shaking his head. “He’s completely obsessed.”

Unit 4B, The Aurelia.

Eliza was cooking. She had gone grocery shopping and kept it simple — pasta, tomatoes, basil. She stirred the sauce and reached for her phone.

I moved in. It’s great. Want to come for dinner? 7pm.

Dallas was sitting in his black Maybach, parked down the block. He watched the light in her window. A dry, suppressed cough escaped him — a lingering reminder of the chill that had never quite left his lungs since the river.

He read the text. A slow smile spread across his face.

I’ll be there, he replied.

Eliza immediately began tidying up. She wanted to impress him. She wanted to prove she wasn’t a charity case — that she could maintain a home on her own terms.

She set the table. Two plates. She almost lit candles, then thought better of it. Too romantic. She put them back in the cabinet.

At seven o’clock exactly, the doorbell rang.

Eliza opened the door.

Dallas stood in the hallway holding a bottle of wine — Château Margaux 2015, worth more than her rent for the year.

“Nice place,” he said smoothly.

“Isn’t it? I got so lucky,” Eliza beamed, stepping back to let him in.

Dallas walked inside and acted as though he had never seen the furniture he had personally approved from a catalog three hours ago.

“This sofa —” he ran a hand across the fabric. “Good quality.”

“It came furnished! Can you believe it?” Eliza said, turning back to the stove.

Dallas suppressed a smile. “Incredible luck.”

They sat down to eat. The atmosphere was strange — domestic and charged at the same time.

“So,” Dallas said, pouring the wine, “you’re on your own now.”

“Yes.” Eliza paused. “It feels quiet.”

“Too quiet?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Peaceful,” she corrected.

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The overhead lights flickered. Then, with a sharp zap, they went out entirely. The apartment plunged into darkness.

“Oh no,” Eliza breathed. “A power outage? On my first night?”

Dallas checked his phone. It wasn’t him this time — the streetlights outside were dark too. A blown transformer somewhere on the block.

“Stay here,” Dallas said, his voice calm and unhurried in the dark. “I’ll check the fuse box.”

He stood and moved through the room with an unnerving, perfect ease — navigating without hesitation, without stumbling. He had always liked the dark.

The lights flickered back on after twenty minutes. Dallas had “fixed” it — which had amounted to flipping the breaker back on once the city grid reset.

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Dinner wound down. The wine bottle sat half-empty on the table.

“It’s getting late,” Eliza hinted, carrying the plates to the sink.

Dallas settled back on the sofa and loosened his tie. “I drank too much wine. Can’t drive.”

Eliza glanced at the bottle. He had barely finished a glass and a half. This was a man who drank scotch like water.

“You have a driver,” she reminded him. “Weston is outside.”

“I gave him the night off,” Dallas said, without missing a beat. “He has a date.”

Eliza sighed. She knew he was lying. She also didn’t want him to leave.

“You can take the couch,” she said.

Dallas smirked. “Generous.”

Eliza went to shower, locking the bathroom door behind her, her heart pounding.

The hot water unknotted her shoulders and washed away the stress of the move — the smell of cardboard boxes, the long day, all of it. She wrapped a fluffy white towel around herself.

Then she realized she had left her pajamas in the bedroom.

He’s on the couch, she thought. I’ll just run across the hall.

She opened the bathroom door. Steam billowed out into the narrow hallway.

Dallas was not on the couch.

He was leaning against the wall directly between the bathroom and the bedroom, jacket removed, sleeves rolled to the elbow.

Eliza let out a soft, startled sound and clutched the towel to her chest.

Dallas's eyes traveled down her bare legs. They darkened instantly.

“You —” she stammered.

“I was looking for water,” he said. His voice came out low and rough.

He stepped closer. The hallway was too narrow. Eliza backed up until her shoulders met the doorframe.

“You’re supposed to be asleep,” she whispered.

“I can’t sleep,” he admitted. He placed both hands flat against the wall on either side of her head, boxing her in. “Not when you’re this close.”

The smell of him — expensive soap, wine, and warmth — filled her senses entirely.

“Even if you’re only here out of gratitude,” he murmured, a raw vulnerability in his voice that stunned her, “your body is mine tonight.”

“What are you talking about?” she breathed. “It’s not gratitude.”

Her words hung in the air between them, fragile and honest. He searched her eyes and found no deception — only a bewildered sincerity that cracked his composure open.

