

Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 191:

“No.” Eliza swung the wooden leg – not to strike, but hard enough to put a wall of air between them. “I am not going with you. I am married. I love Dallas. And I am done with you.”

Anson went still.

The rejection landed squarely in his chest. He looked at the wood in her hand, then at the contempt in her eyes. The hero narrative he had constructed in his head collapsed piece by piece.

His face changed. The love drained out of it and was replaced by something petty and vindictive.

“Fine,” he said. “You want independence? You want to wait for your white knight?” He backed toward the doorway. “Stay here then. Rot in the dark.”

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He grabbed the door handle and slammed it shut.

“Anson!” Eliza rushed forward.

From outside, she heard movement — not the turn of a key. Something heavier. He had grabbed a length of timber from the debris pile near the wall and was jamming it into the exterior handle, wedging it firm against the stone frame.

“Let me out!” Eliza screamed, both fists pounding the door.

“Think about it, Eliza!” he shouted back through the wood. “Think about who really saved you when the cold sets in!”

She heard his footsteps on the gravel, quick and angry, fading fast. Then the roar of an engine turning over and retreating into the night until there was nothing left but silence and the wind.

He had left her.

Again.

Eliza slid down the door until she was sitting on the floor, her forehead resting against the rough wood. The silence of the garden pressed back in, heavier than before. The moon had disappeared behind passing clouds, and the studio was pitch black.

She was alone. Truly alone.

“Dallas,” she whispered, pulling her knees to her chest. “Please.”

She closed her eyes and tried to think. The windows were reinforced with wire mesh — she remembered now. Buck had secured this building like a vault to protect the art. There was no way through the glass.

CRASH.

The sound of shattering glass exploded from the back of the studio.

Eliza screamed, scrambling backward on her hands and knees. The wire mesh covering the high rear window had been kicked inward. A dark figure vaulted through the opening and landed in a low crouch amidst the shards and rising dust. He was wearing black tactical gear, a mask covering the lower half of his face.

Eliza grabbed a shard of glass from the floor and held it out in front of her, hand shaking violently.

The figure straightened. He reached up and pulled the mask down.

Blue eyes. Furious, terrified, beautiful blue eyes.

“Dallas,” Eliza sobbed, the glass dropping from her fingers.

He crossed the room in two strides. He didn’t ask if she was all right – he needed to feel it. He dropped to his knees in front of her, his hands moving over her face and arms, checking for blood, for broken bones.

“Did he touch you?” His voice was raw, torn. “I saw him leave. I saw him storm out. Did he hurt you?”

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Chapter 192:

“He tried to make me go with him,” Eliza choked out, throwing her arms around his neck. She pressed her face into his tactical vest. It was hard and cold from the night air, smelling of rain and gun oil. “He locked me in. He said he bought me.”

“He bought nothing,” Dallas said, pulling her against him so tightly it almost hurt. He buried his face in her hair. “I had a sniper on him the moment he stepped out of his car. If he had dragged you out of here, he wouldn’t have made it to the gate.”

Eliza pulled back and looked at him. “You were watching?”

“I hacked the perimeter cameras,” Dallas said, his thumb brushing a smudge of dirt from her cheek. “I was a mile out when your tracker went dead. I ran the rest of the way.”

He stood and pulled her up with him. “We’re leaving. The car is waiting on the service road. Zane is there.”

“The door is jammed,” Eliza said.

Dallas looked at it. He didn’t bother with the handle. He stepped back, raised his boot, and drove it into the lock mechanism with a force that shook the entire wall. Wood splintered. The door flew open, and the timber Anson had wedged against it clattered uselessly into the dark.

Dallas took her hand. “Let’s go home.”

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They ran through the overgrown garden, shadows stretching around them like reaching hands. Neither of them looked back at the rotting house, or the studio full of ghosts.

At the service road, a black SUV sat idling with its lights off. Zane Sterling climbed out from the driver’s seat and pulled the rear door open. “Target secure?” he asked, one hand resting on his holster.

