

Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

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Chapter 71:

He took a step closer. Eliza took a step back. Her calves met the edge of the sofa. She was trapped.

“About that progress report,” he murmured. He set his glass down on the coffee table behind him without looking away from her. Then he placed his hands on the back of the sofa, one on either side of her hips, and caged her in.

Eliza could smell the wine on his breath, layered beneath the clean scent of his skin. He was overwhelming — a wall of heat and intent. He leaned in, his nose brushing slowly along her jawline in a deliberate inhale.

“I missed you today,” he admitted.

The vulnerability in his voice was more startling than his physical presence. It wasn't a line. It was a fact.

Eliza's breath caught. In the car, she had been bold. But here, with him surrounding her, with the full weight of his attention focused solely on her, a wave of overwhelmed shyness crashed over her — not fear of him, but the sudden, stunning reality of their new dynamic.

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She wasn't ready to be consumed. Not yet.

She ducked under his right arm. It was a scramble, entirely without grace.

"I — I need a shower!" she blurted, backing toward the stairs. "Office germs! I was touching old files all day!"

It was a terrible excuse. She knew it. He knew it. But it was the only shield she could grab in that moment.

She sprinted up the stairs, abandoning her wine glass on the side table without looking back.

Dallas stood in the living room, his hands still resting on the back of the sofa where she had been seconds before. He watched her flee.

A slow, dark smile spread across his face.

He picked up the glass she had abandoned and turned it in his hand until he found the faint smudge of her lipstick on the rim. He brought it to his lips and drank from the exact spot she had touched.

“Run, Eliza,” he whispered to the empty room. “I enjoy the chase.”

The kitchen at 6:00 AM was a study in grey and steel.

Eliza entered quietly, hoping to grab a coffee and slip out before Dallas woke up. She needed time to recalibrate after the panic of the night before. She had hidden in the shower for forty minutes, scrubbing her skin until it was pink, and by the time she emerged, Dallas had retreated to his study with the door closed.

She tiptoed across the tile.

“Good morning.”

The voice came from the direction of the espresso machine.

Eliza startled. Dallas was already there, leaning against the counter, watching dark liquid drip into a cup. He wore grey sweatpants that hung low on his hips and a black t-shirt pulled tight across his shoulders. Eliza froze for a moment, her mind struggling to reconcile this man with the corporate predator in tailored suits. This version of him looked domestic, unhurried, and somehow more dangerous in his unguarded state.

“Did you scrub off all the germs?” he asked without turning.

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend’s Father

Eliza felt her face heat up. “Yes. Sorry about — running away.”

Dallas turned and held out a mug. “Black. Two sugars.”

He knew her order. He remembered everything.

Eliza took the mug. Her fingers trembled slightly. “Thank you.”

He didn’t move away. Instead, he stepped into her space. The kitchen was massive, but he made it feel like a closet.

“You can’t hide in the shower forever, Eliza,” he said softly.

He reached out, his hand large and warm, and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, his knuckles grazing her cheekbone. It was a tender gesture, at odds with the intensity in his eyes.

“I’m not a monk,” he stated plainly. “And you are my wife.”

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Eliza gripped her mug, the heat seeping into her palms. “I know. I just — it’s new. Being us.”

“Take your time,” Dallas said. His thumb brushed her lower lip. “But don’t lock the door next time.”

He smirked, a wicked glint in his eyes, and walked away with his coffee — leaving Eliza standing in the middle of the kitchen with her heart pounding a chaotic rhythm against her ribs.

Two hours later, the atmosphere was entirely different.

Eliza stood in the office of Gavin Ross, S&D Design’s HR manager. The room smelled of stale coffee and aggressive cologne. Gavin sat behind his desk, looking strained, his polished shoes planted firmly on the floor. He didn’t stand when she entered.

“Close the door, Solomon,” he ordered, not looking up from his phone.

Eliza obeyed. She walked to the center of the room and remained standing. “Is there an issue, Mr. Ross?”

