

Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 41:

He brought both hands down against the shelves on either side of her head, caging her in. For a moment, the armor cracked.

“You are going to see him,” he said, the vulnerability bleeding through the anger. “I need to know you are coming back to me.”

Eliza looked into his eyes. She saw the jealousy burning there — bright and consuming. He wasn't trying to control her for the sake of power. He was terrified that Anson still held something she hadn't fully taken back.

“I am your wife, Dallas,” she whispered.

“Words,” he said.

He leaned in. He didn't ask permission this time.

He kissed her.

It wasn't gentle. It was searing — hungry and desperate, the kiss of a man trying to breathe for someone else. He tasted of scotch and barely restrained fear.

Eliza gasped, and he used the opening to deepen the kiss, his mouth claiming every part of hers.

Her hands found his lapels. She meant to push him away. She genuinely meant to. But her fingers curled into the fabric and pulled him closer instead.

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She kissed him back. Fueled by the anxiety of tomorrow, by weeks of walls and contracts and careful distance, she poured everything she had into it.

Dallas groaned — a deep sound that resonated in his chest and vibrated against her.

He lifted her effortlessly, pressing her back against the shelves. Her legs wrapped around his waist on instinct. His hand slid up her thigh, bunching the fabric of her skirt. His touch was hot and unhurried. As his fingers grazed the sensitive skin of her inner thigh, she felt him press something cool and foil-wrapped into her palm.

A condom. The message was unmistakable. No more pills.

“Dallas —” she breathed, breaking the kiss. “Not here.”

“Where?” he murmured against her lips, his mouth brushing the sensitive skin at the corner of hers. “The bedroom? Finally?”

Eliza looked at him. She was tired of fighting. Tired of the walls, tired of the careful distance she had built around herself like scaffolding around something that hadn't needed it in a long time.

“Yes,” she said.

Dallas didn't hesitate. He carried her down the hallway and kicked the bedroom door open with a crash.

The contract was burning to ash in her mind. Tonight, there were no clauses. There was only him.

Sunlight filtered through the heavy curtains and found Eliza's face. She woke slowly, her body heavy and achingly tender in places she wasn't accustomed to.

She was in Dallas's bed.

The memories of the night came flooding back — the intensity, the way he had looked at her, the way his hands had moved over her, reverent and demanding at once.

She turned her head. Dallas was watching her. He was propped on one elbow, the sheet pooling at his waist, wearing an expression she had never seen on him before.

He looked satisfied. The tension that lived permanently in his shoulders was gone. The machine had been switched off, and a man remained in its place.

“Good morning, Mrs. Koch,” he said, his voice low and unhurried.

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Chapter 42:

Eliza yanked the sheet up to her chin. “Oh god.”

She scrambled out of bed, wrapped the sheet around herself like a toga, and fled to the en-suite bathroom.

She looked in the mirror.

She gasped.

Her neck. Her collarbone. The curve of her shoulder. All of it was mapped in dark purple marks – deliberate, unmistakable.

“Dallas!” she called out, her voice rising. “I have a Gala tonight!”

Dallas appeared in the doorway. He was entirely unclothed and entirely unashamed, leaning against the frame with a lazy smile.

“Makeup exists,” he said.

“This won’t cover with makeup! You did this on purpose!” she accused, gesturing at her mottled neck.

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“Perhaps,” he admitted, the mischief evident in his eyes. “I got carried away.”

“Carried away? You chewed on me!”

Eliza stormed past him into her own closet. She pulled out the dress Azalea had chosen weeks ago – a stunning, strapless emerald gown.

Impossible. It would reveal everything.

She pushed frantically through her wardrobe, shoving past the modern pieces, searching for anything with coverage. At the very back, she found it: a vintage black silk gown purchased at an estate sale years ago. It had a high, Victorian-style collar that rose to her chin and sleeves that fell to the wrist.

Severe. Modest. Elegant in a funereal way.

She put it on. It covered every single mark.

She walked out into the living room. Dallas was already dressed in a suit — he had somewhere to be, though not with her.

