

Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 271:

“I don't know what you mean,” Anson said, his voice warm with feigned innocence. “Are you going to the gallery tonight? Diana's exhibition? It's a big night for the family. We should go together.”

“No,” Eliza said, her voice shaking. “I am going alone. You stay away from me. You stay away from that gallery.”

“As you wish,” Anson said. “Enjoy the show.”

He hung up.

Anson lowered the phone and looked across the room. Suki was seated at a vanity, a makeup artist applying the finishing touches. She was almost unrecognizable.

“Tonight is your debut, Suki,” Anson said, walking toward her. “Remember — you are Eliza Solomon. The wild version. The one who wants to burn it all down.” He picked up a Venetian mask from the table: black lace, delicate and sinister. “Put this on. The invitation says ‘Hidden Layers.’ Tonight, you are the hidden layer.”

Back at the penthouse, Eliza stood in her closet. She pushed past the colorful dresses Dallas liked, moved them aside without hesitation, and pulled out a black gown. Severe. Elegant. Almost mourning attire.

She would go. She would find Dallas. And she would force him to look at her – the real her – not whatever ghost Anson had conjured.

Serena Q's Art Gallery had been transformed. The lighting was dramatically low, spotlights cutting through an artificial haze to illuminate the vibrant, emotional paintings on the walls. Guests moved like shadows, their faces obscured by elaborate masks.

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Eliza walked in. She wore a simple black lace mask that covered her eyes but left her mouth visible. Despite the disguise, she felt exposed.

She scanned the room. No sign of Dallas.

She spotted Serena near the entrance, holding a glass of champagne she wasn't drinking. Serena looked anxious.

“Eliza,” Serena hurried over, her voice hushed. “You came.”

“Where is he?” Eliza asked without preamble.

“He’s upstairs.” Serena gestured toward the glass-walled VIP loft overlooking the main floor. “In the private viewing room. But Eliza — he gave strict orders. No one enters.”

Eliza looked up. The glass was tinted; she couldn’t see inside. But she felt him. His presence was a weight pressing down on the entire building.

“I’m going up,” she said.

She moved toward the stairs, but a large security guard stepped into her path. “Private event upstairs, ma’am.”

A ripple of whispers moved through the crowd near the entrance.

Eliza turned.

Anson Hyde had arrived. He was wearing a tuxedo and a silver mask.

And on his arm was a woman.

Eliza stopped breathing.

The woman was wearing a black gown. Not merely similar to Eliza's — identical. The same cut, the same fabric, the same drape. Even her hair was styled in the same loose waves Eliza had spent an hour perfecting. She wore a mask that mirrored Eliza's exactly.

“Who is that?” Eliza whispered.

Anson guided the woman — Suki — toward a darker corner of the gallery, away from the main lights but perfectly visible from the VIP loft above.

Upstairs, Zane stood at the railing, looking down.

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He saw Eliza near the stairs – the real one. Then his eyes swept to the entrance. He saw Anson. And the woman on his arm.

From his elevated angle, through the distortion of the masks and the dim, hazy light, Zane's mind filled in the gaps with prejudice. He assumed the woman standing alone near the stairs was a guest. He assumed the woman with Anson was Eliza.

“Son of a bitch,” Zane hissed. “She actually brought him.”

Below, Suki played her part. She leaned into Anson, her hand sliding up his chest, fingers toying with his bowtie. She threw her head back in a silent, visual laugh that looked intimate and reckless.

Eliza was waylaid by a cluster of socialites. “Eliza! Darling! Is that you? We haven’t seen you since the wedding!”

“Excuse me,” Eliza tried to press past them, her eyes fixed on the woman in her dress. “I need to—”

But they surrounded her, a wall of perfume and chatter.

Upstairs, Zane pulled out his phone and aimed it at the corner where Anson and Suki stood. Suki whispered something in Anson’s ear and then kissed his neck — a slow, lingering, possessive kiss.