Gavin finally looked up. His eyes were cold and calculating. He gestured to the chair opposite his desk with a sigh.

“Sit down.” He waited until she did. “I got a call from Anson Hyde this morning. He’s very concerned about your transition here.”

A spike of ice hit Eliza’s stomach. Anson. He was like a virus that refused to leave her system.

“Anson doesn’t work here,” Eliza said. Her voice was steady, surprising even herself.

“No,” Gavin said, leaning forward on his elbows, his voice dropping. “But Hyde Consolidated is one of our biggest clients. They’re threatening to pull three major restoration contracts if we don’t accommodate their concerns about your — fragile condition.”

“My condition?” Eliza asked, her eyes narrowing.

“He claims the pressure of the main restoration team is too much for you,” Gavin said, looking genuinely annoyed. “He suggested, very strongly, that I reassign you to the Archive Team. In the basement. For your own good, of course.”

Eliza stared at him. The Archive Team wasn’t a restoration role. It was storage — moving heavy boxes in a windowless room, cataloging dead projects. It was where careers went to die.

“That’s not a restoration role,” Eliza said. “That’s a storage role. I was hired as a Junior Restoration Consultant.”

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend’s Father

Chapter 73:

“Look, Solomon, my hands are tied,” Gavin said, throwing his hands up. “It’s either you in the basement or half the department’s budget goes up in smoke. Unless you want to quit? That would solve everyone’s problem.”

Eliza understood exactly what this was. Anson couldn’t stop her from getting the job, so he was trying to bury her instead – keep her hidden, miserable, and breaking. And Gavin Ross was a coward caught in the middle.

Fear clawed at her throat, but something else rose up to meet it. Anger. And the memory of Dallas’s voice in the car. Silence them with excellence.

“I won’t quit,” Eliza said. “And I will speak to the Director about my assignment if it deviates from my contract.”

Gavin slammed his hand on the desk. “I am HR. You listen to me.”

Eliza didn’t flinch. She looked at him – really looked at him. A small man in a cheap suit, bullying a twenty-year-old girl because a richer man had told him to.

“I listen to my contract,” Eliza countered, “which I’m sure Ms. Koch signed off on personally. I’ll be sure to mention this potential reassignment in my weekly progress report to her. I imagine she’ll find it very interesting how her directives are being interpreted.”

She turned to leave. Her hand closed around the cold metal of the door handle.

“Watch your back, Solomon,” Gavin called after her, his voice dropping to a hiss. “The Hyde family has deep pockets.”

Eliza stopped. She looked back over her shoulder.

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“You should check who signs your paycheck, Gavin,” she said, her voice carrying the cool detachment she had learned from Dallas. “It isn’t Hyde.”

She opened the door and walked out.

Her hands were shaking as she moved down the corridor, but her head was high. She had drawn blood.

The breakroom at S&D was a sterile white box with a vending machine that hummed too loudly.

Eliza sat alone at a small round table, eating a sandwich she had packed herself. The other junior associates had scattered the moment she walked in, having clearly received the memo that she was social poison.

A chair scraped loudly against the floor opposite her.

Eliza looked up. A woman with short, choppy hair streaked with neon pink dropped into the seat. She wore a leather jacket over her office blouse and had a small nose ring.

“Nice takedown on Gavin,” the woman said. She tore open a bag of chips with a violent pop. “I heard him yelling all the way down the hall.”

Eliza was cautious. She wiped her mouth with a napkin. “News travels fast.”

“In this office? Faster than light.” The woman grinned and extended a hand. “I’m Bella. Bella Rose. Graphic Design.”

Eliza shook it. Bella’s grip was firm. “Eliza.”

“So,” Bella crunched a chip, “the rumor is you’re Dallas Koch’s new secret. Augustina’s nephew. People are saying you traded favors for the position.”

Eliza choked on her water. She coughed violently, pressing a hand to her chest. “What?”

“The CEO himself,” Bella clarified, raising an eyebrow. “People are saying you’re his – well. You know.”

