

Wife Mask 111

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Elliana arched an eyebrow, amused at his defiance. "Oh, right-Golden Plains, wasn't it?" she said coolly. "That was your magnum opus. How about you recreate just a portion of it? Nothing fancy. Just enough to prove you painted it."

Luca chuckled, sensing blood. "Excellent idea. Let's see those legendary brushstrokes in action, Mr. Scott. We're all eager for a little live demonstration."

Clement, catching on, gestured to the crew. In moments, a fresh canvas, oils, and brushes were laid out center stage. It was checkmate.

Luciano stiffened, his pulse thudding in his ears. He hadn't seen this coming—how quickly the tide had turned. Surrounded, exposed, and under the spotlight. Every award he'd ever flaunted was the work of hired talent. If he so much as touched that canvas, the farce would collapse in front of the entire art world.

Luciano didn't move. Seconds dragged like hours.

Luca tilted his head with mock concern. "What's the matter? You were so proud a minute ago. Cat got your brush?"

And then—just as the silence thickened—a figure in a black hoodie stepped calmly onto the stage.

Elliana's expression shifted. Recognition flared in her eyes. Back during the afternoon's livestreamed workshop—right after Luciano had stormed off in a rage—this same man had returned. Like he wanted to reveal some secrets to her, but something had stopped him. He'd vanished again before saying a word.

But now, with the spotlight burning and the stakes sky-high, the man strode onto the stage with purpose in his steps and something heavy in his eyes.

The moment Luciano caught sight of the man, his expression curdled into panic. "Ethan! You better think twice. You open your mouth, and you'll regret it."

Ethan Brooks halted mid-step, caught in the heat of Luciano's glare and threat. His lips parted, but no words came. He looked like a man wrestling with a decision that could crack his entire world open.

Clement stepped forward with practiced calm. "And you are?"

Before Ethan could answer, someone in the crowd blurted, "That's Luciano's protégé!"

Ethan's face twisted in disgust. "I am not his protégé!" he snapped, voice cracking with emotion. "He used me. Forced me to go along with his scams. Everything about him is a lie!"

The words exploded across the room, sending shockwaves through the audience. Whispers erupted instantly.

Clement offered Ethan a mic, voice steady. "You've got the floor now. No one here's going to silence you-not with the whole art world watching. Say what you came to say."

Luciano's face turned to stone. "You want to ruin your life, Ethan? Go ahead."

That venom-laced threat made Ethan visibly recoil. For a breathless moment, it looked like he might fold. But then- slowly—Ethan raised the mic. His hand was trembling, but his eyes had hardened with resolve.

As soon as Ethan lifted the mic, silence swept through the room-every face turned toward him, expectant.

Ethan drew in a slow, steadying breath before letting the words pour out. "A decade ago, I walked out of Ublento Art Academy as the top graduate. Rosa was my hero. I had big dreams, ready to shake up the art world-until that scumbag Luciano blindsided me. Luciano was nothing at the time. Just a glorified security guard at the academy, barely literate. But he conned his way into my life, got close to my sister, then kidnapped her and took disgusting, blackmail-worthy photos."

Ethan's voice faltered, his jaw tense as he fought to keep his composure.

Gasps rippled through the crowd like a wave of disbelief. "Wait-Luciano was only a guard? No college degree at all?"

"He kidnapped a girl? Took blackmail photos? That's beyond messed up!"

"And he fooled everyone into thinking he was a brilliant artist? What a sick fraud!"

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The color drained from Paige's cheeks as the whispers closed in, her breath catching in her throat. She stood frozen, her mind reeling. The man she'd bowed to, flattered, and treated like a legend—just a damn security guard in disguise? The absurdity of it all slammed into her like a punch, and her face flushed hot with shame. Luciano had strung her along like some gullible fool, and now the world had front-row seats to her humiliation.

Paige leveled a seething glare at Luciano, jaw locked, every muscle in her face tight with fury.

But Luciano wasn't even looking her way—he was too busy calculating his escape, drowning in panic, and blind to the wreckage he'd left behind.

Clement picked up on Luciano's unease and discreetly motioned to security. Guards moved into position, sealing off every exit from the stage. Luciano was cornered, with nowhere left to run.