He looked at the dress. He frowned.

“You are hiding my work,” he said.

“I am hiding your vandalism,” she corrected, pinning her hair into a tight bun.

Dallas crossed the room to her. He took her hand and pressed his lips to her knuckles.

“Go,” he said softly. “But remember what is under that dress.” He leaned in close, his mouth at her ear. “And remember who you belong to when you see him.”

A flush of heat spread through her body, responding to his voice before her mind could intervene. “I know,” she said.

She took the elevator down to the lobby. A car was waiting at the curb. Azalea, who had apparently just arrived, was already in the backseat.

“Whoa,” Azalea said as Eliza slid in beside her. “You look like a sexy nun. Or a very chic vampire.” She studied Eliza for a moment. “I cut the trip short. I had a bad feeling about you walking into that viper’s nest alone. Good thing I did, right?”

“Don’t ask,” Eliza said, turning toward the window.

As the car pulled away from the building, she touched her neck through the cool silk. The bruises throbbed faintly beneath her fingers.

She felt different. She was no longer the girl who had been left behind. She carried Dallas’s marks — invisible to everyone in that ballroom, but heavy to her. They settled in her chest like ballast. They gave her something to stand on.

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Chapter 43:

The Plaza Hotel ballroom was dripping with crystals and white lilies. It smelled of expensive perfume and old money.

Eliza and Azalea entered together. Heads turned. The whispers began immediately, spreading through the crowd like a swarm of bees.

Eliza Solomon. The exile. She came back.

She looked regal in the high-neck black gown, a stark contrast against the sea of pastels and sequins surrounding her. She moved with a new grace, her chin held high.

Victoria Hyde intercepted them near the champagne tower. She was wearing gold, presenting herself like a trophy.

“You actually came,” Victoria said, looking Eliza up and down with undisguised contempt. “And dressed for a funeral. How fitting.”

“I’m mourning your son’s freedom,” Eliza replied, her tone perfectly smooth.

Azalea muffled a laugh into her hand. Victoria stiffened, eyes narrowing to sharp points.

“Enjoy the food, dear. It’s more than you can afford these days.” She turned and walked away.

“I need a drink after that,” Azalea muttered. “I see a waiter – be right back.”

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She disappeared into the crowd. Eliza stood alone near a marble pillar, grounding herself.

“Eliza.”

The voice came from behind her. She turned.

Anson stood there. His tuxedo fit perfectly, but his eyes were shadowed and tired. “You look different,” he said, studying the severe dress. “Closed off.”

“I’m not the same person, Anson,” she said.

He stepped closer, shrinking her personal space. “I heard rumors. About you and Koch.” His voice dropped, urgent and pleading. “Tell me it isn’t true. Tell me you didn’t marry him.”

“That’s none of your business,” she said.

“He is dangerous, Eliza,” Anson pressed. “Koch Industries has a dark history. He ruins people. He will chew you up and spit you out.”

“You ruined me first,” she said, her voice sharp and steady. “He is putting me back together.”

Anson looked as though she had struck him. “I did what I had to do – for the family, for us! If I married Claudine, I could secure the capital to –”

“Darling!”

A shrill voice cut him off.

Claudine Chapman swept in wearing a massive white ballgown, looking every inch the princess and nothing like one in the eyes. She linked her arm through Anson’s and turned to Eliza with a smile that didn’t reach her face.

“Eliza. So glad you could make it.” Her gaze moved over the black gown with quiet satisfaction. “We were just about to cut the cake. You must join us – front row. Since you’re practically family.”

“I’ll stay here,” Eliza said.

“Nonsense,” Claudine said, closing her hand around Eliza’s arm. “Come.”

She steered Eliza firmly toward the stage. The crowd parted around them.

Eliza looked up at what awaited her. The cake was a towering five-tier monstrosity, bright yellow and orange, decorated with elaborate sugar flowers.

Mango mousse.

Her stomach dropped. Her blood went cold.

She was deathly allergic to mango.