“Look at your wife, Dallas,” Zane muttered, hitting record. “Look at what she’s doing at her own mother’s memorial.”

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Eliza finally broke free. She rushed toward the corner, intending to tear the mask from that woman’s face.

But Anson saw her coming. He seized Suki's hand and they slipped through a side door into the alley.

Eliza ran after them — and collided with a hard chest.

It was Zane. He had come down the stairs.

“Having fun, Mrs. Koch?” His voice was drenched in acid.

“Zane, that woman—” Eliza pointed at the closing side door. “That wasn't me. I've been standing right here!”

“Save it.” Zane raised his phone. “Dallas is watching the live feed.”

Eliza looked at the screen. A video. The woman in the black dress — her dress — kissing Anson's neck.

“That's not me!” Eliza's voice cracked with rising panic. “Look at me, Zane! I'm right here!”

“Yeah, you are,” Zane said, looking her over slowly. “Wearing the same dress. Same hair. Same mask. What — did you clone yourself? Or did you run over here after he left to play the victim?”

“It’s a trick!” Eliza grabbed his arm. “Anson set this up!”

“The only trick,” Zane pulled free, “is the one you played on Dallas.”

The VIP room was dark, lit only by the cold glow of the massive flat-screen television on the wall.

Dallas sat in a leather armchair. He wasn’t moving. He wasn’t blinking.

On the screen, the video Zane had sent was looping. The woman in the black dress. Anson’s hands on her waist. The kiss.

Simmons stood in the corner, holding a glass of scotch, looking deeply uncomfortable.

“Boss,” he said quietly. “Turn it off. It’s torture.”

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“She’s wearing the dress,” Dallas said. His voice was a low rumble, like stone grinding against stone. “The black Givenchy. I saw the receipt on the audit log this morning. Anson bought two of them – one for his prop, and one for my wife.” He pointed a trembling finger at the screen. “And she put it on. She accepted his gift.”

“Maybe—” Simmons started, then stopped. There was no maybe.

The door flew open. Zane marched in, pulling Eliza by the arm.

“Here she is,” Zane said, shoving her into the room. “Let her explain it to your face.”

Eliza stumbled, catching herself on the back of a sofa. She looked up and found Dallas.

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He looked terrifying. Cold. Detached. Like the man he had been before he ever knew her.

“Dallas,” Eliza gasped, stepping forward. “Please. That wasn’t me downstairs. Anson brought a woman dressed like me. It’s a setup.”

“A setup,” Zane scoffed. “With a body double? This isn’t a spy film, Eliza.”

“It’s true!” Eliza pointed at the frozen image on the screen. “Look closely — she’s shorter! Look at her!”

“You’re wearing the dress,” Dallas said. He stood and walked toward her, towering over her. “The dress Anson bought. The dress that was delivered to the penthouse.”

Eliza froze. “No — you sent it. The card had your handwriting.”

“I didn’t send anything, Eliza,” Dallas said softly, his voice all the more dangerous for its quiet. “I haven’t been home. That card was a forgery. And you fell for it. You put on the clothes he bought you, and you went to him.”

“I didn’t!” Eliza was crying now, tears leaking from beneath her mask. She tore it off and threw it to the floor. “I thought it was from you! I am standing here telling you I love you! Why would I do this?”

“Because you never stopped loving him,” Dallas said. “Because I was just the bank account that got you out of trouble.”

“No!” Eliza reached for him.

Dallas stepped back. “Get out.”

“Dallas—”

“GET OUT!”

He seized the heavy crystal decanter from the table and hurled it at the wall-mounted television.

The screen shattered, sparks erupting outward, the image of the kissing couple dissolving into a spiderweb of broken glass. Eliza flinched, throwing her arms up over her head.

“Zane,” Dallas said, breathing hard, his back to her. “Remove her.”

Zane took hold of Eliza’s arm. “Let’s go.”

“Dallas, please!” Eliza screamed as Zane pulled her toward the door. “He’s winning! Don’t let him win!”

The door slammed shut.