“Secure,” Dallas said, and helped Eliza in.

He climbed in beside her. As the car pulled away and accelerated toward the city lights, Dallas drew out his phone.

“What are you doing?” Eliza asked, resting her head against his shoulder.

“Sending a message. To Anson. And to Buck.”

“What message?”

“That the sale is cancelled,” Dallas said. “And the eviction notice has just been served.” He hit send.

Eliza closed her eyes.

She was safe. But in the quiet of her mind, a new fear was already taking root. Dante Luna was still out there. And Anson had just humiliated him by buying her out from under him.

“Dust. Mold.” Dallas scrolled through the blurry photos on his phone from the estate’s security feed, his lip curling. “This is where you grew up? It’s a ruin.”

“It was beautiful once,” Eliza said, wiping her eyes and leaving a smudge of dirt across her cheek.

“The car is a mile down the coast,” Dallas said, pocketing the phone. “Zane is waiting.”

Eliza planted her feet on the floor mat. “No. I can’t leave.”

Dallas turned in the seat and looked at her as though she had just spoken in a foreign language. “Excuse me? Your uncle just tried to sell you to a gangster. We are leaving.”

“I need the art, Dallas,” Eliza said, pointing to the photos of covered canvases still on his screen. “And I need to stop them from signing over the land. If I leave tonight, Buck signs the papers tomorrow.”

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 193:

"I'll buy the land. I told you," Dallas said, his voice rising. "I'll buy the whole damn town."

"If you buy it, Anson will know. He'll target you," Eliza said. "He just told me he has five million in cash left. He's dangerous."

"Let him come," Dallas dismissed it with a wave of his hand. "I'll bury him in the foundation."

"No. This is my fight." Eliza reached out and gripped his gloved hands. "I have a plan."

Dallas looked down at her. She was small and dirty, her hair a mess, her coat still damp from the grass. But her eyes were fierce. She wasn't the scared woman from the lobby anymore.

“What plan?” he said, crossing his arms.

“Dante Luna. I’m meeting him tomorrow at The Onyx Club,” Eliza said quickly. “I’m going to get him to admit the blackmail on tape. If I have proof of extortion, the contract is void. Buck goes to jail. The estate is mine.”

Dallas’s expression went dark. The temperature in the car seemed to drop several degrees.

“You want to walk into a room with a predator.” It wasn’t a question. “Over my dead body.”

“He won’t touch me in a public club,” Eliza argued. “And I’ll have backup.” She looked at him pointedly.

“You want me to be your backup? Your bait?” Dallas’s jaw tightened. His voice dropped to a low, controlled growl. “Absolutely not. The plan is cancelled.”

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“Not bait. A negotiator,” Eliza corrected. She moved closer and placed her hand over his chest. She could feel his heartbeat — fast, angry. “Please, Dallas. This is the only way to get justice for what they did. For what they were going to do to me. I need to do this. For my mom. I can’t let them win.”

Dallas exhaled — a long, ragged sound of a man at war with himself. He closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against hers. He was weak to her touch, and he hated that about himself.

“Fine.” The word came out sharp, like a shard of glass. “But I’m not leaving your side.”

“Here? In the car?” Eliza glanced around at the darkness outside. “It’s freezing.”

“We’ll find a motel,” Dallas said, and the tension broke just a fraction, enough for a smirk to surface.

He leaned forward and spoke through the open partition. “Change of plans, Zane. Find us a secure motel. We’re staying local.”

He settled back and pulled a thermal blanket around them both. Then he reached into his pack and produced two protein bars, holding one out to her.

“Room service,” he said.

“You’re crazy,” Eliza whispered, watching the lights pass in the dark outside.

“I’m married to you,” Dallas said, as if that explained everything. Because it did.

Dawn broke grey and miserable over the small, anonymous motel on the Long Island coast. The neon No Vacancy sign flickered outside the window, casting a pale pink wash across the ceiling.