The crowd applauded as the trio stood beside the cake. Flashbulbs popped, bleaching the room white.

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Chapter 44:

Claudine picked up a silver server and cut a generous slice. The scent of sweet, ripe mango rose from the plate, and Eliza's stomach turned.

"For our dear sister, Eliza," Claudine cooed, extending the plate with a radiant smile. "A sweet start to a new chapter."

Eliza stared at the orange mousse. "I can't eat this, Claudine."

"Why? On a diet?" Claudine asked, lifting the microphone she had somehow acquired. Her voice carried across the entire room. "It's rude to refuse the bride, Eliza."

Whispers rippled through the crowd. She's refusing the cake. How petty. Jealous ex.

Anson's eyes dropped to the plate. A frown crossed his face. "Is that — mango?"

"Yes! Imported from the Philippines. Absolutely delicious," Claudine beamed.

"Eliza is allergic," Anson started to say. He took a half-step forward, his hand rising to stop Claudine — but Victoria, standing just at his elbow, closed her fingers around his forearm. Her grip was steel, her painted nails pressing into the fabric of his jacket. She gave him the smallest, most deliberate shake of her head, her eyes burning with a single silent command: Do not make a scene. Do not ruin this merger.

Anson's arm dropped back to his side. His voice died in his throat.

"Oh, surely a little bite won't kill her?" Claudine laughed, the sound bright and hollow. She extended the fork toward Eliza's mouth. "Just a taste. For the cameras."

Eliza looked at Anson. He didn't move. He glanced at his mother, then at the floor, and stood there — held in place by his leash.

She understood the trap completely. If she refused, she was the bitter, jealous ex making a scene at the engagement party of the century. The headlines would dismantle everything she had rebuilt.

If she ate it, she risked her life.

But she had an EpiPen in her purse. And perhaps — perhaps it was worth it to show Anson, in front of every person in this room, exactly what his silence was worth.

She took the fork.

“Fine,” she said, her voice ringing out clearly. “Congratulations.”

She put the fork in her mouth.

The taste of mango was sweet, cloying, and terrifying.

The world was narrowing to a pinprick of light.

The opulent hallway of The Plaza Hotel — its gold sconces and thick patterned carpets — began to spin violently. Eliza slid down the wall, her silk dress bunching around her legs. Her hands flew to her throat, clawing at the high collar she had worn to hide Dallas's marks.

It felt as though someone had poured concrete down her esophagus.

She tried to inhale, but the air wouldn't pass. A high-pitched wheeze escaped her lips — a stridor that meant her airway was collapsing. Her vision grayed at the edges, the faces around her warping into grotesque masks.

"Eliza!" Azalea's scream was shrill, cutting through the buzzing in her ears.

Azalea dropped to her knees, tears already streaming down her face. "Oh my god — help! Someone get a medic!"

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Chapter 45:

Eliza's eyes rolled, searching. She found Anson. He was standing three feet away, his tuxedo immaculate. His face was pale, his mouth opening and closing without producing sound. His hands hovered uselessly in the air before him, trembling. He looked at her not with action, but with a paralyzed horror that offered nothing.

"Do something!" Azalea shrieked, shoving his leg. "Call 911 — she's dying!"

Anson didn't move. He was a statue of incompetence.

The gray in Eliza's vision fractured into black spots. Her lungs burned. Her heart hammered against her ribs — a frantic, caged bird in a space that was rapidly shrinking. She was going to die here, on a hotel carpet, while the man who claimed to love her watched.

Ding.

The sound of elevator doors opening at the far end of the hall was sharp and clear, preceded by a distant crash and a muffled shout – the unmistakable sounds of a hotel security line being violently breached. Heavy footsteps surged against the floor. Not running. Something more purposeful than running.

Through the haze, Eliza saw a figure in black. He moved with a speed and ferocity that blurred the air around him.

Dallas Koch.

He didn't look at Anson. He didn't look at the gathering crowd. His eyes were locked on her with an expression that was apocalyptic – cold fury and terrified focus burning together.