Silence descended on the room.

Dallas stood amid the broken glass, shaking.

“I’m going to the estate,” he said suddenly.

Simmons stepped forward. “What? No. You’ve been drinking. It’s storming out there.”

“I need to see.” Dallas turned, his eyes wild. “If there really is a double — if she’s telling the truth — Anson will have her at the estate. I need to see if there are two of them.”

It was a desperate, irrational hope. The last remaining fragment of his heart searching for a reason to believe her.

“Dallas, don’t,” Simmons said.

Dallas grabbed his keys from the table. “If I’m wrong, I’ll beg on my knees. But I have to know.”

He stormed out, leaving Simmons alone in the wreckage.

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The rain fell in a solid sheet, hammering against the windshield of the Maybach. The wipers were useless, thrashing back and forth against the deluge.

Dallas drove fast, but the traffic and the storm fought him at every turn. It took nearly two hours to reach the coastal road leading to the Hyde Estate — time enough for doubts to fester, time enough for the whiskey to sour in his gut.

His knuckles were white on the leather steering wheel. The alcohol buzzed through his system, blurring the edges of his vision, but his mind was locked onto a single destination.

Hyde Estate.

He parked on the shoulder of the road, concealed by overgrown trees. He didn't drive up to the gate. He got out into the rain.

The cold water soaked him instantly, ruining his suit and plastering his hair flat against his forehead. He didn't feel it.

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He moved through the mud, skirting the perimeter fence until he reached the side garden – the same garden from the photograph. He crept toward the house like a thief.

Inside the estate, in the warm, golden-lit kitchen, Anson checked his phone.

Target acquired. Sector 4.

His security team had spotted Dallas.

“Showtime,” Anson murmured. “She’s been home for hours, remember.” He turned to Suki and gave a quiet signal.

She stood at the kitchen island, wearing Eliza’s favorite oversized sweater — one Anson had kept for years. The heavy stage makeup had been scrubbed away. She looked fresh-faced. Innocent.

Anson reached for the dimmer switch and turned it up, flooding the kitchen with warm amber light. It transformed the room into a stage, perfectly visible through the floor-to-ceiling glass windows.

Dallas stood in the mud, rain dripping from his nose, and looked through the glass.

The whiskey, the rage, and his lingering fever formed a potent cocktail that blurred the edges of reason. He wasn’t seeing with his eyes anymore — he was seeing with the raw, gaping wound in his chest.

He saw her.

A woman stood at the kitchen island, laughing, cutting a piece of cake. She looked happy. Comfortable. At home. As if she had never been at the gallery. As if she had been here all along.

Push him away, Dallas pleaded silently. If he touches you, push him away.

Anson walked into the frame. He came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, burying his face in her neck.

Suki didn't push him away. She leaned back into him, then turned in his arms and fed him a piece of cake.

The distance, the rain, the emotional exhaustion — all of it conspired to conceal the subtle differences in Suki's face. To Dallas, looking through a streaming pane of glass with his judgment clouded by betrayal and alcohol, it was his wife. The wife who had wept in his office about wanting to be free. The wife who swore she hated Anson.

Feeding him cake.

Anson lifted her onto the counter. Her legs wrapped around his waist.

It was intimate. It was revolting.

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And to Dallas, standing in the dark and the rain, it was the truth.

He felt something break inside him — not a crack, but a complete structural failure. The desperate hope he had clung to on the drive over, the last fragile belief that there was a misunderstanding, evaporated entirely.

She was a liar. A beautiful, perfect liar.

He couldn't watch anymore.

Dallas turned away from the window. He stumbled, his foot sliding in the mud, and went down on one knee. The rain beat against his back, mixing with the earth beneath him. He pushed himself up, swaying, and walked back to the car.

The winding coastal road was treacherous even in good weather. In a storm, at night, with a drunk and heartbroken man behind the wheel, it was a death trap.

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The speedometer on the Maybach climbed. 90... 100... 110 mph.