“That is disgusting,” Eliza said, her face burning. “And false.”

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend’s Father

Chapter 74:

“I figured,” Bella shrugged. She pointed a chip at Eliza’s feet. “You don’t have the kept-woman vibe. Your shoes are last season. No offense.”

Eliza looked down at her sensible black flats. They were practical. “Thanks?”

“I’ll handle the rumors,” Bella decided, standing and crumpling the chip bag. “I hate Gavin more than I like gossip. He once tried to fire me for dyeing my hair. Come on — let’s get real food. My treat. That sandwich looks depressing.”

Twenty minutes later, they were seated at The Ivy, a trendy bistro two blocks away, packed with the lunch rush — suits, salads, and performative laughter.

Bella was a fountain of information. She dissected the office politics like a surgeon: who to avoid (Sarah), who was sleeping with whom (the IT guy and the receptionist), and which coffee machine had the best espresso.

Eliza relaxed. For the first time in months, she felt like a normal twenty-year-old having lunch with a friend.

Then the atmosphere in the restaurant shifted. The ambient noise seemed to dip.

A waiter rushed past their table.

“Mr. Hyde! Right this way,” the host announced, his voice thick with deference.

Eliza froze. Her fork clattered onto her plate.

Anson walked in, impeccable in a navy suit, his hair perfectly coiffed. But his eyes were restless, sweeping the room like radar. He was with a client – an older man in grey – though he paid the man almost no attention.

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His gaze moved from table to table. Then it locked onto Eliza.

He stopped dead. The client walked into his back.

Anson didn't acknowledge him. He walked straight toward Eliza's table, his stride long and deliberate.

Eliza's heart began to race. She gripped the edge of the table.

“Eliza,” Anson said, stopping beside her chair. His voice was smooth, but it carried a cutting edge. “I didn’t know you could afford this place.”

Bella raised an eyebrow and looked from Anson to Eliza, connecting the dots. “And I didn’t know you were rude, Mr. Hyde.”

Anson ignored Bella entirely. He leaned down and placed his hand on the back of Eliza’s chair. “We need to talk,” he said. “Alone.”

“I’m having lunch with my colleague, Anson,” Eliza said, fighting to keep her voice steady. “Go away.”

Anson’s fingers tightened on the wood of the chair. His knuckles went white. He leaned closer, crowding her space.

“It’s about Victoria,” he said. His eyes were dark, empty of any real warmth. “She’s asking for you. She’s getting worse.”

Eliza stared up at him. The mention of Victoria was a calculated strike, aimed at the part of her that had spent years desperate for a mother figure. But the memory of Victoria’s hysterical phone call and the staged illness was still fresh.

“I visited Victoria last week,” Eliza said, her voice flat. “She was well enough to scream at the maids.”

Anson’s jaw tightened. A muscle feathered beneath his eye. He had been caught in a lie, and he hated it.

“She took a turn. Just now,” he doubled down, his voice dropping to a harsh whisper. “Don’t be heartless, Eliza.”

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend’s Father

Chapter 75:

“I’ll call her later,” Eliza said, dismissing him. She picked up her water glass.
“Goodbye, Anson.”

Anson glared at her, then shifted his gaze to Bella, who was watching him with open hostility. He sneered, straightened his jacket, and retreated to his table. But he didn’t look at his client. He sat facing Eliza, his eyes fixed on her like a predator watching prey.

Bella leaned across the table. “Okay, that was intense. Is he the ex or the brother?”

“Both,” Eliza sighed, rubbing her temple. “It’s complicated. I’m an orphan the Hydes took in.”

“So not a kept woman,” Bella summarized. “Just a Cinderella story gone wrong.”

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Eliza laughed — a short, dry sound. “Exactly. The glass slipper was a contract.”

“I need to use the restroom,” Eliza said, standing. Her legs felt unsteady.

“Want backup?” Bella asked, glancing over her shoulder at Anson.