He reached them in seconds. Anson was in his way. Dallas didn't ask him to move. He shoved him aside with a single brutal sweep of his forearm. Anson flew backward, hit the opposite wall with a dull thud, and slid to the floor.

Dallas dropped to his knees. The impact cracked against the marble, but he didn't flinch.

“Eliza. Look at me,” he commanded. His voice wasn’t loud, but it had a resonance that rattled her bones. An anchor in the storm.

Eliza fought to focus. Her eyes found his – dark, turbulent, and alive.

Dallas didn’t waste a second checking her pulse or asking questions. He already knew. His hand moved to the inner pocket of his tuxedo jacket and came out with a yellow plastic tube.

An EpiPen.

Why, her fading mind managed to form, does he have that?

He uncapped it in one fluid, practiced motion. He didn’t hesitate. He didn’t search for bare skin.

“This will hurt,” he warned, his voice rough.

He swung his arm down. The needle punched through the layers of black silk and drove deep into her outer thigh.

Eliza's body convulsed with the shock of it — a sharp, sudden sting that cut clean through the suffocation. Dallas held the injector pressed firmly against her leg and stared into her eyes, counting.

One. Two. Three.

He withdrew the device and tossed it aside. It skittered across the marble and came to rest near Anson's polished shoe.

Eliza waited for air. Her throat was still a solid wall. The swelling hadn't retreated yet. Her chest heaved, but nothing entered. Her lips were turning blue.

"She's not breathing!" Azalea sobbed, crushing Eliza's hand. "Dad — she's not breathing!"

Dallas shifted. He placed one hand behind Eliza's neck and tilted her head back, opening the angle of her throat. With the other hand, he pinched her nose shut.

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Chapter 46:

He leaned down without hesitation and sealed his mouth over hers.

It wasn't a kiss. It was a rescue — forceful, deliberate, and utterly focused. He breathed into her lungs. Her chest rose. He pulled back, drew a breath, and did it again.

Breathe, his presence seemed to demand into hers. Breathe for me.

From the floor, Anson watched. He saw the man he had called a heartless machine, a capitalist vulture, breathing life back into the woman he claimed to love. He saw Dallas's large hand cradle Eliza's head with a tenderness Anson had never once possessed.

Dallas broke contact and pressed two fingers to the side of her neck. Thready. Racing. But there.

“Come on, Eliza,” he growled, and leaned in for another breath.

Then Eliza’s chest hitched. A ragged, wet sound tore from her throat. She convulsed, and a shallow, desperate gasp of air moved into her lungs. It tasted of adrenaline and Dallas — sandalwood and scotch.

“There,” Dallas whispered. His forehead rested against hers for one fractured second. “Breathe.”

Color began to creep back into her face. The wheeze persisted, but air was moving.

Down the hall, the noise of radios and heavy boots announced the paramedics. They swept through the crowd, pushing guests aside.

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“Step back!” a medic called, reaching for Eliza.

Dallas blocked the hand. He slid his arms beneath her knees and back and rose to his feet, lifting her against his chest as though she weighed nothing.

“I’m taking her,” he said to the room, his eyes moving across the staff with a look that dared anyone to argue. “Clear the way.”

He turned and walked toward the elevators, carrying Eliza as though she were the only thing in the world that mattered. He didn’t look back at Azalea. He certainly didn’t look back at Anson, who remained sitting on the floor, staring at the empty yellow tube beside his polished shoe, understanding, for the first time, just how completely and utterly useless he had been.

The steady, rhythmic beeping of the cardiac monitor was the first thing Eliza heard – a mechanical lullaby, sharp and insistent. The air smelled of antiseptic and floor wax, the universal scent of hospitals.

She blinked her eyes open. The lights were dimmed. Her throat felt raw, as though she had swallowed broken glass. Her thigh throbbed where the needle had gone in.

She tried to sit up, instinct urging her to flee, to find cover.

A hand, large and warm, pressed gently against her shoulder and eased her back against the pillows.

“Stay down,” a voice said.

