

Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 211:

Dallas Koch looked directly into the nearest camera, his expression one of cold, unassailable authority.

“My wife and I have cooperated fully with the authorities,” he said, his voice carrying clean over the noise of the street. “The time for secrets is over. The time for justice has begun.” He looked down at Eliza then, his gaze softening in a way meant only for her. “And the time for our life together is just starting.”

He guided her through the doors, leaving the stunned press in their wake. The heavy glass doors of Koch Tower swung shut behind them — sealing out the past, and opening onto their future.

The flashbulbs were a dying constellation in the rearview mirror, their frantic popping fading into the city's hum.

Moments earlier, Dallas had marched her up the courthouse steps, ignoring the shouting reporters. He had stood before them — a human shield of tailored wool, his arm a possessive band around Eliza's waist — and answered their questions with a cold finality that left no room for doubt. “She is with me. She is safe. End of

story.” Then he had guided her back through the chaos, a king clearing a path for his queen, and put her safely in the waiting car.

Now they were moving. The silence between them was heavier than the press scrum they had just left behind.

Dallas drove with one hand on the wheel, knuckles white, eyes scanning the road with a predatory focus that hadn’t faded since the hospital. Eliza’s arm throbbed in its sling — a dull, rhythmic echo of the chaos — but it was the noise inside her head that hurt more.

He knew. For ten years, Anson knew.

She stared out the window as the city lights blurred into streaks of neon, feeling hollowed out. As though someone had reached inside her chest and scooped out everything that made her herself, leaving only a shell too tired to cry.

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Dallas reached across the console without looking at her. His hand found hers, fingers interlacing with her cold ones. He squeezed — hard.

“He used the knowledge to bind you,” Dallas said. His voice was low, a rumble that seemed to travel through the leather seats. “He didn’t save you, El. He invested in you.”

Eliza flinched. Invested. The word felt gross, sticky. But it was true.

They pulled up to the corner a block from the Koch Tower entrance. Eliza wanted nothing more than to go upstairs, lock the door, and sleep for a week. But as the car idled, she spotted the silver Aston Martin parked in the shadows of an adjacent building.

Her stomach dropped.

Anson.

He was leaning against the hood, looking like a man who had been unraveling for days. His suit was wrinkled, his tie loose. He held a thick manila folder in one hand like a weapon. He must have spent the last of his family’s favors to get a car this close – to slip past the outer layers of Dallas’s security.

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“Stay here,” Dallas said, unbuckling his seatbelt.

“No.” Eliza opened her door. “I’m done hiding.”

Dallas was out of the car in an instant, moving around to position himself between her and her past, his body a solid wall.

“You have five seconds to leave,” Dallas said, his voice dangerously calm.

Anson ignored him. His eyes were locked on Eliza — desperate, wild. “I brought the police report. Buck is in custody. I made some calls, pulled some strings. I made sure he won’t get bail.” He held out the folder like a peace offering, as though a few phone calls could erase a decade of manipulation.

“I don’t need your help anymore, Anson,” Eliza said, stepping out from behind Dallas. Her voice was unsteady, but the words were solid.

“You need someone who knows the game,” Anson pleaded, taking a step forward. “Koch doesn’t know our history. He doesn’t know the mess Buck left behind.”

“I know enough,” Dallas said. He didn’t move, but his weight shifted forward, ready. “I know you call manipulation ‘protection.’”

Anson’s face twisted into something ugly. “And you? You’re just a rebound, Koch. You don’t love her — you love winning. You love taking what’s mine.”

Dallas laughed. It was a cold, sharp sound that cut through the humid night air. “I don’t treat her like a broken antique to be hoarded.”

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“I saved her heritage!” Anson’s composure shattered. He waved the folder. “The Solomon Estate — it was going to auction next week! I stopped it! I was going to give it back to you, Eliza. On our wedding day.”

Eliza went still. The air left her lungs.