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend’s Father

Chapter 194:

Dallas was already awake. He stood at the window, peering through a gap in the cheap blinds, a cup of terrible vending machine coffee in hand.

“Someone is coming,” he said quietly. He turned and touched Eliza’s shoulder. She was asleep on the queen bed, still in yesterday’s clothes, looking small and exhausted.

Eliza surfaced slowly, her neck stiff. “Is it Buck?”

“Yes. Just like you planned,” Dallas said, his voice tight. “He took the bait.”

Eliza sat up and pushed her hair back. “I had to call him. It was the only way to get close to Dante without alerting his security team. Buck thinks I’m surrendering.”

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“I hate this plan,” Dallas growled, moving toward the center of the room. “I should be the one facing them.”

“You’re the ace in the hole,” Eliza said. “If they see you, they run. If they see me, they get careless.” She met his eyes. “Hide.”

“Where?” Eliza asked, panic surfacing.

“I’m a ghost,” Dallas said, giving her a gentle but firm push toward the bathroom. “Go.”

Eliza slipped into the bathroom and pulled the door almost shut, leaving a sliver of space to see through.

Dallas didn’t vault out a window. He crossed to the armchair in the darkest corner of the room and sat, his black gear making him all but invisible in the shadows.

The key card slot on the door beeped. Buck entered, his voice rough and hungover.

“Rise and shine, sleeping beauty,” he called out.

He surveyed the empty room. Saw the rumped bed. His lip curled. “Playing hard to get? Anson called last night. Said you were ungrateful. Said he’s washed his hands of you.”

Eliza stepped out of the bathroom. Her heart was hammering. “He’s right,” she said flatly.

“Good. That means Dante is your only option.” Buck set a plastic tray on the dusty table — a stale bagel and a bottle of water. “Eat. The car leaves at seven. Don’t try anything. The windows here don’t open.”

He turned and walked out. The door locked automatically behind him.

Eliza exhaled, her knees unsteady. “Dallas?”

He emerged from the shadows, his expression cold with fury.

“You need to go,” Eliza said quickly. “If Buck sees you here, he’ll know I have leverage. He’ll use you against me.”

“This is insane.” Dallas paced the small room like a caged animal. “Let me just have Zane —”

“No. Please.” Eliza stepped into his path. “Go back to the city. Get ready to receive the recording. I need you on the outside, ready to ride in when it counts. Not locked in here with me as a hostage.”

Dallas looked at her. He hated being on the outside. He wanted to be the wall, the shield, the weapon deployed at close range. But the resolve in her eyes was absolute.

“I’ll be at the club. Incognito,” he said, conceding ground he clearly didn’t want to give. “Zane is already airborne. He’ll run point from the city.”

He pulled her close. “One kiss. For luck.”

Flash Marriage To My Best Friend’s Father

Chapter 195:

He didn't wait. He kissed her hard — possessive and desperate, tasting of bad coffee and fear. His hands gripped her waist and drew her flush against him.

“I hate this plan,” he muttered against her lips.

“I love you,” Eliza whispered.

Dallas went still. He pulled back just an inch and looked at her — really looked at her. It was one of the few times she had said it so freely, without duress, without tears blurring the words.

“Tell me that again when we're home,” he said. His eyes burned with a clear, steady blue fire.

He pressed his lips to her forehead once, hard. Then he turned and slipped out the door, a shadow dissolving into the grey morning light.

Eliza stood watching the door after it closed. She was alone again.

She crossed to the far corner of the room, pulled her ghost phone from her bag, and checked the signal. Two bars. Enough. She picked up the stale bagel and forced herself to eat.

She needed strength for war.

Evening came like a shroud.

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Margo met Eliza in the motel lobby at 6:30 PM sharp. “Time to get ready,” she said, without looking up from her watch.

Eliza was taken to a room on the second floor. A dress had been laid out on the bed.

Red. Silk. A slip dress with a neckline that plunged dangerously low and a slit running up to the thigh.