“I’ll be fine. It’s a public place,” Eliza said. “He wouldn’t dare make a scene here.”

She made her way toward the back of the restaurant. The corridor leading to the restrooms was long, narrow, and dimly lit for ambiance. The noise of the dining room faded behind her.

She heard footsteps. Heavy. Fast.

Eliza’s heart slammed against her ribs. She quickened her pace. The footsteps quickened with her.

She reached the heavy oak door of the ladies’ room and extended her hand toward the handle.

A palm slammed against the door above hers, holding it shut.

Eliza spun around.

Anson was there, looming over her, his face twisted into the mask of rage he had kept carefully hidden in the dining room.

“You think you can embarrass me in front of my client?” he hissed.

“You embarrassed yourself, Anson,” Eliza said, pressing her back against the door. “Move.”

“You belong to Hyde Manor,” he ranted. “Not S&D. Not Koch. You are mine to fix!” He reached for her arm, his fingers curled like claws.

Eliza didn't think. Instinct — honed by fear and the new steel Dallas had forged in her — took over.

She shifted her weight. She lifted her right foot. She was wearing the sensible flats Bella had mocked, but the heel was hard rubber.

She stomped on his instep. Hard. With every ounce of frustration she had held back for ten years.

Anson yelled — a high-pitched, undignified sound of shock and pain. He stumbled backward, hopping on one foot. The corridor was narrow. He caught his heel on a large decorative ceramic pot housing a fern.

He crashed to the floor.

His head struck the wall with a loud, sickening thud. The pot shattered. Soil and ceramic shards scattered across the expensive carpet.

Anson groaned, clutching his forehead. Blood began to trickle from a cut above his eyebrow.

A waiter came around the corner carrying a tray of martinis. He stopped, eyes wide.

“Sir! Are you all right?” the waiter gasped, rushing forward.

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 76:

Eliza stood over Anson, chest heaving, hands clenched at her sides. She looked down at the man who had tormented her for a decade – now sprawled in soil and his own blood.

She looked at the waiter.

“He slipped,” she said coolly.

Anson looked up at her through the blood dripping into his eye. He saw the coldness in her face. Humiliation washed over him, hotter than the pain.

“Anson! Oh my God!”

The scream shattered the tension.

Claudine Chapman came running down the corridor in a white dress that looked too bridal for a Tuesday lunch. She had evidently been meeting him.

She saw Anson on the floor. She saw the blood. She spun on Eliza, her eyes wild.

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“What did you do to him?” Claudine screamed. “You savage! You attacked him!”

She knelt beside Anson, dabbing frantically at his forehead with a linen napkin. “Anson, baby, are you okay?”

“He fell,” Eliza said. Her voice was trembling now, the adrenaline draining away into shock. “Ask him.”

Anson shoved Claudine aside. “I’m fine. Get off me.”

He scrambled to his feet, slipping slightly on the scattered soil. He wiped the blood from his eye and glared at Eliza, but he said nothing. He couldn’t admit that his little sister had taken him down. It would destroy him.

The restaurant manager arrived, looking panicked. “Is there a problem here?”

“She assaulted him!” Claudine accused, jabbing a manicured finger at Eliza. “Call the police!”

“He harassed me,” Eliza countered, stepping back.

Then the air pressure in the corridor seemed to drop. The shadows grew longer.

“Is there a problem here?”

The voice was deep, calm, and absolutely terrifying. It wasn’t loud, but it cut through everything – a low growl meant only for the few people in the now-silent corridor.

Eliza turned.

Dallas stood at the far end of the corridor in a dark trench coat over his suit. He looked like a storm cloud that had taken human form, filling the narrow space and making Anson look small and disheveled by comparison. When his eyes landed on

Anson, something flickered in their depths – not merely the authority of a CEO, but something colder. A killer’s stillness.

“Is my wife being bothered?” he asked, the words my wife landing like a territorial claim.

Claudine froze. Her mouth fell open. Wife? She looked from Dallas to Eliza, the pieces clicking into place one by one.