“The estate?” she whispered. “You bought it?”

“I was going to,” Anson said, his eyes searching hers for gratitude. “It was going to be my gift. To prove I’m the only one who truly cares about your legacy.”

Dallas said nothing. He simply raised his hand and signaled toward the lobby entrance down the block. Weston, his head of security, stepped out carrying a thick white envelope, crossed to them, handed it to Dallas, and retreated without a word.

Dallas turned to Eliza. The hardness in his eyes had gone, replaced by a quiet softness. He held out the envelope. “Open it.”

Eliza’s fingers trembled as she tore the flap. Inside was a stack of legal documents. She pulled them out, scanning the dense text beneath the streetlamp.

Deed of Transfer. Property: 1400 Willow Creek Lane. The Solomon Estate. Owner: Eliza Solomon.

She looked at the date. Two days ago.

“How?” She looked up at Dallas, her vision blurring. “You told me you handled the company debt, but the estate itself – the bank said...”

“The debt and the physical property were tangled in separate legal knots,” Dallas said, his voice low and intent. “Untangling the company was the first step. Securing the deed to your home was the second. I told you I would handle it. I transferred the deed to your name the moment the ink was dry.”

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Anson went pale. He looked at the papers in Eliza's hand, then at Dallas. The wind went out of him entirely. His grand gesture — his ultimate leverage — had already been trumped.

"You didn't tell me," Eliza said, staring at Dallas.

"It's your home, El. Not a bargaining chip," Dallas said, his eyes holding hers. "I don't need a wedding, or a favor, or a thank-you to give it to you. It's just... yours."

Eliza looked at Anson. He looked small. Defeated. He had planned to use her parents' home as a leash. Dallas had given it to her as wings.

"Go home, Anson," Eliza said, her voice steadier than it had ever been. "Before I file for a restraining order."

Anson opened his mouth, closed it, and turned away. He got into his car and slammed the door hard enough to shake the frame, then peeled out, tires screaming, leaving the smell of burnt rubber hanging in the night air.

Dallas placed his hand on the small of Eliza's back. "Let's go inside."

They rode the elevator in silence. Eliza clutched the deed against her chest.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked again as the doors opened to the penthouse.

“Because you don’t owe me for it,” Dallas said, walking into the living room and tossing his keys on the counter. “I didn’t want you to feel bought.”

Eliza leaned her head against his shoulder, breathing in the scent of sandalwood and rain. Something shifted quietly in her understanding of love – realigning itself. It wasn’t about who could save her. It was about who empowered her to save herself.

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The air inside Solomon Industries headquarters was stale – thick with the smell of dust, old paper, and failure.

Eliza stood in the center of what had once been her father’s office. The mahogany desk was coated in a thin layer of grime. The leather chair was cracked. Sunlight filtered through the dirty windows, illuminating floating dust motes like tiny ghosts dancing in the silence.

Weston stood by the door, a steady tactical presence. Beside him, sharp and slightly out of place in his tailored suit, was Zane Sterling, Dallas’s lead counsel. He held a tablet.

“The liquidation papers are ready, Mrs. Koch,” Zane said gently. “Are you sure? We can infuse capital. Dallas has the resources to revitalize the brand.”

Eliza ran her hand along the edge of the desk. “No. The name is tainted. Buck poisoned it. Anson used it as a chain.” She took the stylus Zane offered. “I’ll start fresh. My own name. My own reputation.”

She signed. Eliza Solomon.

The screen flashed: Processing... Complete.

It was done. The company that had cost her parents their lives, the legacy that had been a burden for ten years – gone. Eliza felt lighter.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket.

Anson: One last talk. The terrace where we met. Please. Then I’ll leave you alone.

Eliza stared at the screen. She didn’t owe him anything. But she needed to say the words to his face – needed to close the book, not merely turn the page.

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“I need to go to The Pierre,” she told Weston, her voice firm. “Anson wants to meet.”