Dallas didn't care. He wanted to outrun the image burned into his retinas. Eliza on the counter. Eliza kissing Anson.

"Why?" he screamed, slamming his hand against the steering wheel. The leather groaned under the impact. "I gave you everything!"

He had built a world for her. He had destroyed her enemies. He had opened his veins and bled for her.

And she had gone back to the man who caged her.

His phone buzzed on the passenger seat. Zane was calling.

Dallas ignored it.

He came around a sharp bend. The headlights cut through the dark, illuminating the wet asphalt.

Suddenly, a pair of high beams blinded him.

A black, unmarked semi-trailer truck — its lights off until the last second — deliberately swerved from the opposite lane and rammed his rear quarter panel.

Dallas reacted on instinct. He yanked the wheel to the right, but it was already too late. The chassis groaned, the electronics shorted for a split second — long enough for the steering to lock.

Sabotage.

The tires lost traction on the slick road. The heavy car hydroplaned, spinning, the world dissolving into a blur of motion and fragmented light.

The car slammed through the guardrail. Metal screamed as it tore apart. The Maybach tumbled down the embankment, rolling once, twice.

Glass exploded inward. The airbags deployed with a violent, blunt force.

The car came to rest against a massive oak tree at the bottom of the ravine.

Silence.

Steam hissed from the crushed radiator. The rain drummed a soft, indifferent rhythm against the twisted metal roof.

Dallas was pinned in the driver's seat. Blood ran down his forehead, blinding one eye. His leg was trapped beneath the collapsed dash.

He tried to move. His body refused. Pain — white-hot and searing — tore through his lower half.

His phone, miraculously intact, had landed on the floor mat. The screen lit up.

Incoming Call: Eliza.

Dallas turned his head. It took every ounce of strength he had. He looked at her name.

She was calling. Probably to tell him she was coming home. Probably to lie to him again.

His finger twitched toward it. He could reach it. He could answer.

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He let his hand fall.

“Liar,” he whispered. A bubble of blood formed on his lips.

The darkness rushed in and swallowed him whole.

In the penthouse, Eliza stared at her phone. It rang and rang until it rolled to voicemail.

Please leave a message. Dallas’s voice was crisp, professional.

“Dallas, please pick up,” Eliza said, her voice breaking. “I’m home. I’m at the apartment. Where are you?”

She hung up. Her hands were trembling.

She called Zane. Straight to voicemail. She called again.

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“Eliza?” Zane answered on the second ring. His voice was high and strained, the background filled with noise. Sirens.

“Zane! Where is he?” Eliza demanded.

“He’s—” Zane hesitated. “He’s drunk, Eliza. We’re taking care of him.”

“I hear sirens, Zane,” she said, gripping the phone. “Is he hurt?”

“No,” Zane said quickly. Too quickly. “It’s just city noise. Look — he doesn’t want to talk to you. He saw you at the estate.”

“He saw a fake!” Eliza shouted.

“Just stay there,” Zane said. “Don’t come looking for him. He needs space.”

The line went dead.

Eliza set the phone down on the sofa. She walked to the window. Rain lashed against the glass in long, blurred streaks.

Far below, in the distance, she could see the flashing lights of emergency vehicles racing toward the coast.

She pressed her hand flat against the cold glass. Her heart hammered against her ribs in a frantic, wordless rhythm.

She knew. Deep down, she already knew.

He wasn't drunk. He was gone.

Three days.

Three days of silence. Three days of Eliza wearing a track into the expensive carpet as she paced the penthouse floor. She had gone to Koch Tower. Security had

stopped her at the lobby turnstiles — her pass had been deactivated. She had gone to the Koch Estate. The gates stayed closed. The intercom was silent.

She was a ghost. Erased from his life as efficiently as a deleted line of code.

Anson sat in his study at the Hyde Estate, cleaning an antique flintlock pistol. The oil rag moved in slow, rhythmic circles.

Suki stood before his desk, wearing her own clothes now — cheap jeans and a hoodie. She looked nervous.