Anson went pale beneath the blood on his face. The secret was out. In this small, contained explosion, the game was over.

Dallas ignored them both. He walked straight to Eliza and scanned her face, then her body, checking for injuries.

“Are you hurt?” His voice softened, but his eyes remained deadly.

Eliza shook her head. She stepped toward him instinctively, drawn to his gravity. “Take me home. Please.”

Dallas extended his hand. Eliza took it. His grip was warm and solid – an anchor.

He looked at Anson. He took in the blood on his face, the broken pot, and Eliza's shoes. A flicker of understanding, and unmistakable pride, crossed his face.

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 77:

"If you come near my wife again," Dallas said, low enough that only they could hear, "you won't get up."

He wrapped an arm around Eliza's shoulders, shielding her from the stares, and led her away.

They walked out to the valet stand. The black Maybach was already waiting, its engine idling. Eliza got in. She was shaking now, the full weight of the reaction setting in.

Dallas got in the driver's seat but didn't pull away. Rain drummed against the roof, sealing them inside a private world.

He turned to her. "You called me. But only because you were running from him."

Eliza looked at him, confused. "I didn't call you. I didn't have time. You just — appeared."

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Dallas reached out and touched her cheek. "I am always watching, Eliza." He tapped the dashboard. A small screen glowed, showing a tracking dot. "But when I saw him follow you, I was already coming in." He paused. "And then you grabbed my hand like it was a lifeline."

"You are my lifeline, Dallas," she whispered.

It was the truest thing she had ever said.

Dallas's expression softened. The hard lines of his face eased, one by one. "Good," he said quietly. "Remember that."

The Maybach moved through heavy city traffic. Rain lashed against the windows, blurring the world outside into streaks of grey and neon.

"What about Bella?" Eliza asked, looking back toward the restaurant, suddenly remembering she had left her friend in the middle of the chaos. "I left her alone with them."

"My security team is escorting her home," Dallas said, his eyes flicking briefly from the road to her face. "She's safe."

Eliza stared out the window. Her heart rate was finally settling.

"How long have you known Anson was following me?"

"Since you left the office," Dallas said. "My security detail spotted him waiting in his car two blocks away. They alerted me."

Eliza sighed and rested her head against the cool glass. “I can’t escape him. He’s like a ghost. He haunts everywhere I go.”

“He is a man,” Dallas corrected, glancing at her. “Men bleed. As you proved today.” His gaze dropped briefly to her shoe. “You stomped on him. I’m impressed.”

There was genuine pride in his voice — not the patronizing praise Anson used to dispense, but the respect one soldier extends to a comrade.

Eliza smiled faintly. “I learned from the best. You told me not to let them intimidate me.”

“And you didn’t,” Dallas said.

Eliza turned in her seat to face him. The soft glow of the dashboard lit his profile in warm, amber tones.

“Do you think —” she hesitated. “Do you think love can grow after marriage? Or is it just duty?”

Dallas gripped the steering wheel. His knuckles tightened. The car seemed to hum with the tension of the question.

“Why do you ask?” His voice was guarded.

“Because I don’t want to be just a duty to you,” she whispered. “I don’t want to be another promise you kept to a dead friend.”

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend’s Father

Chapter 78:

Dallas was silent for a long moment. The only sound was the rhythmic sweep of the windshield wipers.

“You are many things, Eliza,” he said at last. He didn’t look at her, but his voice was rough at the edges. “Duty is not one of them.”

It wasn’t a confession of love – not in the words a poet might have chosen – but from Dallas Koch, it was an earth-shattering admission.

Across the city, in Anson Hyde’s penthouse, the mood was volatile.

Anson sat on his leather sofa, pressing a bag of frozen peas to his forehead. The bleeding had stopped, but an ugly bruise was already forming.

Claudine paced in front of him, her heels clicking aggressively against the hardwood.

“Married? She’s married to Dallas Koch?” Claudine threw her hands in the air, her voice climbing. “Why didn’t you tell me? That changes everything – the merger, the stocks. If she’s a Koch, she has real power!”