“Ma’am, that’s not advisable,” Weston countered immediately. “Mr. Koch’s orders—”

“I’m not asking for permission,” Eliza cut him off, her gaze steady. “I’m telling you my plan. I need to do this for myself – to sever the final thread. He’ll be on the rooftop terrace, a public space. You and your team will secure the entire floor below, the service elevators, and the stairwells. Have a man in plain clothes at the

bar. If I'm not down in exactly fifteen minutes, or if I use the safe word — 'roses' — you come up. Understood?"

Weston studied her for a long moment, reading the resolve in her eyes. He gave a single, sharp nod. "Understood, Mrs. Koch."

The terrace at The Pierre Hotel was exactly as Eliza remembered it. The view of Central Park was breathtaking, the city spread out like a grid of gold and gray. It was here, ten years ago, that Anson had found her crying after the funeral and promised to take care of her.

He was standing at the railing, a glass of scotch in his hand. He didn't turn when she approached.

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"You sold the company," he said. His voice was flat, carried away on the wind.

"I liquidated it," Eliza corrected, stopping a few feet away. "I freed the employees. I paid the debts. It's different."

Anson turned. His eyes were red-rimmed. "I could have saved it. We could have run it together. Like we planned."

“We never planned that, Anson,” Eliza said. “You planned that. I was just a prop in your play.”

“I loved you, Eliza.” His voice cracked. “Since we were ten. Since before the fire. Before everything.”

“Did you?” The question had been gnawing at her for days. “Or did you love that I needed you?”

Anson flinched as though she had struck him. “What’s the difference?”

“Everything,” Eliza said. “Love is two wholes. We were a crutch and a cripple. You needed me to be broken so you could feel strong.”

He took a step toward her.

“I was dependent on you, Anson. I mistook safety for love. That’s on me — I own that mistake.” She took a step back. “But now I’m standing on my own. And I don’t need the crutch.”

“You have Koch,” Anson said bitterly, gesturing out toward the city. “He’s just a new crutch. A richer, more violent one.”

“No,” Eliza said. “He’s my partner. He let me walk into the fire to save myself. You would have locked me in a tower to keep the smoke away.”

Anson hurled his glass against the stone railing. Crystal shards rained down onto the patio below. “I won’t accept this.”

“You don’t have to accept it,” Eliza said, turning to leave. “You just have to respect it.”

He seized her wrist. His grip was desperate, bruising. “Don’t walk away from me! After everything I did!”

“Let go,” Eliza said. Her voice was ice.

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Anson looked into her eyes, searching for the scared little girl he had known – the one he had shaped. But she wasn't there. Instead, he found pity.

The realization burned him more than any anger could. He released her wrist as though it had scorched him.

"You'll come back," he whispered, dark conviction trembling in his voice. "When he breaks you. When you realize you can't survive without me."

"If I break," Eliza said, smoothing her sleeve, "I'll fix myself."

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She walked away. She didn't look back.

Anson watched her go. The sun was setting, casting long shadows across the terrace. His obsession didn't fade with her departure — it curdled, turning into something black and heavy in his gut.

He pulled out his phone.

“Find out where she's going tomorrow,” he said to the private investigator on the other end. “I want to know every move she makes.”

Eliza woke the next morning feeling a strange, unfamiliar clarity. The liquidation was done. Anson was — managed.

“I want to visit Mom and Dad,” Eliza told Dallas over coffee, tracing the rim of her cup. “I haven't been in... a long time.”

Dallas set his mug down without hesitation. “I'll drive.”

Eliza smiled softly. “It's time I introduced you properly.”

Across town, in a dimly lit, upscale bar that smelled of expensive leather and quiet desperation, Sienna Solomon adjusted the hem of her dress.

She spotted him in the corner booth. Anson Hyde, nursing a hangover, staring into a glass of water as though it were a crystal ball. Sienna slid onto the stool beside him.