“Here.” Anson slid a check across the desk. “The balance. Plus a bonus for the performance.”

Suki picked it up. Her eyes widened at the number. “Mr. Hyde... I heard on the news. Mr. Koch — the accident. Is he...?”

“It was an unfortunate accident caused by the weather,” Anson said smoothly, not looking up. “Unrelated to us.”

“Will they investigate?” Suki asked, her voice trembling.

“Why would they?” Anson smiled coldly. “He was drunk. He was speeding. It’s a tragedy, but a simple one.” He raised the pistol and sighted down the barrel at the wall. “You have a flight to catch, Suki. Paris. I’ve arranged a long vacation. When you return, I expect you to have found a new look. Something less... familiar.”

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Suki touched her face. “But I like looking like her. It pays well.”

Anson slammed the gun down on the desk. Suki flinched at the sound.

“That is not your face,” Anson said, his eyes dark and dangerous. “That is Eliza’s face. You have a similar bone structure — a useful canvas — but you are a cheap copy. You don’t deserve it. Get rid of it, or I will rid you of it myself.”

Suki went pale. She snatched the check and fled the room.

Anson watched her go. “There is only one Eliza,” he whispered. “And she is coming home.”

Back at the penthouse, the elevator chimed.

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Eliza sprinted to the foyer. “Dallas?”

It was Weston. Dallas’s executive assistant. He looked terrible — suit rumpled, eyes shadowed with fatigue. He wouldn’t meet her gaze.

“Weston!” Eliza grabbed his arm. “Where is he? Is he alive? Tell me!”

Weston gently removed her hand and stepped back, maintaining a careful professional distance.

“Mr. Koch is alive, ma’am,” he said stiffly.

Eliza let out a sob of relief, her knees nearly buckling. “Oh, thank God. Where is he? Take me to him.”

“Mr. Koch has been called away to Siberia,” Weston said. The words tasted like ash in his mouth. “An urgent family matter involving his grandmother, Gigi. He left this morning.”

“Siberia?” Eliza frowned. “Without telling me? Without packing a bag?”

“He has clothes there,” Weston said, reciting the script Zane had given him. “He instructed me to tell you that he needs time. To evaluate the marriage.”

“He wants a divorce?” Eliza whispered.

“He didn’t say that.” Weston reached into his pocket and produced a black American Express card, holding it out to her. “He asked me to give you this. For expenses.”

Eliza looked at the card. Heavy, metal, cold. It felt like a payoff — like being handed money to leave quietly.

“I don’t want his money.” She threw the card at Weston. It struck his chest and clattered to the floor. “I want my husband. I want to explain.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Koch.” Weston bowed his head. “I have my orders. Mr. Koch also asked me to retrieve his personal effects.” He turned and walked back to the elevator, leaving Eliza alone in the cold foyer.

She stood there, and she knew it was a lie.

Dallas would never leave for a business trip without his laptop. It was still sitting on his desk in the study. She had already checked.

She ran to their bedroom. A large sealed evidence bag from the hospital had been left on the dresser by Weston. Her hands trembled as she tore it open. Inside were the clothes Dallas had been wearing that night, cut to shreds by paramedics, stiff with dried blood.

Her fingers found something hard in the pocket of the ruined suit jacket. She pulled it out.

His wedding ring. Heavy, platinum, stained with a single dark drop of his blood.

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The sight struck her like a physical blow, emptying her lungs. He hadn't simply left. He had been taken. He was hurt. He was somewhere, and no one would tell her where.

She needed to find him. If Weston wouldn't talk, she needed someone who couldn't lie.

Dr. Vance. Dallas's personal physician. If Dallas was injured, Vance would know.

Eliza wiped her face. She was not going to sit here and wait for divorce papers.

She was going to find him.

The art gallery was closed, the paintings shrouded in dust sheets. Zane paced back and forth, his footsteps echoing through the empty space.