Eliza turned her head. Dallas was sitting in a leather armchair pulled directly to the bedside. He had discarded his tuxedo jacket. His white dress shirt was unbuttoned at the collar, the sleeves rolled to the elbows, revealing forearms corded with tension.

He looked exhausted. There were shadows beneath his eyes, but his gaze was alert — burning with a quiet intensity that made the air feel heavy.

“Water,” Eliza rasped. Her voice was a ruin.

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Chapter 47:

Dallas reached for a plastic cup with a bendy straw on the bedside table and held it to her lips. Eliza drank greedily. The cool liquid moved down her ravaged throat like a mercy. A drop escaped the corner of her mouth and trailed down her chin. Dallas didn't reach for a napkin. He lifted his thumb and wiped it away – a touch that was rough and impossibly gentle at once.

He set the cup down and leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasped.

“Why?” he asked. His voice was low, vibrating with suppressed anger.

Eliza's mind was still foggy from the medication. “Why what?” she whispered.

“Why did you eat it?” he said, his eyes boring into hers. “You knew what it was. I saw the hesitation. You knew.”

Eliza looked away, fixing her gaze on the white blanket covering her legs. The shame settled over her like a weight. “To shut them up,” she admitted, barely audible. “To leave with dignity. If I refused, if I made a scene – they would have won. They would have called me bitter. Unstable.”

Dallas laughed. It was a harsh, humorless sound that cracked like a whip in the quiet room.

“Dignity?” He stood and moved to the window, then turned back sharply. “You almost died, Eliza. You went into respiratory arrest. You stopped breathing for four seconds. For dignity? For his ego?”

“He didn’t stop her,” Eliza said, tears pricking at her eyes. The memory of Anson standing there — watching Claudine press the fork toward her mouth, doing nothing — was more painful than the anaphylaxis itself. “He knew I was allergic, and he just stood there.”

“Of course he did,” Dallas said. “He is weak. He has always been weak. He lets his mother hold his leash and his fiancée hold the whip.”

He walked back to the bed and closed his hand around the metal bedrail until his knuckles went white.

“Why did you ever love him?” he asked. The accusation had left his voice; what remained was a genuine question, laced with bewilderment and something that sounded like pain.

Eliza stared at the ceiling, trying to hold back the tears. “He was the only one who was kind to me. When I was little. For a while, he made me believe I wasn’t just a charity case.” She paused. “He gave me a cage and convinced me it was a home.”

Dallas drew a long, heavy breath. He looked at her — really looked at her — with an expression of raw vulnerability she had never seen on his face before.

“I would have given you the world,” he said, the words so quiet she almost missed them.

Eliza turned her head sharply. “What?”

Dallas’s face closed. He released the bedrail. “Forget the past,” he said, his voice settling back into its usual steel.

He leaned in, filling her space. His scent — clean soap and sharp, residual fear — reached her.

“He is history,” Dallas said. “I am here now. I am the one holding your hand.”

He reached down and took her hand. His fingers interlaced with hers, locking them together. His grip was firm and grounding. The plain silver ring she had

bought him caught the harsh hospital light — a simple, solid promise against his skin.

“I am the one who breathed for you,” he whispered.

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Chapter 48:

Eliza looked at their joined hands. Her heart gave a traitorous leap and began to race, thumping hard against her ribs.

Beep. Beep. Beep-beep-beep.

The cardiac monitor registered the acceleration. The rhythm grew faster, louder, filling the silence.

Dallas glanced at the screen, then back at her. The corner of his mouth ticked up.

“Your heart agrees,” he noted.

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Heat crept up her neck. “It’s the medication,” she said weakly. “Epinephrine causes tachycardia.”

“Liar,” he whispered.

He leaned down. For a moment, she thought he was going to kiss her lips. Instead, he pressed his mouth to her forehead — a lingering, possessive seal. A brand.

“Rest,” he said, pulling back without releasing her hand. “I’m not leaving.”

He settled back into the chair and stretched his long legs out, looking fully prepared to remain there until the end of time.

The chaos at The Plaza had not subsided – it had simply moved.