Ethan took a breath to steady his voice and pressed on. "Luciano threatened to expose those photos unless I painted for him in secret. If I refused, he swore he'd leak them and destroy my sister's future. She was only sixteen. I couldn't let that happen. So I agreed. Every masterpiece he bragged about? That was my work. For a decade, I painted in the shadows while he soaked up the glory. I didn't just paint while Luciano reaped the glory and rose through the ranks of the Calligraphers and Painters Association—he also tormented me behind the scenes, treating me like filth beneath his boots. What cut deeper than the abuse was how he twisted something sacred. He knew how much Rosa meant to me—how her brushwork shaped my own—and he faked devotion to her legacy just to cash in. Luciano didn't just ruin my life—he dragged my sister down with me. Watching him exploit my idol for his dirty schemes made my skin crawl. I can't stay silent any longer. Rosa's paintings were the only comfort I had in those bleak years—her art kept me breathing through night after night of despair."

At last, Elliana understood why Ethan had lingered near the livestream's end, torn between speaking up and walking away. Ethan had probably seen the Lonely Sunset and finally put the pieces together—she was Rosa. He'd nearly intended to confess everything but lost his nerve, still haunted by Luciano's grip on him through those damning photos.

Hearing Ethan say her art had saved him-it struck something tender and aching in Elliana's heart.

"You stayed silent for ten whole years. What changed today?" Elliana asked softly.

Ethan stared at her, reverence clouded by sorrow in his gaze. "Because my sister just died."

"What?" Gasps rippled through the room. The crowd and everyone on stage froze-staggered, silent, devastated.

Ethan's voice cracked as he fought to keep it together. "Luciano's kidnapping shattered her. After what he did with those photos, she was never the same. Her health spiraled. Then this morning, the doctor called. She didn't make it."

"She..." Ethan collapsed to his knees, shoulders heaving. "She would've turned twenty-six today."

Ethan's wails echoed through the room, wrenching sobs from the crowd.

"You monster, Luciano!" One man shot to his feet, seething, and hurled an object straight at Luciano.

That broke the dam-outrage surged through the crowd as they flung anything within reach, their fury erupting in a storm of vengeance.

Luciano scrambled across the stage, flinching and dodging like a cornered rat in a circus ring.

Paige shrank into a corner as the uproar intensified. None of the flying objects were meant for her, yet the shame clung to her just as fiercely as it did to Luciano.

"Please-everyone, calm down! I've already notified the police!" Clement's voice boomed over the frenzy.

Moments later, the police stormed in and escorted Luciano off the premises.

The chaos subsided, but as the competition resumed, all eyes turned on Paige-resentful, accusing. Just like that, she became the crowd's new target.

Luciano was hauled off by the police, with Ethan close behind, ready to cooperate in the investigation that was about to rip through the art world's underbelly.

The grand event, however, had descended into chaos. The once -elegant stage looked like a battlefield. Just minutes earlier, the furious crowd had erupted into a frenzy, hurling anything they could get their hands on-soda bottles, half-eaten apples, even a lone sneaker. It was open season on Luciano.

But the most wild part? Someone had thrown a diamond ring! Elliana stared at it where it had landed, glittering on the floor like a defiant symbol of excess. Whoever tossed that must've had money to burn.

After the storm passed, Clement took the mic, calm and composed, his voice anchoring the room. "I know you're angry

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-and rightly so," he said, sweeping his gaze across the furious audience. "But we can't let one fraud ruin what this competition stands for. The show must go on."

His words hit home. Heads nodded in agreement. These weren't just spectators—they were oil painting fanatics, drawn here by the promise of brilliance. Especially now, with Rosa's identity revealed and her masterpiece on full display, no one wanted the night to end in scandal.

Some were already gearing up to bid on Elliana's *Lonely Sunset*. This wasn't just a painting. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Rosa's work rarely hit the market—and when it did, even money couldn't always secure it.

But as the competition resumed, there was one more entry left to face judgment. Paige's *Riding the Waves* was next.

And the room, still charged with energy, turned to watch her.

After settling the crowd, Clement turned sharply to the corner of the stage, where Paige hovered like a shadow trying to disappear. "Miss Jones," he said, calm yet commanding, "please step to the center."

The spotlight shifted. So did the target of the fury. Until now, the crowd had been too focused on Luciano to notice Paige. But with Clement's simple call, their anger swung her way.

"Paige is no different from Luciano!" "Throw her out too! They were in it together!"