“Rough night, Anson?”

He didn’t look up. “Go away, Sienna.”

“My family’s money bailed me out, but it didn’t buy me an alibi. I’m a social leper.” She signaled the bartender for a martini and settled in. “It seems Eliza left us both in the dust, didn’t she? The princess and her billionaire.”

Anson stiffened. “Don’t say her name.”

“My mother — Margo — she told me something interesting before the police took her away.” Sienna leaned in, dropping her voice.

“I don’t care about your mother,” Anson said, waving her off.

“She tried to ruin Diana’s marriage. Years ago,” Sienna whispered. “She sent photos to Arthur. Photos of Diana with another man. A boy, really.”

Anson paused. He turned his head slowly to look at her. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I hate them too,” Sienna said, her eyes flashing. “My parents. They made me a pariah. I have nothing, Anson. No money. No status.” She placed a hand on his arm. “I can be useful. I know Eliza. I know her fears. I know where she goes when she’s hurting.”

Anson looked at her hand, then at her face. He saw the naked ambition. He saw a tool.

“You want to be her replacement?” he asked, the words deliberately cruel.

“I want to be Mrs. Hyde,” Sienna said, her voice stripped of any romance. “I don’t care about love. I care about security. Just like you.”

Anson laughed — a dry, humorless sound. “At least you’re honest.”

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Sienna checked her phone. She had paid off a junior accountant at the now-defunct Solomon Industries — a man bitter about his severance — who still had access to Eliza's old personal calendars.

“According to my source, today is her parents' anniversary. She's going to the cemetery,” Sienna said, sipping her drink.

Anson's eyes darkened. “The cemetery.”

“If you want her back,” Sienna said, “you need to remind her of the past. Remind her why she owes you.”

Anson stood abruptly. He threw a hundred-dollar bill on the counter. “Stay away from me, Sienna. You smell like desperation.” He stormed out — but he didn’t go home. He headed straight for his car.

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Sienna watched him go, smiling quietly into her glass. The seed was planted.

“Are you nervous?” Dallas asked as they turned off the highway.

Eliza held a bouquet of white roses in her lap. “A little. They never met a boyfriend of mine. Anson wouldn’t let me date.”

“Husband,” Dallas corrected. His hand moved from the gear shift to rest firmly on her thigh.

“Husband,” Eliza repeated. The word tasted sweet.

They turned through the cemetery gates, the wrought iron looming overhead in the pale morning light.

In the rearview mirror, a black SUV followed at a discreet distance. Dallas's eyes flicked to the mirror, then back to the road. His jaw tightened.

The air in the cemetery was crisp, smelling of damp earth and decaying leaves. The silence was the kind that pressed against one's eardrums.

Eliza led Dallas through the rows of headstones, her boots crunching on the gravel path. They stopped beneath a large oak tree.

Diana and Arthur Solomon.

The granite was cold beneath Eliza's fingertips. She knelt and placed the roses at the base of the stone.

"Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad," she whispered. Her throat felt tight. "I brought someone." She glanced up at Dallas. He stood a few feet back, hands clasped in front of him, respectful and still. "This is Dallas."

Dallas stepped forward and knelt beside her. "Sir. Ma'am."

“He saved me,” Eliza told the headstone. “More than once.”

Dallas stared at the name Diana Solomon. A muscle ticked in his jaw. The name felt strangely familiar – an echo from a distant, harsher chapter of his life, a memory he couldn’t quite grasp, like a word caught on the tip of his tongue. He pushed it aside. This was Eliza’s moment.

In the parking lot, Anson lowered his binoculars.

He watched them kneeling together. From this distance, it looked like a proposal. It looked like intimacy.

Rage boiled in his gut, hot and acidic. That was his spot. His tradition. He was the one who brought the lilies. He was the one who paid the groundskeeper to keep the moss off the stone.