In a private staging room behind the ballroom, Anson Hyde was pacing back and forth, dragging his hands through his hair. His tuxedo was disheveled, his bow tie hanging loose and undone.

Claudine sat on a velvet settee, calmly checking her reflection in a compact mirror. She dabbed at a smudge of lipstick.

“You knew!” Anson spun on her. “You knew about the mango! I told you years ago!”

Claudine snapped the compact shut. “I thought she was exaggerating for attention, darling. You know how dramatic she gets. Always the victim.”

“She could have died, Claudine!” His hands were shaking. “Her throat closed. Did you hear that sound? Did you hear her wheezing?”

Claudine shrugged, adjusting the strap of her gown. “But she didn’t die. And look around – she ruined my engagement party. The press will have a field day. ‘Ex-girlfriend stages emergency to upstage bride.’ It’s embarrassing.”

Anson looked at her. Really looked at her. For the first time, the beauty he had prized seemed grotesque. Her indifference was reptilian.

“Get out of my sight,” Anson whispered.

“Excuse me?” Claudine rose from the settee, eyes flashing.

“I said get out!” He grabbed a vase from the side table and hurled it at the wall. It shattered with a satisfying crack.

Claudine flinched, then composed herself into a sneer. “Fine. Sulk. But remember who controls the capital for your merger, Anson.” She swept out of the room.

Anson stood amid the shards, breathing hard. He had to go to the hospital. He had to explain.

At Lenox Hill Hospital, Azalea Koch was standing in front of a vending machine, kicking the base of it with her sneaker.

“Stupid machine! Stupid night!” she muttered. “Give me my caffeine!”

She had been crying for an hour. Her eyes were swollen, her mascara long since ruined. She needed coffee, but the machine had swallowed her last dollar bill without producing anything.

“It requires patience, not violence,” a calm, unhurried voice said from behind her.

Azalea spun around, prepared to snap at whoever it was.

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Chapter 49:

A young man in a white coat stood there. He had messy brown hair that looked as though he ran his hands through it constantly, and wire-rimmed glasses that had slid slightly down his nose. He had a kind, lopsided smile.

He stepped forward and pressed two fingers against the glass, directly above the selection pad.

Thunk.

A can of iced coffee dropped into the bin. He retrieved it and held it out to her.

“The sensor is temperamental,” he said simply.

Azalea stared at him. The frantic energy drained out of her. In the sterile, buzzing quiet of the hospital corridor, his calm felt like something solid to hold on to – a stark contrast to the useless paralysis she had witnessed less than an hour ago.

“I’m – Azalea,” she said, clutching the can.

“Dr. Liam Sumner,” he replied. “I’m the resident on duty. I’m heading up to check on the anaphylaxis patient in 302.”

Azalea’s eyes went wide. “Eliza? You’re her doctor?”

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His smile warmed. “She was a year above me at university. Art History club. Brilliant. I haven’t seen her in over a year.”

Azalea’s mind shifted into gear. A doctor. Kind. Someone who already knew Eliza. A normal, decent human being.

“She’s my friend,” Azalea said. “Can I walk up with you? I was heading back anyway.”

“Sure,” Liam said, with a small, easy laugh. “Lead the way.”

They walked toward the elevators. Azalea found herself breathing a little easier, the sharp edge of the evening softened slightly by the presence of this quietly capable person beside her.

Just as the elevator doors began to slide shut, the hospital's revolving doors burst open.

Anson Hyde. Frantic, shirt half-untucked, scanning the lobby with wild eyes.

He rushed to the reception desk. "I need to see Eliza Solomon. I'm Anson Hyde."

The nurse behind the glass continued typing without looking up. "Visiting hours are over for non-family. Are you immediate family?"

Anson hesitated. "I'm the only family she has."

"Name?" the nurse asked, finally lifting her eyes.

"Anson Hyde."

She typed it into the system. A bright red box appeared on her screen.

ACCESS DENIED. SECURITY ALERT.

Her expression hardened. She reached for her phone. “Mr. Hyde, you are on our restricted list. You are not permitted on the premises.”