“Shut up, Claudine,” Anson snapped. His head was pounding.

“I won’t shut up! You made me look like an idiot!” she yelled. “You’ve been chasing her around like a lost puppy while she’s been with the richest man in the city!”

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“It’s a fake marriage! He bought her — it’s a contract! She told me!” Anson hurled the bag of peas onto the table.

“And you sabotaged her at S&D!” he shot back, deflecting. “I told you to stay out of it!”

Claudine stopped pacing. She looked at him with cold contempt. “I was trying to help you. You didn’t want her working there. You said you wanted her back at the Manor.”

“I wanted to control where she works! I didn’t want her humiliated by Gavin Ross!” Anson roared. “You pushed her straight into his arms!”

“She was already in his arms, Anson,” Claudine said icily. “You’re just too blind to see it. And now you’re bleeding.”

Anson glared at her. “Get out.”

“Fine,” Claudine spat. “Call me when you’re done playing the victim.” She stormed out, slamming the door hard enough to rattle the windows.

Anson walked to the window. Through the rain, a massive digital billboard glowed in the distance — an advertisement for Koch Industries.

“I will take her back,” he vowed to the empty room. “Whatever it costs.”

He picked up his phone and dialed a number saved under Private.

“It’s Hyde,” he said. “I need intelligence on Dallas Koch. That look in his eyes — it wasn’t just business. Get me something on him. I want everything. Start with his military service. The Middle East years. I want to know where the bodies are buried.”

The sound of leather striking leather echoed through the private gym — a rhythmic, violent pulse. Thud. Thud. Crack.

Dallas was working the heavy bag. He wasn’t wearing gloves. His knuckles were taped, but blood was already seeping through the white gauze. He hit with a ferocity that was unsettling to watch, each punch a release of the rage that had been building since he saw Anson near Eliza.

Flash Marriage To My Best Friend's Father

Chapter 79:

“Whoa. Easy, killer,” a voice called out. “I’m not the Hyde boy. Save some for him.”

Zane Sterling stepped into the ring wearing boxing gear, holding up focus mitts.

Dallas stepped back, chest heaving, sweat dripping from his nose. “He touched her.”

“And she stomped him,” Zane grinned. “I heard from the security team. An absolute legend. The Stiletto Stomp. We should patent it.”

Dallas didn't smile. He walked to the bench, grabbed a water bottle, and downed half of it in one pull.

“So the secret is out,” Zane noted, settling onto the ropes. “Claudine knows. Anson knows. The waiter knows.”

“It was bound to happen,” Dallas said, wiping his face with a towel.

“You're hiding her, you know,” Zane said, his tone shifting. “Eliza. She's stunning. And smart.”

Dallas shot him a look that could have stopped traffic. “Careful, Zane.”

“I'm just saying!” Zane raised his hands. “You have a diamond and you keep her in a vault. People are curious. Rumors breed in the dark.”

“She is not a trophy to be displayed,” Dallas growled. “She is my wife. And she is fragile right now.”

“Fragile? She took down Anson Hyde in a restaurant hallway,” Zane countered. “She’s tougher than you think. Maybe she needs to be seen — to show the world she’s not a victim anymore. To show them she’s Mrs. Dallas Koch.”

Dallas considered this. He looked down at his scarred knuckles.

“Vanessa wants to bring her to the club opening tonight,” Dallas said. “The Velvet Room.”

“Do it,” Zane urged. “Let her shine. Let her own the title. And if anyone gives her trouble — well, you’ll be there.”

Dallas unwrapped his hands. The scars on his knuckles stood out stark white against his flushed skin.

“If anyone gives her trouble, the gym won’t be the only place with blood on the floor,” Dallas said, perfectly calm.

Zane shivered theatrically. “Remind me never to date your wife.”

“You have Sloane. Focus on her,” Dallas advised.

“Speaking of Sloane – she wants to meet Eliza too. Double date?” Zane asked.

