

# Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 21:

Anson touched his cheek, stunned. He stared at her as though the furniture had suddenly come to life and attacked him. The submissive, quiet Eliza was gone.

“You —” he started, his voice unsteady with shock.

Before he could finish, two large shapes emerged from the shadows at the tree line. They moved with military efficiency — no shouting, no hesitation. Dallas's private security. One guard seized Anson's left arm and twisted it behind his back. The other took his right.

“Mr. Hyde,” the first guard said, his voice flat and unhurried. “Mr. Koch sends his regards.”

They dragged Anson toward the perimeter fence, his feet carving twin furrows through the mud.

“You'll regret this, Eliza!” Anson screamed over his shoulder, struggling uselessly against their grip. “He'll throw you away when he's done with you!”

Eliza stood alone on the pier. She was panting. Her hand stung — a hot, pulsing throb that traveled up her arm. The adrenaline began to drain away, replaced by trembling. Her knees felt like water.

She turned to look at the house.

On the second-floor balcony, overlooking the lake, Dallas stood motionless. A statue carved from darkness. He held a glass of whiskey in one hand, his knuckles white around the crystal. Even from this distance, Eliza could feel the cold radiating from him.

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He had seen Anson's arms around her. Had he seen the struggle? Or had the angle hidden that, leaving only the embrace? Had he seen her crying?

The doubt Anson had planted whispered in her ear. He thinks you went back to him.

Eliza turned and ran. She ran off the pier, up the grassy slope, past the pool, and burst through the French doors into the study.

“Dallas!” she called out.

The room was empty. The fire still crackled. The scent of his cologne still hung in the air. On the desk, his whiskey glass sat on a coaster, the ice still melting, a small pool of water forming at its base.

Beside the glass sat a small black velvet box. And a note, written in his sharp, angular hand on thick cardstock.

For the new lady of the house.

Eliza’s hands trembled as she opened the box. Inside lay a diamond tennis bracelet – exquisite, a river of stones set in platinum. It was cold to the touch. Heavy. It felt like a payment. Or a goodbye.

She clutched the box and ran into the hallway. “Mrs. Higgins!”

The housekeeper appeared from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel, her expression already worried.

“Where is he?” Eliza asked, breathless.

“Mr. Koch took the helicopter, ma’am,” Mrs. Higgins said gently. “He said he had urgent business in the city. The pad was just a few minutes ago.”

The distant, fading rhythm of rotor blades seemed to echo in Eliza’s memory – a sound she hadn’t consciously registered until now.

She sank to the floor. The hardwood was hard against her knees.

He had left. He had seen Anson, misunderstood, and instead of staying – instead of demanding an explanation, instead of shouting – he had simply withdrawn. He had left a gift and vanished.

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Chapter 22:

He's a machine, Anson had said.

Eliza looked at the bracelet. It glittered beneath the hallway chandelier, cold and relentless.

"No," she whispered. "He's not a machine. He's jealous."

But the doubt was already there. Was she simply an investment to him — one that had just shown the first sign of volatility?

Night settled over the estate. The silence that had felt peaceful an hour ago was now oppressive, pressing down on the roof like a physical weight.

Eliza sat on the floor of the foyer for a long time.

Then the front door handle turned.

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Her head snapped up. The heavy oak door swung open, and a gust of wind and rain swept in — a storm had built and broken without her noticing.

Dallas stood in the doorway. He hadn't gone to the city. He was soaking wet, his shirt plastered flat against his chest, his hair dripping. And his eyes — his eyes were burning with a fire that terrified her.

Eliza scrambled to her feet, clutching the velvet box to her chest like a shield.

Dallas didn't speak. He stepped inside and kicked the door shut behind him. The slam echoed through the high-ceilinged foyer and vibrated up through the floorboards. He walked past her without a word, heading straight for the study, radiating a dangerous energy — smelling of rain, ozone, and bourbon. A great deal of bourbon.

Eliza followed him. She didn't know why. Self-preservation told her to stay back, but something stronger — a need to fix this — pulled her after him.

She found him in the study, pouring another two fingers of whiskey into his glass, his back to her.

“Dallas?” she whispered.

He turned slowly. His tie was undone, hanging loose around his neck. The top three buttons of his shirt were open, revealing the tanned skin of his throat. He looked wrecked.

“I couldn’t leave,” he said. His voice was rough, like gravel grinding against itself. “I tried. I got to the pad. But I couldn’t leave what’s mine unguarded.”