“That’s impossible!” Anson’s hand came down flat on the counter. “My family has a wing named after them in this hospital!”

“Security to the lobby, please,” the nurse said calmly into the receiver.

Two large uniformed guards stepped out from the shadows near the elevators and moved toward Anson with quiet, grim purpose.

Anson’s eyes tracked upward to the elevator display. The numbers climbed steadily.

2... 3...

He was locked out. Completely.

In Room 302, the atmosphere was quiet but charged.

Dallas had moved from the chair to the edge of the bed. He had his laptop balanced on his knees, typing emails with one hand while the other rested possessively over Eliza's ankle beneath the blanket.

A knock at the door came, and before either of them could answer, it swung open.

“Eliza! Look who I found wandering the halls!” Azalea stepped in, looking significantly brighter than she had an hour ago.

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Chapter 50:

Dr. Liam Sumner followed, holding a chart. “Hey, Eliza. Long time no see.”

Eliza’s face lit up. “Liam! Oh my god.” She pushed herself upright. “I haven’t seen you since the symposium!”

Dallas stiffened. His fingers stopped moving on the keyboard. The temperature in the room seemed to drop ten degrees.

He closed the laptop with a sharp snap, set it aside, and stood — unfolding his full height until he towered over the doctor.

“And you are?” Dallas asked. His voice was perfectly polite and laced with menace.

Liam appeared entirely unintimidated. He extended a hand. “Dr. Liam Sumner. I was the pre-med student who kept crashing the Art History club back at uni just to clear my head. Eliza helped me pass my electives.”

Dallas looked at the hand, then shook it — briefly and with a crushing grip. “Dallas Koch.”

Liam blinked. He looked from Dallas to Eliza, then back again. “The Dallas Koch? The billionaire?” He seemed genuinely confused. “I didn’t know you knew him, Eliza.”

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Eliza’s mind went blank. Boss? Guardian? Friend? None of those explained why he had been sitting on her bed holding her ankle.

“He’s my —” she started.

“Boyfriend,” Dallas said smoothly.

Eliza’s mouth fell open. Azalea turned toward the wall, coughing violently into her fist to conceal a laugh.

“Boyfriend?” Liam looked surprised, his eyebrows climbing. “Oh. I see. I honestly thought you were still hung up on that Hyde fellow — the one who made you cry in the library that time.”

“She isn’t,” Dallas said, his voice flat.

“Glad to hear it,” Liam said, nodding with a genuine smile. “Sounds like you upgraded. Significantly.”

Dallas’s hostility dissolved on the spot. The ice melted. He regarded Liam with sudden, unambiguous approval. “Indeed,” he agreed. “A significant upgrade.”

Eliza’s face burned. “Liam. My chart. Please.”

Liam laughed and lifted the clipboard. “Right. Vitals are stabilizing. You’re lucky, Eliza. Whoever administered the epinephrine hit the exact right muscle group. That saved your life.”

“It was me,” Dallas said.

He sat back down on the bed and settled his arm around Eliza’s waist, drawing her gently against his side. The gesture was unhurried and unmistakable. Mine.

Liam nodded, slipping back into professional mode. “Good work. I’ll leave you to rest — I have rounds to finish.”

“I’ll show you the cafeteria!” Azalea volunteered, a shade too eagerly. “I still owe you a coffee.”

“Lead the way,” Liam said, smiling at her.

They left together, the door clicking shut behind them.

Eliza immediately shrugged off Dallas’s arm and turned to face him. “Boyfriend? That’s the story we’re going with now?”

“Would you prefer ‘husband’?” Dallas asked, his voice dropping to something dark and amused. “Or perhaps ‘master’?”

“Dallas!” She hit his arm. “You said secrecy! Clause 7!”

“He’s a doctor,” Dallas said, entirely unruffled. “HIPAA applies. He can’t go to the press.” He leaned in, his eyes darkening. “Besides — I didn’t like the way he looked at you.”

Eliza paused. “He looked at me like a friend.”