The backlash hit like a wave, and Paige felt herself drowning in it. Her jaw clenched. She wanted to scream. This wasn't fair. She wasn't Luciano's lackey. At least, that wasn't how she saw it.

They'd just used each other for leverage—mutual manipulation, not mentorship. Yet, here she was, dragged into the flames alongside him.

Resentment surged in her chest. What burned most was the memory of being tricked into bowing three times to that ridiculous wax statue of Elliana. If she had known who Rosa really was, she would've rather bowed to a pile of trash. Now, as she lifted her gaze, she caught Elliana's expression—amused, composed, almost smug.

That look scraped across Paige's pride like a blade. The shame was unbearable. Hot tears welled up and spilled before she could stop them. "I know you're angry," she said, voice shaking, barely above a whisper. "But don't turn on me. Luciano fooled me too. I didn't know.."

She broke off, choking back sobs. "I'm just—just another victim."

"That's right! Don't gang up on Paige!" Haley's voice rang out as she stepped forward, shielding Paige. "Luciano was brought in by the organizers to hype up Ublento's art scene. Paige only trained under him because she's passionate about painting! What's she done that warrants this hate? Luciano's the real villain here—Paige got caught in the storm."

Her logic seemed solid, and for a beat, the crowd mulled it over. There'd never been much chatter linking Paige and Luciano before today.

The crowd's fury began to flicker out, like a fire starved of oxygen.

Sensing the shift, Paige exhaled a sigh of relief discreetly, swiped away her tears, and stepped in close to Elliana with a forced grin. She wrapped her arm through Elliana's, striking a sisterly pose.

"Elliana, I'm shocked! You're Rosa? That's incredible! I'm so proud! As your sister, I mean it from the heart. You've got to teach me your secrets now- we're family, right? You can't say no!"

Elliana gave a sideways smile, thin and unreadable. She had to give Paige credit-the girl could pivot faster than a weather vane in a hurricane. Just a moment ago, Paige had practically been out for blood. Now Paige was clinging to her like a long-lost twin, acting as if the past never happened. Unbelievable.

Elliana gently slipped her arm free, no words, no fuss—just quiet dismissal.

Then, without warning, the massive screen behind the stage flickered to life. A video began to play.

Luciano, caught on camera, was shown handing a painting over to Merritt in a dim back room. The footage made everything clear—Merritt's calculation, Luciano's brown-nosing, and worst of all, Paige's fake-as-hell antics and sly cooperation. The sound was crisp. The actions, damning. Gasps filled the air.

Seconds ago, the crowd had begun to cool toward Paige. Now? ALL hell broke loose. Rage poured out like fuel on a flame.

"Paige, get off the stage!" someone shouted from the crowd.

The shout pierced the air, and in seconds, the whole crowd had taken up the chant, their voices rising in a unified roar, demanding Paige leave.

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If Luciano's disgrace hadn't erupted first, Paige's forgery might've drawn nothing more than smirks and side-eyes. But with tempers already flaring, the audience turned vicious.

Paige's connection to Merritt-the city's notorious underworld leader—usually kept people quiet. No one dared stir up trouble with someone under his protection. But Luciano's disaster stirred the crowd into such a frenzy that they didn't care Paige was tied to Merritt—they just wanted her out, right along with Luciano.

This was precisely why Elliana had taken down Luciano first -waited for him to crash and burn before unleashing the damning video. Every move had been deliberate.

Paige had tried to sabotage Elliana with "The Heiress ' Graduation Trip," but Elliana flipped the whole thing on her, leaving her no exit, no cover.

The fury in the crowd caught Paige completely off guard, her back to the on-stage screen and thus oblivious to the video. She'd just finished milking Luciano's scandal to paint herself as the innocent party—how had the crowd turned on her so suddenly?

From the sea of faces, Haley frantically waved both arms, jabbing her finger toward the massive screen lighting up behind Paige.

Paige froze, slow to register what was happening. But the moment she turned and caught sight of the video, her legs gave out and she collapsed onto the stage in a heap. This wasn't supposed to come out-how had it leaked? The deal happened inside Merritt's exclusive club-who in their right mind would risk leaking that footage? Whoever it was clearly didn't care about the fallout.

Her mind reeled, too rattled to make sense of anything. The roar of the crowd gave her no space to breathe. Trash and debris were already flying at the stage.

"What are you waiting for, Paige? Get off that stage!" "Get off the damn stage!"