Eliza flinched at the words. Possessive. Raw. Not financial.

“Is that all I am?” she asked, her voice breaking as tears welled up, hot and fast. “Just something you own?”

Dallas pushed off the desk and crossed toward her, blocking the firelight. “You were with him,” he said. “By the lake.”

“He trespassed! I slapped him!” Eliza cried, stepping forward. “I told him to leave!”

“I saw him touching you,” Dallas said. His eyes dropped to her arms, as if searching for Anson’s fingerprints. “I saw you crying. You were crying for him.”

He reached out. His hand was large and calloused. He caught a tear sliding down her cheek with his thumb. “Stop crying for him,” he commanded. The anger had drained from his voice, replaced by something desperate. “I cannot stand it.”

“I’m not crying for him!” Eliza insisted. “I’m crying because you left! Because you think — because you think I would choose him!”

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## **Flash Marriage To My Best Friend’s Father**

Dallas stared at her. The alcohol was stripping away his usual filters, peeling back the layers of the stoic CEO to expose the man underneath. “You think this is a choice?” he said, a dark, humorless sound escaping him.

He took her hand and pulled her toward the door. “What are you doing?” she asked, her heart hammering.

“I am tired of being the gentleman, Eliza,” he murmured, leading her up the grand staircase.

He stopped outside her bedroom door.

“The contract says —” she began, her voice barely a whisper.

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“The contract says you are my wife,” he interrupted, his hand closing on the doorknob. He pushed the door open and guided her inside, closing it behind them with a soft but final click. He leaned down, his lips brushing her ear, his breath warm with whiskey.

“And tonight,” he said, “I want to be a husband.”

He lowered his head and buried his face in the crook of her neck.

Eliza froze as his breath hit her skin — warm, close, sending a shiver down her spine that had nothing to do with the cold. He inhaled again, deeper this time.

“Vanilla,” he murmured into the curve of her neck. “You smell like vanilla. Not him. Good.”

Something shifted in him. The terrifying intensity dissolved into something almost childlike. He wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her toward him until her chest was pressed against his damp shirt, and rested his heavy head on her shoulder.

“Dallas, you need to go to your room,” Eliza said, trying to sound firm — like a nurse managing a difficult patient.

“No,” he mumbled into her sweater. “My room is cold. This room is warm.”

He pressed her gently backward until her legs hit the bed, and they both tumbled onto the mattress together. Eliza fell back against the pillows. Dallas followed her

down, his weight settling over her as he braced himself on his elbows, hovering just above.

“Dallas! We have an agreement!” she pleaded, pressing her hands flat against his chest. It was like pushing against a brick wall.

He looked down at her, eyes hazy and struggling to focus, but the heat in them was unmistakable. “I want to sleep here,” he stated.

“Just sleep? Nothing else?” she bargained. Her heart was pounding so loudly she was certain he could feel it through his shirt.

Dallas smiled – a lazy, lopsided tilt of his lips that did strange things to Eliza’s stomach. “Unless you want something else, Mrs. Koch?”

Her face burned. “No! Sleep. Just sleep.”

He grunted, seemingly satisfied with the terms. He rolled off her, flopping onto his side, then reached for the duvet and pulled it over both of them. He threw one heavy arm over her waist. He hooked one leg over hers. He pinned her to the mattress as though she were a body pillow he was afraid of losing.

“Don’t move,” he commanded, already half-asleep.

# Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 24:

Eliza lay perfectly still, staring at the ceiling. She was trapped. A billionaire octopus had claimed her for the night. She waited for him to try something – to move his hand, to kiss her. But his breathing evened out within seconds, growing deep and rhythmic. He was asleep.

She turned her head slightly to study him. In the dim light of the passing storm, his face was relaxed, the sharp lines of his jaw softened. His long eyelashes cast faint shadows across his cheeks. He looked younger. He looked far less like the machine Anson had described and far more like a man who was simply exhausted.

He's a machine. A cold, heartless machine.

This man — clinging to her like a lifeline, seeking her warmth in the dark — was no machine. Eliza felt a strange, overwhelming urge to touch his damp hair. It looked soft. She resisted.

He's just drunk, she told herself. Tomorrow he'll be the CEO again.

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But the warmth of his body was undeniable. It seeped into her side and chased away the chill left by the encounter at the lake. It made her feel safe. For the first time in years, she wasn't sleeping with one eye open, waiting for Anson to hammer on her door. The monster was outside. The dragon was in her bed, keeping watch.