“Dante likes red,” Margo said from the doorway, applying an aggressive coat of pink lipstick.

Eliza touched the fabric. It was cold. It felt like a costume — a victim’s costume. She put it on. It fit perfectly, which turned her stomach. Margo had either kept it from her own younger days or bought it specifically for this transaction.

Eliza picked up a small beaded clutch from the dresser. She slipped her ghost phone inside. Then, angling her body away from the doorway, she slid a compact black voice recorder into the inner pocket.

“You look... marketable,” Margo said, running a critical eye over her.

Buck’s voice carried up from downstairs. “The car is here!”

They went down. A black sedan waited outside — not the mud-caked SUV from before, but a hired town car. Buck sat in front. Margo and Eliza took the back. Eliza watched in silence as the Manhattan skyline grew closer through the window, a fortress of rising lights.

Using the phone hidden in her clutch, she typed quickly: En route. Onyx Club.

No reply. He was already in position.

The Onyx Club occupied a fortress of black stone in the Meatpacking District, fronted by velvet ropes and a line that stretched half a block.

Buck walked her past all of it. The bouncer acknowledged him with a nod.

“VIP elevator. Penthouse suite. Mr. Luna is waiting,” the bouncer said, unclipping the rope.

Margo stepped forward.

“Just the girl,” the bouncer said, blocking her path with one massive arm.

Margo stopped, visibly affronted. Buck placed a hand on the small of Eliza’s back — clammy, insistent — and pushed her forward. “Be nice,” he murmured. “Save the family.”

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 196:

Eliza stepped into the elevator alone. The doors were polished brass, mirror-bright. Her reflection stared back at her: pale skin, red dress, dark eyes.

She looked like a sacrifice.

I can do this, she told herself. I am Eliza Koch.

The elevator ascended without a sound. There were no buttons — it was controlled remotely. The kind of detail that told you exactly what kind of man waited at the top.

Ding.

The doors slid open directly into a lavish suite.

The room was dim, lit by low amber lamps and the vast wash of city light pouring through floor-to-ceiling windows. The air was thick with expensive scotch and leather.

Dante Luna sat on a Chesterfield sofa, swirling a glass of amber liquid. When he saw her, he smiled – a wet, hungry expression that stopped well short of his eyes.

“Red. Perfect.”

Eliza stepped out of the elevator. The heels Margo had chosen sank into the deep carpet. “Mr. Luna,” she said, her voice holding steady. “Let’s talk business.”

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Dante laughed – that same ugly, echoing sound from the studio.

“Business?” He rose from the sofa. In the low-ceilinged room, he seemed to fill it completely. “Honey, the business is already done.”

Eliza’s thumb found the switch on the recorder inside her clutch. Click.

“Sit,” Dante said, gesturing to the chair opposite him. “Drink.”

A glass of champagne sat waiting on the table, bubbles still rising. Eliza perched on the very edge of the chair, her weight balanced forward.

Ready to run.

“I reviewed your proposal for the land,” Eliza began, leaving the champagne untouched. “The zoning laws in Havenport won’t permit a casino.”

“Boring,” Dante said, waving a dismissive hand. He crossed to the desk and picked up a manila envelope. “Let’s talk about you.”

“I’m part of the deal. As a consultant,” Eliza said, trying to keep the conversation on professional ground.

Dante tossed the envelope onto the coffee table. It skidded across the glass surface and spilled open.

Photographs. Dozens of them.

Eliza went still.

These weren't the photos Margo had shown Anson. These were different. Eliza walking in the rain on campus, captured through a car window. Eliza sketching on a park bench, the lens close enough to show charcoal on her fingers. Eliza crying on the steps of the library – a telephoto lens recording every tear.

“I've been watching you too, Eliza,” Dante said, with a slow, leering smile. “Not as long as Hyde. But better. He wanted to keep you in a glass case. I just want to watch you.”

“You're sick,” Eliza whispered.