The crowd's fury surged like a stampede. A few people even lunged for the steps, ready to drag Paige down themselves, but security blocked them just in time—one second later and she'd have been tackled.

Still, the damage was done. Even without a single blow, Paige's dignity had been torn to shreds.

Fueled by fury, some people ripped off their reeking socks, jammed them with whatever they could find, and launched them at Paige. Then things got ridiculous: someone's underwear sailed onto the stage, and more followed.

Within moments, Paige was drowning in chaos. Her designer gown was soaked in sticky soda, and a rogue stiletto had left a bruise blossoming across her flawless makeup. Curled into herself, she trembled violently, hands locked over her head, shrieking in panic.

Elliana stood back, expression unreadable, as memories surged-every taunt, every cruel prank Paige had ever thrown her way. Now, it was all coming back with interest.

The judges and Clement just sat there, stone-faced. Art purists to the end, they couldn't bring themselves to intervene while their beloved arena was defiled by the likes of Paige.

Paige's very public downfall served as a thunderous message: no one could claw their way to the top with lies and walk away unscathed.

When the chaos broke out, Haley immediately dispatched bodyguards to protect Paige, but the crowd was too packed and wild. The bodyguards couldn't push through and had no choice but to watch her take the full brunt of the fury.

By the time the bodyguards finally reached her, Paige was a mess—hair matted, makeup streaked, eyes glassy with shock.

Ever since Merritt had become her godfather, Paige's confidence had inflated beyond reason. She kept up a polished front, but deep down, she believed she was invincible. Backed by Merritt's influence, she assumed she ruled Ublento. Even the city's heavyweights would start treating her like royalty, and she would drink it in like it had her name on it. She never imagined her fall would be this brutal—or this public.

Paralyzed with fear, Paige didn't resist as the bodyguards grabbed her and rushed her off the stage, shielding her as best they could.

Even during the escape, angry crowds kept hurling disgusting trash at her and the bodyguards protecting her.

The chaos didn't ease up until Paige and her crew were completely out of sight. What was supposed to be a refined art venue now looked like a war zone straight out of a busted street fair. Sticky soda streaks clung to walls and floors alike.

The venue was strewn with a chaotic mess of odds and ends, like a storm had swept through a junk drawer.

The crowd looked just as foolish in the chaos's wake.

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One man had gotten so worked up that he lost all sense. Out of things to hurl at Paige, he yanked off his own shirt and lobbed it like a man possessed. But that didn't cut it—so off came his pants, leaving him strutting around in just his boxers. Good thing Paige had already been dragged out, or he might've flung those boxers too in his madness.

Now, standing in the wreckage and half-naked, the adrenaline drained fast. A chill swept over him as reality hit, and he broke into a panicked sweat.

The real spectacle wasn't just the guy stripped to his boxers—it was the other one, equally underdressed, grabbing him and shrieking like a lunatic.

The second guy, clearly furious, had ripped off his own clothes in the heat of the moment. Clad in nothing but his underwear, he lunged at the first man, screaming and clawing like a madman, leaving angry red welts across his chest and back.

To anyone watching without context, it looked disturbingly intimate.

During the earlier chaos, the bizarre brawl had gone unnoticed. But now, with Paige gone and the room settling, everyone's attention landed squarely on the sight of two nearly naked men locked in a desperate embrace.

"Oh my God!" The crowd gasped, recoiling in horror and confusion.

"Ahhh!" Both men screamed in sync, shoved each other away, and bolted out of the venue like their lives depended on it—howling the entire way. Laughter and secondhand embarrassment rippled through the room.

Onstage, Clement wiped a hand across his sweaty brow and shot Elliana a sheepish glance. "Sorry you had to witness that, Rosa."

Elliana let out a soft laugh. "It's alright." She brushed it off, but inside, she was cracking up. When she'd dropped that video, she hadn't anticipated it would trigger this level of chaos. It was absurd and absolutely hilarious.

Even the judges looked stunned, their faces flushed. This was, without a doubt, the most chaotic day of their professional lives.

The host stood frozen, clearly at a loss on how to steer the finals back on track.

Thankfully, Clement stepped forward to take the reins. He surveyed the wreckage of the hall and then forced a smile that barely masked his nerves. "Alright, everyone, let's take a breath. A couple of idiots tried to steal the spotlight, sure-but with Rosa here, this is still the brightest competition we've ever had. Please, take your seats."