She drifted off eventually, the sound of the rain and Dallas's breathing pulling her down into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Three hours later, the storm had passed.

Dallas opened his eyes in the darkness, perfectly still.

He hadn't been that drunk. Tipsy, perhaps — but the stumbling, the neediness, the helpless weight of him? That had been a performance. It was the only way he could close the distance without frightening her. The only way he could hold her without making her run.

He felt her small frame rising and falling with each breath against his chest. She was warm. She was here.

He pressed his lips to the top of her head so softly she didn't stir.

“Mine,” he whispered into the darkness.

It wasn't a question. It was simply a fact.

Sunlight hit Eliza's face like a physical slap. She groaned, scrunching her eyes shut and trying to burrow back into the warmth.

She patted the space beside her. The sheets were cool. Empty.

Her eyes snapped open. “Was it a dream?” she murmured.

She sat up. She was still fully dressed in her sweater and jeans, though both were thoroughly wrinkled. Then she heard the water running. The door to the en-suite bathroom swung open, and steam billowed out carrying the scent of sandalwood and citrus soap.

Dallas walked out.

Eliza stopped breathing.

He was wearing a towel — white, fluffy, hanging dangerously low on his hips. And that was it. Water droplets clung to his chest, tracing the defined ridges of his torso before disappearing into the white terrycloth. His shoulders were broad, the muscles shifting beneath his skin as he towel-dried his hair with a smaller hand towel.

Eliza slapped both hands over her eyes. “Dallas! Put clothes on!”

“It is my house,” came the calm, amused reply. “And my wife’s room.”

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# Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 25:

He sounded completely sober. The needy, clinging man from the night before was gone. The arrogant CEO was back.

Eliza peeked through the gaps in her fingers. He was walking toward the bed. He leaned over her, placing one hand on the mattress beside her hip.

“About last night —” he began.

“You were drunk!” Eliza accused, her face burning. “You violated the contract! Clause 4 says respectful cohabitation!”

“I reviewed the contract this morning,” Dallas said, his voice unhurried. “Clause 4 forbids ‘public embarrassment.’ It says nothing about private consummation.”

Eliza dropped her hands. Her mouth fell open. “You – you want to consummate?”

Dallas looked at her. His gaze dropped briefly to her lips, then returned to her eyes. The air in the room thickened, charged with static.

“If I had wanted to, Eliza,” he said, his voice dropping to a low rumble, “you wouldn’t have slept so soundly.”

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The implication hung between them. Eliza felt a jolt of heat low in her stomach. She looked at his lips. For one split second – a terrifying, irrational split second – she found herself wishing he had wanted to.

Dallas saw the desire flicker in her eyes. He noticed the way her breath caught. Satisfaction settled quietly in his chest. He leaned in. Closer. Closer still, until she could feel the warmth radiating off his damp skin.

Eliza closed her eyes and tilted her chin up.

Dallas pulled back.

“Get dressed,” he said, his voice crisp. “Breakfast in twenty minutes.”

Eliza’s eyes flew open. He was already moving toward the door. He paused at the threshold and glanced back over his shoulder.

“And Eliza?”

“Yes?” she squeaked.

“You drool when you sleep.”

He walked out.

Eliza grabbed a pillow and hurled it at the closed door. It hit with a soft, unsatisfying thump. She fell back onto the mattress and groaned at the ceiling.

She felt completely outplayed. He could turn the heat on and off like a faucet, and she was the one left scalding. But beneath the embarrassment, something else lingered. She touched her lips.

What is wrong with me?

She needed boundaries. She needed walls. If she let him in — if she let herself fall for him — she would end up just another asset he could liquidate the moment he grew bored.

She scrambled out of bed, grabbed her laptop from her bag, and opened a blank document.

ADDENDUM A.

1. No entering the private bedroom without knocking. 2. No nudity in shared spaces. 3. No confusing behavior.

She typed furiously.

Downstairs in the kitchen, Dallas poured himself a black coffee. He heard the faint, rapid tap of keys drifting down from upstairs.

He smiled.

Eliza marched onto the back patio clutching a piece of printer paper like a weapon. Dallas was sitting at the glass table, reading the Wall Street Journal on his tablet. He was wearing a crisp white polo shirt that showed off his tanned arms. He looked infuriatingly well-rested.

“We need to talk,” Eliza said, slamming the paper down on top of his tablet.