Remind her of the past, Sienna had said.

He reached for his phone.

Eliza's phone rang, shattering the quiet.

She looked at the screen. Anson.

"It's Anson," she said, frowning.

Dallas's expression hardened instantly. "Don't answer."

"If I don't, he might show up." She glanced around uneasily. "He knows where I am. He always knows."

She swiped to answer. "What do you want?"

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“Do they know?” Anson’s voice was slurred, thick with alcohol and malice.

“Know what?”

“That you killed them,” he said.

A jolt — cold and horribly familiar — shot through Eliza. Her knees went weak. It was a conditioned response, a phantom pain born from a decade of his psychological warfare. “What are you talking about?”

“If you hadn’t asked for that toy... if you hadn’t delayed them at the store... they wouldn’t have been on that stretch of road when the car went off the cliff.” His voice was a snake in her ear. It was a lie — a specific, carefully crafted lie he used to tell her when she was fourteen, designed to make her cry, to make her cling to him for absolution. “It was the timing, Eliza,” he whispered. “Your fault. Just like the guesthouse fire was your fault. You destroy everything around you. And I’m the only one who was ever there to pull you out.”

Eliza trembled – but this time, something new rose through the fear. Cold, hard certainty. The ghost story had lost its power.

Dallas saw the color drain from her face. He didn't ask questions. He took the phone from her hand.

“That lie doesn't work anymore, Anson,” Eliza said, her voice unsteady but clear enough for the microphone to catch. “I know who cut the brakes. I know it was Buck. Your stories are over.”

“Listen to me, you piece of trash,” Dallas growled into the receiver, his voice terrifyingly low. “If you ever call her again, I will bury you in the plot next to them. Do you understand me?”

He didn't wait for an answer. He hung up and closed his fist around the phone. The screen cracked with a sickening snap.

“He's lying,” Dallas said, taking hold of Eliza's shoulders. “It was Buck. He cut the lines. That is physics. That is fact. You did not kill them.”

Eliza nodded. A single tear escaped — not grief, but rage. “I know. I know. But God, he knows exactly where to cut.”

In the parking lot, Anson lowered his binoculars. He had seen her face — not broken with grief, but twisted in anger. He had seen Dallas holding her.

Eliza was still shaking, adrenaline and fury mixing in her blood.

“For years,” she stammered, staring at the headstone, “he made me believe I was responsible. That my childish whim was their death sentence.”

“Stop,” Dallas said firmly. “Buck cut the lines. Evil isn’t your fault.”

An old man in denim overalls approached, dragging a rake behind him. He stopped when he saw Eliza and squinted against the sun.

“Miss Solomon? Is that you?”

Eliza wiped her eyes. “Yes, Mr. Henderson.”

He was the groundskeeper. She hadn't seen him in years.

"Haven't seen you in a long time," he said, leaning on his rake. "But your brother – he never misses a week."

Eliza frowned. "My... brother?"

"The young man. Mr. Hyde." Henderson nodded toward the grave. "Comes every Sunday. Rain or shine. Ten years running."

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A chill that had nothing to do with the wind moved through her. “Every week?”

“Aye. Pays for the fresh lilies himself. Talks to them for hours.” Henderson chuckled, as though sharing a sweet story. “Mostly about you, miss. How he’s keeping you safe. How he’s fixing your mistakes. How hard it is to raise you right.”

Dallas stiffened beside her. Eliza could feel the heat radiating off him.

“He told them he was going to marry you,” Henderson added. “Asked for their blessing last week. Said he’d finally broken you enough to mold you.” He tipped his cap and walked away, oblivious to what he had just said.

Eliza stood very still. Anson hadn’t just been controlling her in life. He had been standing over her parents’ grave, reporting to them – narrating his ownership of her as though they had sanctioned it. It wasn’t devotion. It was a shrine to his control.

“He’s been here,” she whispered. “Every week. Talking to them.”