“I like pure things,” Dante said, almost thoughtfully. He picked up a photo of her studying a painting. “Hyde kept you pure. Paid to keep you that way. Now I want to take you out and ruin you.”

The realization hit her like cold water. The money had never mattered. The land had never mattered.

“There is no bailout, is there?” she said.

Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 197:

“Oh, I’ll pay Buck,” Dante said easily. “I set the whole thing up. Dangled the debt over your pathetic uncle’s head for months. The land was never the prize, Eliza. It was always you. I’ll pay him after I break you. After you belong to me.”

“This isn’t business. This is a crime.” Eliza stood and grabbed her clutch.

“Who would believe you?” Dante laughed. “You’re a gold digger. Anson Hyde’s reject. An orphan who married a billionaire on paper. The press will tear you apart.”

Eliza stepped back toward the elevator and pressed the call button.

Nothing happened. The indicator light glowed red.

“You leave when I say so.” Dante moved to block the door, holding up a small remote. “Sit down. Drink your cocktail.”

Eliza looked at the glass. “I’m not thirsty.”

“It wasn’t a request.” The smile disappeared from his face. His eyes went flat.

He seized her wrist. His grip was crushing.

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“Drink it. Or I send these photographs to the press,” he said quietly. “Headline: Solomon Heiress Sells Body for Bailout. Think about your husband. Think about Koch Industries.”

The threat landed. It was real. If this broke publicly, the board would destroy Dallas.

Eliza lifted the glass with a trembling hand – and in one sharp motion, threw the contents into his face.

Dante bellowed and staggered backward, champagne burning his eyes.

Before he could recover, he lunged. He seized her by the hair and drove her back against the wall, wrenching the glass from her hand. His other hand forced her jaw open, pouring the remaining drugged champagne into her mouth. She choked and sputtered, twisting against him, but a small amount went down.

It tasted bitter.

Chemical.

He threw her to the floor. “Good girl,” he panted, wiping his face with his sleeve.

He straightened slowly. “Now,” he said, his voice dropping to something soft and deliberate as he reached for his belt. “Let’s begin.”

The room tilted. The edges of Eliza’s vision began to soften and blur, the amber light fracturing into halos.

The drug was fast. Too fast.

Eliza swayed. The floor seemed to turn to liquid beneath her feet.

“That’s it. Relax.” Dante’s voice reached her as though filtered through deep water. He rose and moved toward her.

She tried to run. Her legs were leaden, unresponsive. She stumbled and caught herself on the arm of the sofa before sliding down onto the rug. Dante stood over her, looking down.

“So pretty. So quiet.”

Two minutes earlier. The lobby.

Dallas Koch walked through the revolving doors. He was not incognito. He was wearing a suit that cost more than the building, and his face was a mask of cold, absolute fury.

Weston, his second-in-command, was directly behind him, speaking into an earpiece. “Zane was airlifted from the coast — five minutes out. Penthouse access is hard-locked, Boss.”

“Then we make a new door,” Dallas said, without breaking stride.

The revolving doors spun again.

Anson Hyde burst into the lobby. He looked unraveled — tie gone, collar open, eyes wild. He spotted Dallas immediately.

“Koch!” Anson crossed the floor toward him. “You knew? How did you know she was here?”

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 198:

“Unlike you, I don’t leave her unprotected,” Dallas said, without slowing. “Get out of my way.”

Anson didn’t flinch at the insult. He flinched at the raw, possessive fury in Dallas’s eyes. This wasn’t a business transaction. This was something else entirely.

“She’s my family,” Anson said, falling into step beside him. “You don’t deserve her.”

“She isn’t yours to deserve,” Dallas said, and shoved past him toward the VIP elevator.

The bouncer stepped forward. “Sir, you can’t —”

Weston moved. It was a blur — a precise strike to the throat, a sweep of the leg. The bouncer hit the floor with a groan and didn't get back up.

Dallas pressed a small black device against the elevator panel. Numbers cycled rapidly across the display.