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“Call me,” he said, his voice dropping to near silence. “My title.”

Eliza trembled. The towel was slipping. She didn't care.

“Husband,” she breathed.

Dallas groaned — a sound of pure possession. He brought his lips down onto hers. It wasn't a gentle kiss. It was hungry, desperate, and claiming.

Eliza melted. Her hands found his hair and gripped tight.

He lifted her. Her legs wrapped around his waist instinctively. A sharp wince crossed his face as the stitches in his side pulled — a fleeting shadow she didn't see.

The towel fell to the floor.

“Bedroom,” he growled against her mouth. “Now.”

Sunlight hit Eliza’s face. She woke slowly, warm and heavy.

She was in her new bed at The Aurelia. But she wasn’t alone.

Dallas’s arm was draped over her waist, holding her with the easy certainty of a man who had no intention of letting go. He was asleep, his face buried in the crook of her neck. In sleep, he looked younger – less like a titan of industry, more like simply a man.

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She tried to ease out from under his arm.

His grip tightened instantly.

“Where are you going?” he mumbled, his voice thick with sleep.

“Work,” she whispered, trying to untangle her legs from his.

“S&D doesn’t start until nine,” he murmured into her skin. “Stay.”

“Not S&D,” she corrected him softly. “I have to go to The Gilded Lily. The manager needs me to sign off on the new menu.”

“Call in sick.” He kissed her shoulder, refusing to move.

“I can’t call in sick, Dallas,” she laughed, finally wiggling free enough to sit up. “I own the place now, remember? You made me the boss.”

Dallas opened one eye. A lazy, satisfied smirk spread across his face. “Best investment I ever made.”

“You are impossible,” Eliza said – but she couldn’t stop smiling.

Dallas got up, entirely unbothered by the morning chill or her gaze. Eliza looked away, color rushing to her cheeks despite everything that had happened the night before.

“You’ve seen it all before,” he said, moving toward the kitchen. “I’ll make coffee.”

Eliza watched him go. He moved through her small apartment with the quiet confidence of a man who had already made himself at home in it. This domesticity was dangerous. It was addictive.

In the kitchen, the coffee machine hissed to life.

Dallas leaned against the counter, waiting for it to brew. He picked up his phone — but he didn’t open his emails. He opened a secure app connected to his personal lifestyle management team.

He had noticed the empty spaces in Eliza’s closet that morning. It bothered him. She was still living half-in, half-out, one foot always pointed toward the door.

He tapped a pre-set command: Initiate Protocol Nest. Transfer all remaining personal effects from Penthouse Guest Suite to Aurelia Unit 4B. Execute immediately.

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He slid the phone back onto the counter just as the coffee finished. He wouldn't ask her. He would simply make it happen. Merging their lives wasn't a question for him — it was an inevitability.

Eliza came out in a robe, tying the sash tight. Dallas turned and held out a steaming mug.

“Black. Two sugars,” he said.

She took it and wrapped both hands around the warmth. “This feels real,” she whispered, entirely unaware that he had just moved her entire life into this apartment with a single tap.

“It is real,” Dallas said.

Saturday arrived, and Eliza was enjoying a quiet morning when a frantic knocking rattled her door.

“I’m running away from home!” Azalea announced the moment Eliza opened it. She was clutching a backpack and looked absolutely furious.

“What happened?” Eliza ushered her inside.

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“Daddy hired a new math tutor. Mrs. Trunchbull’s evil twin,” Azalea complained, flopping onto the sofa. “She smells like mothballs and despair. Can I live here? It’s so chill.”

Eliza laughed. “Sure. But your dad will find you.”

“He’s busy buying countries or whatever,” Azalea said, waving a dismissive hand.

They spent the afternoon baking cookies. Eliza was terrible at it — she burned the first batch — but Azalea laughed, and they ended up eating the dough straight from the bowl. It was fun, easy, and warm in a way that made Eliza’s chest ache with quiet longing. This was what a family felt like.

At 5:00 PM, the lock beeped.

Dallas walked in, using his own key.

Eliza stared. “You have a key?”

“The landlady gave it to me. Emergency contact,” he said, without so much as a flicker of hesitation. Eliza felt a jolt of alarm — a ghost of Anson’s intrusions — but it was immediately followed by a conflicting, unwelcome warmth.