"You can't tell her," Zane said sharply. "Dallas will kill us. He explicitly said no visitors. Especially her."

Serena was packing a sculpture into a crate. She looked up, her expression fierce. "Zane, he's in the ICU. He was calling her name when he was delirious — before the sedation kicked in."

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“He was calling her a liar,” Zane argued. “The doctors say he may never walk properly again. His leg is shattered. If he sees her — the woman who put him there — his blood pressure will spike. He could stroke out.”

“Maybe there’s an explanation,” Serena said quietly. “Eliza looked so confused that night. What if the video was fake?”

“It’s 4K video, Serena.” Zane threw his hands up. “I took it myself. Unless she has an evil twin, that was her.”

“I’m just saying,” Serena sealed the crate, “it feels wrong. Keeping a wife from her dying husband.”

“She’s not a wife,” Zane said. “She’s a widow. She just doesn’t know it yet.”

It was two in the morning. The city was asleep, but Eliza was wide awake.

She lay in the middle of the king bed, hugging Dallas’s pillow. It still smelled like him — sandalwood and rain.

She picked up her phone and opened their chat history. The last message was hers: Going now. She scrolled up past the photos from the rose garden, past the silly memes Azalea had sent to their group chat.

She pressed the call button.

She expected voicemail.

Ring... Ring... Ring...

It connected.

Eliza sat bolt upright. “Dallas?”

No voice. Just breathing — heavy and labored. And beneath it, in the background: beep... beep... beep. A rhythmic, mechanical sound. A heart monitor.

“Dallas? Is that you?” she cried. “Say something!”

A low groan came through the speaker. The sound of pure, unguarded pain.

Then rustling. A woman's voice, brisk and professional. "Sir, you cannot have that. Give it to me. This is highly irregular."

"No—" Dallas's voice. Weak. Slurred. "El..."

"Sir, you need to rest. Your vitals are unstable. Dr. Vance, we need you in here — his pressure is dropping!"

The line went dead.

Eliza stared at the phone, her heart hammering so hard it hurt.

That wasn't Siberia. That was a hospital. Dr. Vance — Dallas's personal physician — worked exclusively out of the VIP wing at Lenox Hill.

He was here. He was hurt.

"You liar, Weston," Eliza hissed, throwing back the covers.

Her phone rang in her hand. Anson.

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“Eliza,” his voice was smooth, threaded with practiced concern. “I heard a rumor. Is it true Dallas is missing? Do you need company? I can come over.”

“I don’t need you,” Eliza said, her voice cold as stone. “I know where he is.”

“Oh?” Anson’s tone shifted, turning sharp. “Where?”

“Somewhere you can’t reach him.” She paused. “And Anson? If I find out you had anything to do with this—”

“With what?” he said, all innocence. “The rain? I don’t control the weather, El.”

“Go to hell,” Eliza said, and hung up.

She grabbed her coat. She didn’t care about security. She didn’t care about Zane or Weston or the Koch family rules. Her husband was hurting.

And she was going to tear down the hospital doors if she had to.

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Rain slicked Eliza’s hair flat against her skull, cold rivulets running down her neck and soaking into the collar of her blouse. She didn’t feel the chill. She didn’t feel the burn in her lungs from running three blocks after the taxi got stuck in gridlock. She felt only the frantic, bird-like flutter of her heart against her ribs.

She burst through the sliding glass doors of Lenox Hill Hospital, her sneakers squeaking on the polished linoleum. The air inside was dry, smelling of antiseptic and old coffee — a sharp contrast to the humid storm she had left behind.

She didn't stop at the reception desk. She knew where he had to be. The VIP wing. Top floor.

She marched toward the bank of elevators reserved for high-profile patients and slammed her hand against the up button.

Nothing happened. The light didn't turn on.

She pressed it again, harder.

"Ma'am."

A large hand clamped onto her shoulder. It wasn't gentle.

Eliza spun around. Two security guards stood blocking her path, built like linebackers, their faces impassive walls.