Click. Green light.

The doors opened.

Anson slipped in just as they began to close.

"I'm coming," he said, chest heaving.

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Dallas looked at him. For one long second, the calculation in his eyes suggested he might physically remove Anson from the elevator. Then he gave a single sharp nod.

“Don’t slow me down,” Dallas said.

The elevator shot upward. The silence between the two men was lethal — charged with testosterone and mutual hatred and something that, beneath all of it, was the same desperate thing.

“If she’s hurt,” Anson said, watching the floor numbers climb, “I kill him.”

“Get in line,” Dallas said, and cracked his knuckles.

Penthouse.

Dante was unbuttoning his shirt. His belt buckle clinked in the silence.

Eliza crawled backward across the rug. The drug was working fast — her fingers felt thick and numb, her vision soft at the edges. Her hand brushed against something on the coffee table. Cold. Heavy. A crystal ashtray. She closed her hand around it and squeezed.

Dante reached for her.

Eliza swung.

The crystal connected squarely with his knee.

CRACK.

Dante howled and buckled sideways, clutching his leg. He lashed out on instinct — his hand caught Eliza across the face, snapping her head to the side. She went sprawling, her lip splitting against her teeth.

Ding.

The elevator chime was the most beautiful sound she had ever heard.

The doors slid open.

Dallas and Anson stepped out. Two figures moving toward the same point — one dark, one light, both carrying the same expression, the same readiness to burn the room to nothing.

Dante turned, still clutching his knee. “Who the —”

Dallas didn’t speak. He didn’t pause. He crossed the room like something launched from a great height.

Anson ran for Eliza.

The room exploded into violence.

Dallas tackled Dante mid-turn. They crashed into the coffee table, shattering the glass top, sending shards flying like scattered diamonds. A sharp pain lanced through his ribs — a ghost of the pneumonia that had nearly killed him — but he ignored it, channeling the agony into the force of his blow.

Dante was big, a brawler, but Dallas was trained. Dallas didn’t just hit; he dismantled.

He landed a brutal hook to Dante’s jaw. Crack. Then an elbow to the nose. Blood sprayed across the white rug.

Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 199:

Anson slid to his knees beside Eliza and pulled her upright. “Eliza! Look at me!” He shook her gently.

Eliza’s head lolled. Her eyes were unfocused, pupils blown wide. “Dallas?” she mumbled, her hand reaching out, grasping at the air.

Anson flinched. Even drugged, even bleeding, she called for him.

Dante roared. He pulled a knife from his boot — a serrated blade that glinted in the dim light — and slashed upward.

Dallas dodged, but not fast enough. The blade sliced through his suit sleeve, and a line of red bloomed instantly on his forearm.

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“Dallas!” Eliza screamed, the sound weak and terrified.

Dallas didn’t even glance at the wound. He seized Dante’s wrist with both hands and twisted.

SNAP.

The sound of the breaking wrist was loud and sickeningly wet. The knife clattered to the floor. Dante screamed — a high-pitched wail of pure agony.

Dallas didn’t stop. He mounted Dante, pinning him to the floor, and began to rain punches down on his face. One. Two. Three. His knuckles were raw, his expression a mask of pure, unadulterated rage. He wasn’t fighting anymore. He was executing.

“Dallas! Stop! You’ll kill him!” Anson shouted. “You’ll go to jail!”

Dallas froze, his fist raised for another blow. His chest heaved. He looked down at Dante’s ruined face – the man was unconscious, bubbling blood – then looked over at Eliza, huddled and trembling in Anson’s arms.

He stood up and straightened his torn jacket, ignoring the blood dripping from his arm. Then he walked over to Anson.

“Give her to me.”

Anson tightened his grip. “She’s hurt. I’m taking her to the hospital. My car is downstairs.”

“I said,” Dallas’s voice dropped to a whisper far more terrifying than any shout, “give me my wife.”