He looked at Azalea. “Tutor. Now.”

“No! Save me, Eliza!” Azalea scrambled behind her, using her as a human shield.

Dallas crossed his arms. He looked like a storm cloud dressed in a designer suit. “Azalea, you have a Calculus 101 midterm on Monday. Skipping tutorials at NYU is not an option.”

“Calculus is useless! I’m a Fine Arts major, not some business drone!” Azalea shot back.

Dallas glanced at Eliza, one eyebrow raised. “Is that so?”

Eliza felt the pressure bearing down on her. “Math is important for... mixing paint ratios?” she offered weakly.

Azalea was unimpressed.

“Go home, Azalea. The car is downstairs,” Dallas said.

Azalea pouted. “You’re a dictator.”

She grabbed her bag and stomped toward the door. “Bye, Eliza!” she called over her shoulder.

The door clicked shut. Dallas exhaled, rubbing his temples.

“She’s a handful,” he admitted.

“She’s lonely, Dallas,” Eliza said gently. “She just wants to spend time with people. She hates that empty penthouse.”

“She needs discipline,” Dallas insisted.

“She needs balance. Let her stay for dinner next time,” Eliza suggested.

Dallas looked at her for a long moment. “You’re pleading for her?”

“I’m pleading for the family,” she corrected herself.

A smile crossed his face — rare, genuine, the kind that reached his eyes.

“Family,” he repeated quietly. “I like that word.”

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Eliza couldn’t stop thinking about Azalea. The look on the girl’s face as she’d stomped out the door stayed with her long after the apartment fell quiet.

She decided to intervene. She invited Dallas to dinner again – to discuss Azalea, she told herself.

Dallas arrived promptly. He brought dessert: a rich chocolate cake. He had remembered she loved chocolate.

They ate. Eliza was nervous.

“So, about the tutor,” she began, pushing her fork around her plate.

“She put glue on his chair,” Dallas said dryly. “He quit this afternoon.”

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Eliza pressed her lips together to smother a laugh. “Okay. That’s... creative.”

“Eliza, she needs to focus on her university finals,” Dallas said, his tone shifting to something more serious.

“She will. But maybe you’re being too hard on her. She told me you froze her trust fund.”

“She bought a boat. A yacht. She’s nineteen years old and she spends like she’s forty,” Dallas explained.

Eliza blinked. “Okay. That’s... excessive.”

“But still,” she pressed on. “Ease up. Let her breathe.” She met his eyes. “Let her come over here.”

Dallas leaned back in his chair and studied her with that steady, unreadable gaze. “You want me to be lenient?”

“Yes.”

“What do I get in return?” Always the businessman. Always the deal.

“What do you want?” Eliza asked, wary.

“You,” he said. “Every weekend. At the Penthouse. With us.”

“You want me to move back part-time?”

“I want Azalea to see us together. Stability,” he said — though it was only half the truth. He wanted her in his space, in his life, in every room that had felt too quiet since she left.

Eliza turned it over in her mind. It meant compromising her independence. But she loved Azalea. And honestly, she missed the penthouse. She missed him.

“Fine. Weekends,” she agreed.

“One more thing,” Dallas added.

“Say it again. My title.”

Eliza felt heat rise to her cheeks. “Husband.”

Dallas smiled. “Deal. I’ll unfreeze her allowance. Partially.”

Eliza had the distinct feeling she had just made a deal with the devil — a very handsome devil. Dallas glanced at his watch and rose from the table.

“It’s Friday night. The weekend starts now.”

“Wait – now?” Eliza’s eyes went wide.

“Pack a bag, wife.” He extended his hand. “We’re going home.”

The smell of bacon was the first thing to breach Eliza’s consciousness. Not the polite, distant scent of a hotel breakfast, but the heavy, savory aroma of fat hitting a hot pan in the very next room.

She blinked open her eyes. The ceiling was high, coffered, and aching familiar. The penthouse. She was in her old guest room – the one that had been her gilded cage and then, gradually, her sanctuary. She had agreed to come back for the weekend, a step forward that now felt like a leap.

Eliza sat up and pushed the duvet off her legs. The bedroom air was cool, a sharp contrast to the warmth she could sense waiting beyond the door. She pulled on her robe and knotted the sash tightly around her waist, as if armoring herself.