She looked at the grave. The fresh lilies Anson had placed there suddenly looked like chains. Like bars on a cage.

“It’s not love,” she said, her voice trembling with rage. “It’s sickness.”

She grabbed the lilies. The stems snapped in her hands. She marched to the nearby trash bin and hurled them in.

“I don’t want his flowers on them,” she cried, turning to Dallas. “I don’t want his stain on them!”

“We’ll replace them,” Dallas said, stepping close. “With roses. Every week. I’ll bring them myself.”

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“He’s everywhere, Dallas. I can’t breathe.” Eliza’s hands flew to her throat. “He’s in the ground. He’s in the air.”

“I’ve got you,” Dallas said. Without hesitation, he swept her up into his arms. “Just breathe.”

He carried her out of the cemetery, past the silent watching eyes of the stone angels. Eliza buried her face in his neck and inhaled the scent of him, trying to drown out Anson's ghost.

From his car, Anson watched Dallas carry Eliza away. His gaze fell to the trash bin and the broken lilies inside it.

He gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles cracked.

"She threw away my flowers," he muttered.

She rejects my penance. His eyes went flat, emptied of anything human.

He started the engine. "If I can't have her peace, I'll have her chaos."

Dallas settled Eliza gently into the passenger seat and closed the door. "We're leaving," he said. "Somewhere he can't find us."

Dallas drove fast. The speedometer climbed as they hit the highway, putting miles between them and the cemetery.

Eliza was curled in the passenger seat, staring at the dashboard.

“He dedicated ten years to them. To me,” she murmured. The guilt was a reflex — a habit Anson had installed in her long ago.

Dallas’s hands tightened on the wheel. “Dedication isn’t ownership, El.”

“I know. But... it makes me feel like I owe him. Like I’m ungrateful,” Eliza admitted.

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Dallas pulled over onto the shoulder of the empty scenic road. Gravel crunched under the tires. He put the car in park, unbuckled his seatbelt, and turned to face her.

“Look at me,” he said.

Eliza met his blue eyes. They were intense, burning with a need she rarely saw in him.

“Does his ten years of service make you love him?” Dallas asked.

“No,” Eliza said, without hesitation.

“Then who do you love?” he pressed. “Tell me the truth. No debt. No gratitude. No ‘because you saved me.’ Just desire.”

Eliza reached out and touched his face. His stubble scratched her palm.

“I love the man who let me hold on to him when I was breaking,” she whispered.
“The man who bought my home back without asking for credit. I love you, Dallas.”

Dallas let out a breath he seemed to have been holding for days.

He leaned in and kissed her — not gently, but deep and desperate, erasing Anson’s touch, Anson’s words, Anson’s memory.

“Say it again,” he whispered against her lips.

“I love you,” Eliza smiled, the tears on her cheeks already drying.

Dallas rested his forehead against hers. “That’s all I need to fight the world.”

He put the car back in gear. “I’m taking you to the Lake House. We need to reset.”

He merged back onto the road. The sun was setting, bruising the sky in shades of purple and orange.

Then a black truck appeared behind them — huge, filling the rearview mirror, closing fast.

“Proximity warning.” Sentinel’s calm, British voice — the AI integrated into the vehicle — broke the quiet. “Vehicle approaching at high speed.”

Dallas glanced at the mirror. “Tailgater.” He changed lanes to let it pass.

The truck changed lanes with them. Aggressively.

“It’s not a tailgater,” Dallas said, his voice dropping into combat mode. “It’s a hit.”

“What?” Eliza grabbed the door handle.

“Hold on!”

He floored the accelerator. The engine roared.

The truck slammed into their bumper. Crunch. Eliza screamed as the car lurched forward, whiplash snapping her head back.

“Sentinel – evasive maneuvers!” Dallas shouted.

The truck pulled up alongside them. Eliza turned and saw the driver. Ski mask. No face.