Eliza pushed weakly against Anson’s chest and reached for Dallas. “D…” she whispered. “Take me home.”

Anson looked down at her. He saw the way her body leaned toward Dallas, like a plant seeking the sun. He saw the trust in her glazed eyes.

It broke him.

He loosened his arms.

“Take her,” Anson said, his voice hollow.

Dallas scooped her up effortlessly, cradling her against his chest, careful of her split lip. “I’ve got you, baby,” he murmured into her hair. “I’ve got you.”

He turned and walked to the elevator without looking back — not at Anson, not at the unconscious man on the floor.

Anson stood alone in the wreckage. He stared at Dante’s still form, then at the knife on the floor. He nudged it with his shoe but didn’t pick it up. Instead, he pulled out his phone and dialed a number very few people had. “I have a situation at The Onyx,” he said, his voice cold and precise. “And an anonymous tip for the SEC regarding Dante Luna’s offshore accounts. He’s going to be buried so deep in litigation, he’ll never see the sun again.”

Downstairs, the lobby had dissolved into chaos. People were screaming.

Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 200:

Dallas walked through them like Moses parting the Red Sea, covering Eliza's face with his jacket to shield her from the burst of camera flashes.

Zane had the car waiting at the curb, engine running.

"Drive," Dallas ordered as he slid into the back seat.

Eliza curled into his side. "You're bleeding."

“It’s nothing.” Dallas kissed her forehead. “Just a scratch.”

The hospital room was white. Sterile. Quiet.

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Eliza woke slowly. The fog in her brain had lifted, replaced by a dull headache and the sharp scent of antiseptic. An IV drip was taped to the back of her hand.

Dallas sat in the uncomfortable plastic chair beside the bed, still wearing his blood-stained dress shirt, his jacket long gone. His arm was bandaged where the knife had grazed him. He looked exhausted – shadows bruising the skin beneath his eyes, dark stubble shading his jaw.

“Dallas?” Her voice came out raspy.

He moved instantly, leaning forward to cover her hand with his. “I’m here. You’re safe. The drug is out of your system.” He brought her knuckles to his lips, his touch warm and grounding.

“Dante?” she asked, a shiver running through her.

“In the ICU. Police are guarding his door.” Dallas’s voice hardened. “Zane gave them the recording from your clutch. It’s enough to put him away for extortion, kidnapping, and attempted assault – twenty years.”

“You found the recorder?” Eliza managed a weak smile.

“Smart girl.” Dallas smiled back, though it didn’t reach his eyes. “Very smart.”

The door opened without a knock.

Anson stood in the doorway. He looked terrible – suit ruffled, tie missing, a bandage wrapped around his right hand from the fight. His eyes went straight to Eliza.

Dallas rose slowly. The temperature in the room seemed to drop.

“I came to check on her,” Anson said stiffly, staying by the door.

“She’s fine. No thanks to you.” Dallas stepped between Anson and the bed, blocking his view.

“I saved her from the Solomons for years!” Anson’s voice rose, thick with entitlement. “I kept her safe when no one else cared!”

“You kept her as a pet,” Dallas countered, his voice low and lethal. “I made her a wife. There is a difference.”

“You Kochs are heartless,” Anson sneered. “You treat marriage like a merger. You bought her just like I did.”

“This marriage is real, Anson.” Dallas gestured toward the bed. “Look at her.”

Anson looked. Eliza sat upright against the pillows, pale and still. She met his gaze not with love, nor with the fear he was accustomed to, but with a quiet, exhausted resignation.

“Anson, please,” she said softly. “Just go.”

His face twitched. He took a step forward, ignoring Dallas entirely. “You’re making a mistake, Eliza. He doesn’t know you. He doesn’t know the damage you carry. He’ll get tired of fixing you.”

“I don’t need fixing,” Eliza said. “I need to be free. And I am done being controlled by you.”

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Message from Noa: Have a great Tuesday dear readers. God loves you and Noa wishes you all the best. (=∩=) /

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