"You need a keycard or a retina scan to access the twenty-second floor," the first guard said, his voice a low rumble. "Step back, please."

“I’m his wife,” Eliza said, breathless, trying to shake off his grip. It only tightened. “I’m Eliza Koch. Dallas Koch is up there. Let me through.”

The guard didn’t blink. He looked at her not with sympathy, but the way one looks at a disturbance — a paparazzo with a camera in her purse.

“This floor has been restricted by Koch Industries,” he recited, his tone flat and clearly rehearsed. “All access is managed by Mr. Koch’s executive office. We have no information for you.”

The words struck her like a blow. Her stomach dropped. A restricted floor meant he was here. Weston’s story about Siberia had just collapsed.

“That’s a mistake,” Eliza said, her voice rising, cracking at the edges. “He needs me. Call Zane Sterling. Call Weston. They’ll vouch for me.”

“Mr. Sterling and Mr. Weston are the ones who set the protocols, ma’am,” the second guard said, stepping forward to close the gap. “We have our orders. Please leave the premises, or we will escort you out.”

People in the lobby were staring. Nurses whispered behind their clipboards. A woman in a wheelchair watched Eliza with quiet pity.

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Heat rushed to Eliza's cheeks — a mixture of humiliation and rage. She looked at the elevator doors and pictured Dallas behind them. Was he awake? Was he in pain? Did he really hate her this much?

"I'm not leaving," she said through her teeth.

She lunged sideways, aiming for the stairwell door marked Emergency Only.

The first guard moved faster than a man his size should have. He grabbed her arm, spun her around, and dragged her back toward the center of the lobby. It wasn't an embrace. It was a restraint.

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“Let go of me!” Eliza screamed, thrashing. “Dallas! Dallas!”

The elevator chimed — a soft, cheerful sound in the middle of the chaos.

The silver doors slid open.

A man stepped out wearing a pristine white lab coat over a black t-shirt, a slim metallic stylus tapping idly against the tablet in his other hand. His eyes were dark, amused, and entirely devoid of warmth.

Dr. Vance.

He stopped, leaning against the elevator frame, watching the guards wrestle with a soaking wet and frantic woman. He pursed his lips and let out a low whistle.

“Tsk, tsk,” Vance said, his voice cutting cleanly through the noise. “Look at this. The little bird trying to fly into the hurricane.”

Eliza stopped struggling. She knew him — Dallas’s shadow, the man who stitched him up when the world tried to break him.

“Dr. Vance!” Eliza gasped, wrenching her arm free as the guard loosened his grip at the sight of the doctor. “Tell them who I am. Take me up.”

Vance walked toward her slowly and stopped a foot away, looking down at her. He smelled of rubbing alcohol and expensive cologne.

“I know who you are, Eliza,” he said. “You’re the reason my patient’s blood pressure is spiking through the roof.”

“Is he okay?” Eliza seized the sleeve of his coat, her wet fingers leaving a dark mark on the white fabric. “Please. Just tell me he’s alive.”

Vance glanced at her hand on his sleeve with mild distaste but didn’t pull away.

“Alive?” he said, his tone almost casual. “If you consider a shattered tibia, three broken ribs, and a lung barely holding inflation to be alive. He nearly died on the table last night.”

Eliza's hands flew to her mouth. The air left the room. "Oh my God."

"He was driving like a maniac," Vance continued, conversational and cruel in equal measure. "In the rain. Blind drunk. Because he saw something he shouldn't have seen. Sound familiar?"

The guilt hit her like a stone sinking into still water. "It wasn't me," she whispered. "The video, the photo — it wasn't me."

"Doesn't matter what I think," Vance shrugged. "Matters what he thinks. And right now, he thinks you're the devil."

"I have to see him," Eliza said. "I can explain. If I can just look at him—"

"He doesn't want to see you," Vance cut her off. "Weston and Zane are up there now, taking shifts. If Weston sees you, he might actually throw you out the window. We're on the twenty-second floor. It's a long drop."

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