His voice was steady, soothing-like a breeze that cut through the lingering tension. Slowly, the crowd settled. People exchanged sheepish glances, as if waking from a shared delirium.

One brave soul sat down. Then another. Before long, the hall had mostly returned to order.

With the chaos behind them, it was finally time to get back on track-to name the champion and runner-up.

Clement took the mic again, now assuming full hosting duties. He turned toward the judges. "Shall we proceed with selecting the winners?"

The judges gathered briefly before Luca stepped forward as their spokesperson. "Rosa's oil painting skills are frankly beyond us. Evaluating her work feels almost out of place in this competition..."

Luca paused, glancing at Elliana, clearly deferring to her decision.

Elliana spoke up without hesitation. "I never intended to compete. I only entered to expose Luciano's fraud. I'm withdrawing the Lonely Sunset from the running. Let the contest play out as it should."

The judges let out a collective sigh of relief. A visible wave of relief passed through the judges.

Clement gave a respectful nod. "Rosa, do you have any advice for the competition?"

Elliana's gaze shifted to Riding the Waves, credited to Paige. Her voice was calm but pointed. "The brushwork is unmistakably Ethan's. He's been through a lot. Art should be something that helps him heal."

The judges exchanged thoughtful looks and nodded in agreement. "Don't worry, Rosa. Even with Paige disqualified, Riding the Waves stays in the running and will be judged fairly. I'll personally verify the true artist and make sure the prize money ends up in the right hands," Clement assured her.

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Elliana gave a small nod. "Thanks, Clement."

He waved it off with a modest smile. "Just doing my job. Come on, Rosa—join us in the VIP seats for the rest of the show."

Elliana wasn't particularly eager to stay. But with the Lonely Sunset still on display, walking out felt like abandonment. So, she accepted his invitation and took her seat beside him in the VIP section.

With the Lonely Sunset officially withdrawn, the rest of the competition progressed without a hitch.

After thorough deliberation, the panel unanimously awarded Riding the Waves the top honor at the Starry Oil Painting Competition. Brick Bridge by Bentlee, which had originally placed third, was elevated to runner-up.

The reshuffle nudged Hailee's piece from sixth to fifth place. That boost came with a thirty-thousand bump in prize money—raising her winnings from two hundred to two hundred thirty grand.

To Hailee, it felt Like manna from heaven. Still dazed from the revelation that Elliana was actually Rosa, the unexpected windfall only added to her mental whiplash.

But her quiet meltdown went unnoticed—overshadowed by the bigger headline.

Just as the final applause settled, someone from the audience stood and shouted, "Rosa, I'll give thirty million for the Lonely Sunset! Will you sell it?"

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Rosa's paintings were the stuff of Legend—exceptionally rare and fiercely coveted. Besides two early pieces floating around, there was nothing else out there. Her focus had long shifted to jewelry and fashion, leaving the art world starving for her canvas pieces. That scarcity drove collectors wild.

Lonely Sunset was a jewel in its own right. Still, since Elliana had painted it quickly during a livestream workshop, some collectors assumed it lacked the refined depth of her earlier masterpieces.

The man who opened the bidding thought thirty million was a fair starting point.

But before the offer could hang too long in the air, Clement spoke up with a polite but pointed correction. "Sir, just for context—the museum currently holds Spring Goddess, one of Rosa's early works. It sold at auction for one hundred million."

The implication landed with weight. If an early Rosa piece could command nine figures, what made anyone think her latest, painted with honed skill and confidence, was worth less? Put plainly: thirty million wasn't going to cut it.

The original bidder blinked, momentarily stunned. He'd watched Elliana's livestream—seen her paint the Lonely Sunset with effortless grace, like it was just another day in the studio. Could it really surpass Spring Goddess?

He wasn't the only one wondering. Other collectors, on the verge of jumping in, hesitated. Was this latest piece truly that valuable?

Luca rose from his seat, his expression warm but authoritative. "Lonely Sunset is a leap beyond Spring Goddess. The brushwork, the ideorealm—it's on another level entirely."

The judges around him nodded in quick agreement.

"No doubt about it," one judge added. "This piece elevates Rosa to a new tier in the art world."

"She's continued to grow, even without releasing anything new for years. This proves it—Rosa's untouchable now."