He swerved hard into their lane – a T-bone attempt at eighty miles per hour.

Dallas steered into the skid, fighting the wheel with both hands, but the truck was heavier. They were being pushed – steadily, inevitably – toward the guardrail. Beyond it, a steep embankment dropped away into darkness.

“Brace!” Dallas shouted, throwing his right arm across Eliza’s chest and pinning her to the seat.

The car hit the guardrail. Metal screamed against metal – a high-pitched shriek that tore through her eardrums.

The truck rammed them one final time. Hard.

The guardrail gave way.

The world flipped.

They tumbled down the embankment. Sky. Ground. Sky. Ground.

A deafening series of pops filled the cabin as Sentinel deployed the wraparound curtain and knee-blocker airbags, encasing them in a protective cocoon seconds before the final impact.

The car came to rest upside down.

Silence.

Then the slow hiss of the radiator. Hssss.

“Eliza!” Dallas’s voice was rough. He was coughing.

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Chapter 220:

Eliza blinked. Blood dripped into her eyes. She was hanging from her seatbelt.

“Dallas...” she groaned.

“I’m here. We need to move — possible fuel leak.” She heard the snick of a knife. He cut his own belt and dropped down onto the roof of the car, then crawled to her. His forehead was bleeding, a gash running into his eyebrow.

“Don’t move your neck,” he ordered. He checked her quickly for spinal injury with professional, practiced hands.

“I’m okay,” Eliza whispered.

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He cut her belt and caught her as she fell.

He kicked the passenger door. Jammed. He kicked it again, harder. The hinges shrieked and gave way.

He dragged her out into the tall grass. Cool air hit Eliza’s face.

“Up there,” Dallas whispered, pointing toward the road.

A silhouette stood against the dying sun. The truck driver. He had a gun.

Dallas pulled her behind a large rock. “Stay down.”

He reached down and pulled up his pant leg, revealing a holster strapped to his ankle. A gun.

Eliza stared. “You have a gun?”

“I have many things,” he murmured.

The gunman fired blindly down the slope. Bang. Bang. Dirt kicked up near their feet.

Dallas didn't flinch. He waited, counting.

Bang. Bang. Bang. Click.

Reload.

In that split second of silence, Dallas moved. Not like a hero in a film — no dramatic rise, no silhouette against the sky. He came up just enough over the rock in one fluid, economical motion. He aimed and fired once.

A cry of pain echoed from the road. The silhouette dropped to one knee, clutching his shoulder.

The gunman scrambled back to the truck. An engine roared, tires screamed, and he was gone.

Dallas didn't pursue. He holstered the gun and turned to Eliza, his hands trembling slightly now that the threat had passed.

"Are you hurt?" He scanned her, hands moving fast.

"My arm..." Eliza winced, clutching her left arm. "It hurts."

Sirens wailed in the distance. Sentinel had already sent the distress signal.

"We survived," Dallas said, pulling her into his chest. "We survived."

The hospital lights were too bright. Everything smelled of antiseptic and fear.

Eliza's arm was fractured, now encased in a black sling. Dallas had a bandage on his forehead – stark white against his tan skin.

Weston walked into the private room holding a tablet. He looked grim.

“We ID'd the truck,” he said, without preamble. “Stolen plates. But the driver left DNA on a shell casing. He's a mercenary.”

“Who hired him?” Dallas asked. His voice was ice.

“The Luna family. Specifically, Mrs. Luna. She wants revenge for Dante.”

“She wants a war,” Dallas said, standing. “She'll get an apocalypse.”

The door swung open and Azalea rushed in, her face pale, her usual composure absent. She pulled Eliza into a careful hug, mindful of the sling. “Are you okay? I heard – it's all over the news.”

“We're fine,” Eliza said.

“There’s more.” Azalea looked at Dallas. “The Hyde family — Anson — he’s going after the Lunas too.”

“He’s doing what?” Eliza asked.

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