“One step at a time. Club first.” Dallas stood. “I have to go. I promised her dinner.”

“Whipped,” Zane coughed into his hand.

Dallas didn’t deny it. He just walked away.

Back at the penthouse, the mood was chaotic.

Eliza stood in front of the full-length mirror in her bedroom, wearing a silver dress Azalea had brought her. It was backless, shimmering like liquid mercury, and ended mid-thigh.

“It’s too short, Azalea,” Eliza said, tugging at the hem.

Azalea sat on the bed eating an apple, entirely unbothered. “It’s perfect. Dad will have a heart attack — in a good way. You need to look like a billion dollars.”

“I look like a disco ball,” Eliza sighed.

“A sexy disco ball,” Azalea corrected. “Trust me. Tonight is about power. You stomped on Anson with your heel. Tonight you stomp on society with your dress.”

Eliza studied her reflection. The dress clung to every curve. It made her look dangerous.

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Flash Marriage To My Best Friend’s Father

Chapter 80:

“Fine,” Eliza said. “But if I freeze, I’m wearing your coat.”

The Velvet Room lived up to its name. It was dark, plush, and vibrated with a bass line that thumped directly in the chest.

Eliza walked in with Dallas’s hand firmly at the small of her back, his touch burning through the thin fabric of the silver dress. He looked striking in a black shirt and dark trousers — part of the shadows and yet commanding the room entirely.

Vanessa Star, the club owner and a friend of Zane’s, greeted them at the VIP rope, glamorous in red velvet.

“Finally! The mystery wife!” Vanessa beamed. She pulled Eliza into a hug that smelled of jasmine and expensive champagne. “Welcome to the inner circle, darling.”

Eliza smiled, feeling a wave of relief wash over her. “Thank you, Vanessa.”

“I know the DJ!” Azalea yelled over the music, pointing toward the booth. “I’m going to request Beyoncé!” She disappeared into the crowd before Dallas could say a word.

Dallas guided Eliza to a secluded VIP booth where Zane and his girlfriend, Sloane, were already settled. Sloane was warm and funny, and within minutes Eliza felt like she belonged.

The peace didn't last.

Dallas's phone lit up. He frowned. "Security issue at the perimeter," he murmured to Eliza. "I need two minutes. Stay here. Zane – watch her."

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"On it," Zane saluted with his drink.

Dallas stepped out onto the private terrace.

Eliza sipped her cocktail. Two women drifted past the booth – high-society types draped in diamonds and disdain. Eliza recognized one: the daughter of a Senator who had often attended Hyde parties.

They spotted Eliza. They stopped.

“Isn’t that the Hyde charity case?” the Senator’s daughter whispered, loudly enough to carry.

“I heard she seduced Dallas Koch,” her friend giggled behind her hand. “Probably pregnant. That’s the only way a girl like that gets a ring.”

“Or maybe she’s just cheap,” the first woman sneered, eyeing Eliza’s dress. “Look at her. She looks like she’s working the corner, not the room.”

Eliza stiffened. She gripped her glass and tried to be the bigger person.

But Azalea had returned from the DJ booth. She was standing directly behind the women, and she had heard every word.

“Hey! Plastic Barbie!” Azalea shouted. The music seemed to dip at precisely that moment.

The women spun around, startled. “Excuse me?”

“Yeah, you,” Azalea snapped, eyes blazing. “That dress costs more than your facelift. And she didn’t seduce him – he begged for her.”

“You little brat. Who are you?” the Senator’s daughter sneered.

“I’m Azalea Koch,” Azalea announced, stepping up beside Eliza. “And this is Mrs. Koch. My father’s wife. You might want to show some respect.”

“Mrs. Koch?” The woman laughed. “Please. She’s a gold digger. And you’re just the daughter of a ghost.”

Azalea’s expression went flat. She reached over and lifted the silver ice bucket from the table – champagne bottle and all.

“Cool off,” she said, and dumped the entire contents over the woman’s head.

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