"Collectors, take note-Lonely Sunset is a _ stronger acquisition than Spring Goddess."

With Ublento's top art authorities backing the painting, the room shifted. The bidders finally grasped what they were looking at-not just a painting dashed off on a whim, but a masterwork that marked the evolution of a legend. And Elliana-Rosa-had conjured it like it was nothing. A few strokes. A live demo. And she'd shaken the entire art world.

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A voice rang out from the crowd, loud and clear. "I'm bidding one hundred twenty million!"

With Spring Goddess having fetched a hundred million, and Lonely Sunset being deemed an even greater work, the opening volley had to land high.

The sheer number was enough to thin the herd. Most collectors, no matter how desperate to own a Rosa original, knew their bank accounts couldn't keep up. Now, it was a high-stakes duel between the deep-pocketed elite.

"One hundred thirty million!" "One forty!" "One fifty!"

That last bid hit the room like a gong. The crowd fell still. For most here, one hundred fifty million wasn't just steep—it was astronomical. After all, the Starry Oil Painting Competition was meant to spotlight emerging artists, not trigger bidding wars for icons. Rosa's presence had upended expectations. And most collectors here weren't as deep-pocketed as Cole—they had limits. One fifty was already jaw -dropping.

Clement turned toward Elliana, about to ask if she was ready to part with the piece, when another voice boomed from the back. "I'm going one eighty!"

Exclamation tore through the hall. "Is this for real..."

Heads whipped toward the man who'd casually tossed in an extra thirty million like he was paying for lunch.

The way he smirked, it was as if the Lonely Sunset was already hanging in his private gallery.

For a moment, it looked like no one could touch him. Then came a low, gravel-edged voice-tight with resolve. "Two hundred million."

Gasps rippled through the crowd as they turned again. The bidder's tone was fierce, all-in, like he'd just wagered his entire empire on Rosa's genius.

"I'll go two-twenty!" The one-eighty bidder fired back, refusing to blink. His face was flushed, jaw tight—he was clearly at his ceiling.

The room buzzed with whispers, the tension thick. Was that the final blow?

And then, a voice floated from the back—smooth, assured, and devastatingly calm. "One billion."

Silence slammed down like a hammer. Time seemed to stop. Hearts pounded. One billion. Who was this person? What kind of titan casually dropped a billion like pocket change? No one could compete with that.

Slowly, almost reverently, every head turned to glimpse the man who'd just nuked the bidding war in one sentence.

The guy who placed the billion-dollar bid looked nothing like what anyone expected—just a quiet guy in glasses, more like a librarian than a billionaire. He didn't fit the image at all.

Someone dropping that kind of money should have a larger-than-life vibe. This guy? He looked like he was running an errand for someone powerful. So, who was the real player behind the curtain, chasing Elliana's *Lonely Sunset*?

The room was buzzing. Everyone was dying to know.

The man in glasses stayed cool as ice, a slight smirk on his face. He didn't walk like a tycoon, but the confidence rolling off him spoke for the mystery mogul behind him.

Elliana was stunned. She never imagined someone would throw a billion at her painting. Was it really worth that much? Or was this buyer just so rich that he needed ways to burn his money?

It reminded her of the madness during the Endless Love auction.

Back then, the crowd had gone wild. Someone had shouted five hundred million, and everyone thought that was the winning number—until a mystery bidder doubled it. That was game over. A billion? No one could top that.

That bold bid had smashed through the room like a wrecking ball. No one stood a chance in the face of that kind of wealth.

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Lately, at Paige's engagement party, Elliana had found out who the bidder of Endless Love was. It had been Cole. But today's mystery man? It certainly wasn't Cole. If anything, he probably hated her right now. He wouldn't go near her, let alone buy her work. If he ever found out she was Rosa, he'd probably call her a jerk. He had spent a billion on Endless Love, only for it to end up back in her hands. It was like she'd swiped his billion for nothing.

She never meant to hurt him. But if he ever called her a snake, she wouldn't have a solid defense.

As the unease crept in, Elliana pressed her lips together. Her cheeks burned.

Clement, clueless about her thoughts, practically bounced with excitement. "Rosa, you okay selling the Lonely Sunset for a billion?"

Okay with it? Elliana was more than okay. In her head, she was screaming yes. If a few brushstrokes could bring in a billion, she'd be crazy to say no. She loved money. Always had. But she couldn't show it. Out here, she was a respected artist, not a money-chaser.