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She walked barefoot down the long hallway, her steps silent on the polished marble.

Dallas stood at the stove in the vast, sun-drenched kitchen. He had rolled the sleeves of his white dress shirt up to his elbows, exposing the corded muscles of his forearms. He held a spatula with the same precision he likely held a signing pen – or a weapon. He didn't turn when she entered, but his posture shifted slightly, acknowledging her presence.

"You cook?" Eliza asked. Her voice was rough with sleep. She leaned against the cool marble of the island and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Survival skill," Dallas replied, his voice a low rumble. He flipped a pancake with a casual flick of his wrist. It landed perfectly. "Blueberry or plain?"

Eliza studied his back. This was the man who could buy a country on a whim, standing at a stove and flipping pancakes against the entire Manhattan skyline.

“Blueberry,” she said.

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He plated the food and turned around, sliding the plate across the island toward her. Three pancakes, perfectly round, dusted with powdered sugar, with bacon arranged alongside them in a neat row. He picked up his own plate without ceremony.

“Coffee's in the pot,” he said.

They ate in a silence that was startlingly comfortable. The only sounds were the quiet scrape of forks against ceramic and the distant hum of the city stirring awake far below. Eliza felt a knot in her chest loosen — one she hadn't known was there.

Then the intercom buzzed.

The sound was sharp and jarring, tearing through the peace like a blade through canvas. Eliza's fork clattered onto her plate. Her heart slammed against her ribs with an immediate, visceral force.

Dallas didn't flinch. He rose and crossed to the wall panel, pressing the talk button. "Yes?"

"Mr. Koch." The head of security's voice crackled through the speaker, crisp and professional. "Apologies for the intrusion. There is a man at the curb. Anson Hyde. He's insistent on waiting for Ms. Solomon." A brief pause. "He has gifts. He's causing a minor scene, sir."

The blood drained from Eliza's face. The taste of blueberries turned to ash on her tongue.

Dallas's eyes darkened, the blue in them shifting to the color of a deep ocean trench. "I'll have him removed."

"No."

Eliza stood. Her legs felt unsteady, but her voice held. She looked down at her hands — they were trembling. She curled them into fists, pressing her fingernails into her palms until the sharp sting brought her back to herself.

“If you remove him, he’ll only come back,” she said, her voice low and controlled. “He thrives on being the victim. He needs to know there is no hope left.”

Dallas looked at her carefully, reading her face for fear. He found fire instead.

“I’ll be watching,” he said. It wasn’t a threat. It was a promise. A tether.

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Eliza nodded. She turned and walked back to her room without hesitation. The robe came off and was replaced by black trousers and a silk blouse. She pulled a sharp, tailored trench coat from the closet and belted it tightly. It was armor. She

wasn't going down there as the girl he had shaped; she was going down as the woman he had lost.

The elevator ride felt like an eternity. She watched the numbers count down, and with each passing floor, the heat in her chest expanded – hot, steady, and suffocating.

The lobby doors slid open. The doorman, reading the tension in the air, held the glass door for her and stayed close.

Eliza stepped out onto the sidewalk.

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The wind was biting, whipping her hair across her face. Anson stood near the curb, leaning against his black sedan. He looked wrecked. His usually immaculate suit was wrinkled, his tie loosened, a shadow of stubble darkening his jaw. In his hands, he held a small, iconic blue box. Tiffany.

“Eliza,” he breathed when he saw her. He straightened immediately, a flicker of relief crossing his face. “You came down.”

“To tell you to leave,” she said. Her voice was cold. She remained on the top step of the entrance, looking down at him.

Anson took a step forward and extended the box like an offering. “I brought your favorite. A vintage bracelet – the one you admired.”

“I don’t want it,” she said. “I don’t want anything from you.”

“Stop punishing me, El.” His eyes were wide, desperate. “I know you’re angry about Claudine. I ended it. I threw her out – for you.”

Eliza laughed, a sharp, brittle sound. “You threw her out after Dallas had already turned her and her family into ash. You don’t get credit for taking out the trash after the building has already burned down, Anson.”

“It was business!” His voice cracked, drawing the slow attention of passersby on the street. “My heart was always yours! I did it for us!”

“Your heart is a commodity I can’t afford,” Eliza said. “And frankly, I don’t want it.” She held his gaze. “Go home, Anson. Before you truly lose everything.”