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## **Flash Marriage To My Best Friend’s Father**

Chapter 26:

Dallas didn't flinch. He glanced at the page. Addendum A: Personal Space & Conduct Protocol. He raised an eyebrow and looked up at her over the rim of his coffee cup. "Is this necessary?"

"Yes!" Eliza said, pointing a trembling finger at him. "You were inappropriate. Last night. And this morning."

"I was being your husband," Dallas corrected, his tone perfectly calm.

"A contract husband!" She pressed the word. "The agreement was for protection. Not for cuddling. Or towels."

Dallas set down his cup. "Clause 2: No entering the bedroom without explicit invitation." He read it aloud, then looked up at her. "And if you invite me?"

"I won't," she said. Too quickly.

Dallas picked up a pen from the table. He didn't bother reading the rest of the document. He simply signed his name at the bottom in bold, aggressive strokes. "Fine. I agree to your terms, Mrs. Koch."

Eliza blinked. The wind went out of her sails entirely. “Just like that?”

“I enjoy a challenge,” he said, and left it at that. He stood, straightening his collar. “I have to head back to the city for a meeting. Azalea will drive you back later.”

“Wait,” Eliza said, feeling the distance snap back into place. The playful ease was gone, replaced by his business mask. “Are we — are we okay?”

Dallas paused. He looked at her, his expression unreadable. “We are married, Eliza. We are always okay.”

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He walked away toward the helipad, where the chopper was already spinning its rotors. Eliza watched him go. The air felt colder without him.

“Morning, sunshine!” Azalea dropped into the chair Dallas had just vacated and grabbed a croissant from the basket. “Why does Dad look like he won the lottery? And why do you look like you saw a ghost?”

Eliza snatched the contract back and folded it. “Nothing. Just business.”

She sat down, but she couldn't eat. Her mind was running in circles.

Last night. The way he had held her. The bourbon on his breath, the way his control had quietly slipped. She had woken up wrinkled and disoriented, still fully dressed – but what if she didn't remember everything? What if, in his drunken state, something more had happened? The thought was a cold spike of terror in her stomach. It wasn't a question of what she wanted; it was a question of her own memory, her own vulnerability. A baby would be a permanent chain – proof to the world that she had trapped Dallas Koch, confirmation of everything Anson had always claimed about her.

She couldn't let that happen. She needed to be sure.

She slipped her phone out beneath the table and opened the CVS Pharmacy app. Her fingers hovered over the search bar.

Emergency Contraception. She selected Plan B One-Step.

Delivery Method: Same Day Delivery.

She entered the penthouse address. She and Azalea would be back by the afternoon. She could intercept the package, take the pill, and have peace of mind.

“Let’s go back to the city, Azalea,” Eliza said, shoving her phone into her pocket.

Azalea shrugged, already brushing croissant crumbs off her lap. “Sure. The country is boring anyway. The Wi-Fi is terrible.”

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## **Flash Marriage To My Best Friend’s Father**

Chapter 27:

Eliza forced a smile.

What she didn't know was that every purchase made through the Koch household account — particularly from a pharmacy — automatically triggered a security notification on Dallas's private server.

The Koch penthouse was quiet.

Dallas was home early. He had canceled his afternoon meetings, telling himself it was to catch up on emails — but in reality, he was waiting. An alert had come through on his phone an hour ago, a notification from his head of security.

Encrypted Alert: Pharmacy Delivery, Same-Day. Item: Plan B One-Step. Recipient: E. Solomon. ETA: 15 minutes.

He had left the office immediately.

He was sitting in the living room when the front doorbell rang. Mrs. Higgins went to answer it.

“Package for the house, sir,” she said, holding out a small, stapled paper bag from CVS.

Dallas took the bag. “Thank you, Mrs. Higgins. I’ll take it to her.”

He waited until the housekeeper had disappeared back toward the kitchen. Then he opened the bag.

The small rectangular box seemed to mock him. Plan B One-Step.

He went still. The temperature in the room appeared to drop ten degrees. The air thinned, became difficult to breathe. His hand tightened around the box, crushing one corner.

She wanted to ensure that no part of him — not even the possibility of him — could take root. It felt like a rejection of his very existence.

The elevator dinged.

Eliza and Azalea walked in, laughing about something Azalea had seen online. They stopped dead.

“Dad? You’re home early?” Azalea asked, her smile faltering as she sensed the atmosphere.

Dallas didn’t look at his daughter. His eyes — dark and turbulent as a storm out at sea — locked onto Eliza. He held up the crumpled box.