Elliana gave a calm smile. "Didn't expect a collector to come in this strong. I'd look petty if I didn't let it go."

Right after saying it, she winced inside. That line sounded so fake.

Clement beamed, "Exactly! The guy's clearly obsessed. Must be your number-one fan."

Elliana just smiled. Words failed her.

Clement took care of the paperwork himself. The man in glasses walked away with the Lonely Sunset, and Elliana walked away with a billion-dollar check.

Across town, in the Evans Group CEO's office, Cole watched everything on the museum's security feed. When Elliana stepped out of frame, he tossed his phone aside and muttered, "Heartless woman."

Myles, Aron, and Hugh all raised their brows at once. Cole had just trashed his wife-right after spending a billion to buy her painting. They couldn't tell if this was love or bitterness.

The room went still until Cole snapped, "Send someone to follow Elliana. I want to know where she goes."

"Got it." Myles jumped into action without a second's pause.

Elliana, totally in the dark about Cole's moves or his muttering, slipped out of the museum. The museum's front door was chaos-reporters everywhere, cameras flashing nonstop. Now that her identity as Rosa was out, she would be swarmed. Therefore, she slipped out through the back door.

It was exactly nine. The air was crisp and cool. The street was quiet, lit by flickering neon signs in the distance.

Elliana suddenly remembered Hailee was still inside. She pulled out her phone to send a text. "Hailee, I'm at the back door. You still inside?"

Hailee replied in seconds, full of excitement, "Elliana, I thought you'd be big one day—but this? You're already a legend! Are you sure I'm still cool enough to be your friend?"

Elliana smirked, fingers flying across the screen. But then she froze. A shadow was creeping closer. Her eyes narrowed. A cold edge flashed in them.

A figure loomed for only a moment before melting into the darkness, its purpose as unreadable as ever. Elliana didn't flinch. She tracked it sidelong, her posture easy, her fingers never pausing on her phone.

Just as silently as it had emerged, the figure slipped away -vanishing the instant it reached within five meters.

Elliana tilted her head down, flicked away the unease, and resumed her text. "Rosa's just a name. Don't let it mess with your head. You and I? Nothing changes."

Hailee's response buzzed through almost immediately. "Can I come over now?"

Elliana smiled faintly and typed back. "Absolutely. I'm starving. Let's grab something to eat."

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Hailee's the bubbly reply came. "Sure! I'm on my way!"

True to her word, Hailee burst in minutes later, slightly winded but glowing with excitement. She waved a bank card like a victory flag. "Elliana! Dinner's on me tonight!"

Only after Elliana's encouragement had Hailee submitted her painting, and to her shock, it had snagged a prize. Now, she wanted to celebrate the win with the person who'd pushed her to try.

With a grin, Elliana agreed without hesitation. "Deal."

Hailee Linked arms with her. "Alright, your pick then. Where do you want to eat?"

Elliana tilted her head thoughtfully. "Didn't you say your family runs a diner? Let's head there."

Hailee blinked in surprise. "Wait-seriously? Our diner's in a rough part of town, on old Willow Lane. It's in a sketchy neighborhood and, trust me, far from glamorous. I wouldn't take you there."

"It doesn't bother me," Elliana replied. "Spaghetti with red sauce, the kind your dad's been making forever. I want that comfort food magic. Let's go."

Despite her reservations, Hailee gave in, and the two flagged down a cab and set off.

Elliana genuinely craved a taste of the local specialty—but that wasn't the whole story. She wanted a chance to meet Hailee's family, perhaps even a glimpse of her elusive boyfriend. She would assess

his condition firsthand and then decide whether to reveal her discreet identity as Milena to treat him. Even though her feelings toward Hailee were sincere, she needed the full picture before deciding how far to involve herself.

Back at the street corner, after the cab vanished, the figure reemerged and quietly tapped out a message to Myles.

In the CEO's office of the Evans Group, Myles's phone buzzed. He glanced down and immediately turned to Cole. "Mr. Evans, your wife just left with Hailee. They're heading to a diner on Willow Lane."

Cole gave a cold laugh, lips curling with disdain. "She walks off with a billion of my money, and now she's dining in some rundown joint? Has she no sense of class? What a disgrace."