Anson looked stunned. He lunged forward, reaching for her hand.

“Don’t touch me.” Eliza recoiled, her voice sharp as a cut.

The doorman stepped forward. But Anson had already frozen.

His eyes had drifted past Eliza, to the glass doors of the lobby behind her.

She didn’t turn around. She didn’t need to. She could feel the presence radiating through the glass like a current.

Dallas stood there — a dark silhouette against the bright lobby lights, perfectly still, watching. He looked like a predator waiting for an excuse to move.

Anson went pale. In that split second, the vast chasm of power between himself and Dallas Koch became undeniable.

“Leave,” Eliza commanded one last time.

She didn’t wait for a response. She turned her back on him and walked through the glass doors. Dallas stepped aside to let her pass, his gaze never leaving Anson’s figure on the street.

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As the heavy doors clicked shut — sealing out the wind, the noise, and everything behind her — Eliza caught one last glimpse of Anson through the glass. He was still standing at the curb, clutching his useless blue box: a man who had understood, too late, that he had been fighting a war he had already lost.

The heavy glass doors clicked shut, severing the cold street from the warm, golden light of the lobby. The sound was final — like a book slamming closed.

The adrenaline that had kept Eliza upright evaporated in an instant. Her knees buckled, and she swayed, the marble floor tilting toward her.

She didn't hit the ground.

Dallas moved off the pillar he had been leaning against. He was there in two long strides, his hand shooting out to grip her elbow, steadying her before she could fall. His touch was firm and grounding — a stark contrast to the desperate, clawing grasp Anson had reached for just moments ago.

"I've got you," Dallas murmured, his voice low against the quiet hum of the lobby. He didn't ask if she was all right; he could feel the tremors running through her arm. He turned her away from the street, shielding her from Anson's view through the glass, and wrapped a heavy arm around her shoulders, pulling her into his side as they walked toward the private elevator.

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The doorman stepped aside respectfully, averting his eyes from Eliza's pale face.

Dallas pressed the call button. The doors slid open at once, as if waiting for them.

They stepped inside. As the metal doors sealed them into the quiet, upward-moving cocoon, Eliza finally let out a breath that sounded dangerously close to a sob.

She leaned against the cool wood paneling of the elevator car and watched the floor numbers climb. 10... 20... 30...

Dallas didn't speak. He simply stood close enough that their arms brushed – a silent, steady wall.

When the doors opened directly into the penthouse foyer, the familiar scent of cedar and rain greeted them. Dallas led her to the living room sofa and guided her down gently. Then he walked to the kitchen and returned with a glass of water.

“Drink,” he said.

Eliza took the glass. Her hands were shaking badly enough that water sloshed over the rim. She drank it in one long swallow, the cold liquid shocking her system back into focus.

“He looked... pathetic,” she whispered. “I used to be terrified of him. Today, he just looked small.”

“He is small,” Dallas said. He stood over her like a sentinel.

Her phone, left on the coffee table, buzzed. The screen lit up.

Anson: Victoria Hyde is asking for you. She's sick, Eliza. Really sick. If you don't come, you're killing her.

Eliza stared at the message. A wave of cold fury washed through her. The audacity of it – the same tired, pathetic lie, deployed again as if she were still the girl who would crumble under its weight. The fact that he believed her foolish enough to fall for it was more insulting than the lie itself.

“He says his mother is sick,” she said, her voice laced with ice. She tossed the phone onto the sofa as though it had burned her. “He’s using her. Again. Does he have no shame?”

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Dallas picked up the phone and read the message, his face impassive. Then he scrolled through something on his own phone.

“Victoria Hyde is currently at the Clinique La Prairie in Switzerland,” he said calmly. “She checked in two days ago for a revitalization package. I saw the flight manifest.”

Eliza looked up, her expression hardening. “He lied.” It wasn’t a question.

“He’s desperate,” Dallas said, deleting the message with a single swipe before tossing the phone back onto the cushion. “Desperate men lie.”

Eliza rubbed her arms against a sudden chill. “I feel dirty. Like his obsession is clinging to me. Like slime.”

“Go shower,” Dallas said, his voice gentling. “Wash him off.”

Eliza nodded. She went to her room and turned the water on as hot as she could bear, scrubbing her skin until it flushed pink, trying to scour away the memory of Anson's desperate, hollow eyes.