Eliza’s face went paper-white. Every trace of color drained from her lips. “That’s — that’s mine,” she whispered.

“Azalea,” Dallas said. His voice was terrifyingly quiet.

“Dad, wait —” Azalea started.

“Now,” Dallas said.

The single word landed like a thunderclap off the marble floors. Azalea flinched. She shot Eliza a wide, apologetic look, then retreated quickly down the hallway. The door to her suite clicked shut.

Eliza stood alone. Facing the dragon.

“I – I just wanted to be safe,” she stammered, twisting her hands together.

Dallas walked toward her. Slow. Deliberate. “Safe from what?” he asked, stopping inches from her and holding up the box. “From me?”

“From breaking the contract! From complications!” Eliza shot back, her voice rising. “I didn’t want to trap you!”

“A child is a complication?” Dallas asked. The hurt in his eyes was buried beneath a wall of rage, but the crack was there – and Eliza saw it.

“For a fake marriage? Yes!” she cried.

The words fake marriage snapped the last thread of his patience. He reached out and closed his hand around her wrist – not to hurt her, but to anchor her. To make her stay and listen.

“Come with me,” he said, low and rough.

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# Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 28:

He pulled her toward the kitchen.

Dallas pulled her to the massive marble island at the center of the kitchen. He let go of her wrist and grabbed a glass from the drying rack, filling it from the tap with movements that were jerky and barely controlled. He set the glass down hard on the marble. Water sloshed over the rim and spread across the counter. He ripped open the crushed box, popped the single pill from its blister pack, and placed it on the cold grey stone between them.

“Take it,” he said, his voice like ice.

Eliza stared at the small white pill. It seemed to represent every fear she had ever carried. “Dallas, please,” she whispered, tears pricking her eyes. “Don’t be like this.”

“You want to be safe? You want this to be a contract?” He leaned over the counter, his face close to hers. “Then take it. Prove to me that I mean nothing to you. Prove to me that having a family with me is so repulsive to you that you need medication to prevent it.”

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Eliza looked at the pill. Then at him. She saw the raw pain living behind his anger. He wanted this to be real. He wanted her. But she was still so broken, still so convinced she was nothing more than a charity case, that refusing the pill felt like admitting she wanted him – and that was terrifying. Taking it felt like preserving her independence. Her dignity.

Her hand, trembling uncontrollably, reached for the pill. She picked it up.

Dallas watched her fingers close around it. The light in his eyes didn't just fade. It shattered. He physically recoiled, as though she had struck him.

Eliza brought the pill to her lips, closed her eyes, tilted her head back, and swallowed it with a mouthful of water. The action was final. A line drawn in the sand.

Dallas watched her throat move as she swallowed. He didn't move. He didn't speak. He simply watched, his face a mask of stone.

"Happy?" Eliza asked. A single tear escaped and rolled down her cheek.

He walked around the island and backed her against the counter, trapping her between his body and the cold marble. "Ecstatic," he said, his voice hollow.

He reached out and brushed the tear away with his thumb. The touch was confusingly tender.

"Remember this moment, Eliza," he whispered. "You hesitated."

He leaned in, his lips grazing her ear. "Because next time, there will be no pills. And no contracts."

Eliza shivered.

"We have a lifetime to play this game," he said.

Then he captured her lips. It wasn't a gentle kiss. It was punishing and possessive – a kiss that staked a claim on her soul. He bit her lower lip, just hard enough to sting, then pulled away.

“Dinner is at seven,” he said, straightening his tie, switching back to CEO mode in the space of a breath. “Don't be late.”

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## **Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father**

Chapter 29:

He turned on his heel and walked out of the kitchen.

Eliza slumped against the counter, pressing her fingers to her swollen lip. She was breathless. She understood, with a sinking clarity, that she had just declared war on his heart. And he fully intended to win.

Dinner was a funeral.

The silence was total. The only sounds were silverware against china. Azalea attempted a joke about the weather. It landed with a thud. She looked between her father and Eliza, then gave up entirely, focusing on her pasta.

Dallas didn't look at Eliza once. He sat with his phone in hand, typing steadily, her presence entirely erased from his attention. The cold shoulder was worse than his anger had been.

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She needed an escape.

"I have a project presentation tomorrow," Eliza announced into the silence. "I'll be on campus all day."

"Good luck," Dallas said. He didn't look up.

Eliza's heart cracked a little further.

She went to bed that night feeling hollow. The pill was gone. She was safe. But the cost had been higher than she could have imagined.

The next morning, the sky was a brilliant, mocking blue.

Eliza drove the silver Aston Martin onto the university campus, the engine purring with a low growl that vibrated through the seat. As she pulled into the student lot, heads turned. The rumors were already flying — Eliza Solomon, the charity case, arriving in a car that gleamed with an almost arrogant luxury, completely alien among the dented student beaters surrounding it.

She parked and stepped out. She was wearing a simple blazer and jeans, but she held her head high.

She walked toward the Arts building. A group of girls was blocking the path. At the center stood Celeste Chapman — Claudine's younger sister, with the same blonde hair, the same expensive clothes, and the same cruel streak.

“Look,” Celeste announced, pointing a manicured finger. “It's the charity case with the sugar daddy car.”

Students stopped. Phones came out. The circle tightened.

Eliza tried to step around them. “Move, Celeste.”

Celeste stepped directly in front of her and looked her up and down with a slow sneer. “Did you steal it?” she asked, her voice carrying across the quad. “Or did you earn it on your knees?”

The crowd inhaled sharply.

The insult mirrored Anson’s words almost perfectly. Eliza went still. She thought of Dallas in the kitchen. We have a lifetime to play this game. She thought of his protection. She didn’t have to take this anymore.

“I’d ask if you earned your tuition,” Eliza said, her voice clear and steady, “but we all know Daddy paid for it to keep you out of rehab.”

The crowd erupted. Celeste’s face turned a deep, furious red. “You bitch!” She raised her hand and swung for Eliza’s face.

Eliza didn't flinch. She caught Celeste's wrist in midair, her grip firm. "Don't," she said quietly.

"Let go of me!" Celeste shrieked.

"Ew," a voice drawled from behind them. "Is this what passes for entertainment here? Let her go, Chapman."

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## **Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father**

Chapter 30:

The crowd parted. Azalea Koch strode through the gap wearing oversized sunglasses, flanked by two members of her own entourage.

“My father would be very disappointed to hear that someone under his protection is being harassed on campus,” Azalea said, her voice laced with ice.

The crowd buzzed. Under his protection?

Azalea walked up to Eliza and threw an arm around her shoulders. She lowered her sunglasses and looked directly at Celeste. “If you touch her again, I will have my father call your father to discuss his company’s latest quarterly report. I hear it wasn’t great.”

It was a veiled corporate threat, and Azalea was a Koch. In this city, that name carried the weight of law.

Celeste went pale. She yanked her hand back. “You’re lying. She’s a nobody.”

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“She’s with me,” Azalea said, her tone absolutely final. “Which makes her somebody you don’t want to mess with. Now get out of my sight before I lose my patience.”

Celeste glanced at the phones recording her humiliation from all angles. She backed down. “Whatever,” she muttered, and pushed through the crowd. Laughter followed her.

Azalea steered Eliza away toward the building. “You okay?” she asked, dropping the act the moment they were clear.

Eliza exhaled a breath she had been holding far too long. A real smile crossed her face — one that reached her eyes. “I am now.” She glanced at Azalea. “What was all that ‘under his protection’ business?”

“The ultimate power move,” Azalea said, winking. “It keeps people guessing but tells them everything they need to know: you’re untouchable. Plus, it genuinely unnerves people.”

They walked into the building together, a united front.

Fifty yards away, in a parked black sedan with tinted windows, Anson Hyde watched. He gripped the steering wheel until the leather creaked beneath his hands. He saw the car. He saw the confidence. He saw the Koch daughter close ranks around her.

He couldn’t touch her socially anymore. She was insulated by money and power and loyalty. He needed a different approach.

He picked up his phone and dialed. "I need to know the exact nature of her relationship with Dallas Koch," he said into the receiver. "Is she a guest? A mistress? Something else entirely? Find out if he has any real weaknesses." He hung up, staring at the doors through which Eliza had disappeared.

"Contract or not," he whispered, "you're mine, Eliza."

In the study down the hall, Dallas sat alone in the dark.

The blue light of a security monitor cast sharp shadows across his face. He was watching footage from the campus parking lot, rewinding the moment Celeste raised her hand to Eliza. His fist tightened on the desk, knuckles turning white. He hadn't been there. He had been in a boardroom while his wife was being hunted. The self-loathing settled in his mouth like something bitter. He wasn't angry at Azalea for speaking up. He was angry at himself for making it necessary.

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