When she emerged, wrapped in a towel, the apartment was quiet. Dallas was in his study, the door standing partially open. She could hear the low murmur of his voice on a conference call.

She didn't want to disturb him. But the silence in the living room pressed in on her. Her mind refused to settle. You're killing her. Even knowing it was a lie, the words had barbed themselves somewhere tender — a phantom ache from a wound that had long since scarred over.

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She wandered to the massive bar cart in the corner.

A bottle of bourbon sat there. The amber liquid caught the last of the afternoon light.

Just one glass, she thought. To numb the nerves. To stop the shaking.

She poured two fingers into a heavy crystal tumbler and drank it neat, without ice.

The burn was immediate and harsh, searing her throat. But as it settled in her stomach, it radiated a warmth that pushed back against the chill. Like a controlled fire, burning away the residue of the Hydes. She swirled the remaining liquid and watched the light refract through it. The tension in her shoulders began – slowly, slightly – to loosen.

“I don’t owe them anything,” she whispered to the glass. “I paid my debt.”

She took another small sip, savoring the burn this time. It wasn’t about getting drunk. It was about reclaiming some feeling of control, even if it had to come from a bottle.

The study door opened. Dallas walked out, rolling his neck slowly. He stopped when the faint scent of alcohol reached him.

He scanned the room and found her on the rug near the floor-to-ceiling windows, the city sprawling endlessly behind her. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright and slightly unfocused.

“Eliza?” He approached her carefully, the way one might approach a wounded animal.

She looked up and offered a small, wobbly smile — a sad, broken thing with no humor in it at all.

“Hey, husband,” she said, her words carrying a faint slur as she gestured with the half-empty glass. “Just... contemplating the view.”

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Dallas crouched down in front of her. He took in the bottle on the cart, the tumbler in her hand, the way she was listing gently to one side.

“You’re drinking,” he said.

“I’m coping,” she corrected him, raising a finger toward his chest. Her aim was slightly off; she poked his shoulder instead. “I’m erasing him. One sip at a time. It’s... efficient.”

Dallas said nothing. He simply stayed crouched in front of her, steady and unhurried, watching her with an expression she couldn’t quite read – the same patience she had seen earlier when he’d handled Azalea’s tantrum with a quiet blend of sternness and barely concealed amusement. The patient protector behind the ruthless CEO. A side of him she hadn’t expected.

Dallas’s jaw tightened. He reached out and gently pried the glass from her fingers.

“No more,” he said.

“You’re no fun,” Eliza pouted, her lower lip trembling. “You’re just like... like a statue. A very handsome, expensive statue.”

She tried to stand, but her legs refused to cooperate. She stumbled forward and collided with his chest.

He caught her easily, his arms wrapping around her waist to steady her. She felt small against him, fragile in a way she would never allow herself to be when sober.

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Eliza rested her cheek against his shirt. He smelled of sandalwood and starch — clean and grounding, cutting right through the bourbon.

“Why are you so hard?” she mumbled, poking his chest through the fabric.

“Muscle, Eliza,” he said dryly, holding her upright.

She looked up at him. Her eyes were swimming, filled with unshed tears that magnified the hazel flecks in her irises.

“I hate owing people,” she confessed, her voice dropping to a whisper. “Anson made me feel like a beggar for ten years. Every meal, every dress — it was a debt. Now I owe you.”

“Taking care of my wife isn’t a debt, Eliza,” Dallas said firmly, his voice a low, possessive rumble. “It’s a fact.”

“Screw the facts!” The sudden volume startled even her. She slapped a hand over her mouth, eyes going wide. “Oops.”

She lowered her hand slowly. “I just want someone to be on my side. For free. Not because of a deal. Not because of pity.”

Dallas looked down at her. If she were sober, he might have told her that he had been on her side since the day he saw her reading in the garden, five years ago.

“I am on your side,” was all he said.

Eliza studied his face, searching for the lie. She didn’t find one.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled herself up onto her tiptoes. “Prove it.”

She drew his face down toward hers. It was clumsy and uncoordinated. Her lips landed on his cheek, then slid to the corner of his mouth.

Dallas went very still. Every instinct in him roared to kiss her back, to close the remaining distance completely. But not like this. Not while she was trying to drown a ghost in bourbon.

“Eliza,” he said, his voice strained. “You’re drunk.”

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