Myles, unfazed by the rant—he'd long grown used to Cole's whiplash moods—responded with an easy grin and a hint of mischief in his tone, "Willow Lane might be a little rough around the edges, sure, but the vibe's unbeatable. The food's great—real comfort stuff. I've eaten there myself. Best red sauce in the city."

Cole lifted an eyebrow skeptically. "You went to a dump like that?"

"Absolutely!" Myles responded, lying as smoothly as he breathed. "It's worth the trip. Their red sauce hits like nostalgia. That kind of flavor? You don't get it in those overpriced five-star restaurants. And I'm not the only one—Aron and Hugh are hooked too."

Cole's gaze shifted to Aron and Hugh, cold and unreadable. "Is that so? You two like that place too?"

"We've never be— Ow!" Hugh yelped as Aron jabbed a sharp pinch into his ribs, cutting him off before he could blurt out the truth.

Aron, unfazed, mustered a wide, sheepish grin. "We're huge fans, actually. Myles got it exactly right—the food's incredible. We were just saying we might swing by after work tonight."

Cole had clearly caught the pinch but didn't comment. He simply let it slide.

Myles shot Hugh a pointed glare, silencing him, then turned smoothly back to Cole. "Mr. Evans, you've been cooped up in your ivory tower too long. You should really get a taste of the streets-feel the pulse, try some local cuisine, and reconnect with the city."

"That's right!" Aron chimed in, jumping into the conversation. "You've been working nonstop. Come kick back with us at Willow Lane, grab a bite, maybe relax a little."

"No!" Cole refused flatly with a sharp shake of his head. "You said she's there, didn't you? I'm not going anywhere near that woman."

"You won't see her." Myles pressed on, his voice dripping with false assurance. "The place is bigger than you think— dozens of tables and endless stream of people. The chance of running into her is next to nothing."

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Cole didn't respond and just pressed his lips into a thin line.

Sensing the hesitation, Aron seized the moment. He clapped a hand on Cole's arm, his voice warm with insistence. "Come on. The weather's perfect. Don't waste the night sulking in here."

Before Cole could object, Aron hauled him to his feet and steered him out the door.

Still bewildered, Hugh mumbled, "Why are you and Aron feeding him that lie?"

Myles gave him a swift kick without thinking twice. "If you're too dumb to help, then shut up!" He shot Hugh one last scathing glare before jogging to catch up.

Grumbling under his breath, Hugh chased after them, his face a storm of annoyance and confusion.

Rather than heading straight to Willow Lane, Elliana took a sharp detour, guiding Hailee toward a nearby hotel instead.

""Wait-why are we pulling into a hotel?" Hailee asked, squinting in confusion.

Elliana shoved her fingers through the tangled mess of her wig and let out a sigh. "I need to pull myself together. If your dad catches me like this, he's bound to think you're hanging around with the wrong crowd."

A grin tugged at Hailee's lips. "Sure, my dad's got outdated ideas, but come on-you've got that 'cool but dangerous' thing going. He'll love you once he sees past the mascara."

Despite Hailee's reassurance, Elliana wasn't taking chances -she needed to dial it down. Now that her discreet identity as Rosa was out, walking around like a neon sign wasn't smart. And dragging Hailee into unwanted attention? That was off the table.

While Elliana disappeared into the bathroom for a fast rinse, Hailee made herself at home on the couch, scrolling idly and waiting.

Thirty minutes later, the bathroom door creaked open, and Elliana emerged like a different woman.

Hailee nearly fell off the couch. She jumped up, eyes wide. "Girl, you look unreal!"

Elliana hadn't changed her outfit—a simple black tracksuit still hugged her frame—but the transformation was in the details. Her tangled mop had been tamed into sleek waves, and with the heavy makeup gone, her skin glowed with a soft, natural shine.

Wanting to keep things low-key, Elliana added a quirky touch -a pair of oversized gold-rimmed glasses with no lenses, just enough to veil her face and give her that subtle mystery.

The transformation was striking. The girl who used to stick out like a sore thumb now looked effortlessly cool-poised, polished, and magnetic.

"You're a total babe! Why would you ever cover that up? Ditch the disastrous makeup forever!" Hailee exclaimed, half -laughing at the end.

Twenty was the age to flaunt one's youth, not bury it beneath layers of eccentricity. But Elliana had her reasons -her sudden marriage to Cole had flipped her world and forced her into hiding. Without that curveball, the disguise would've been ancient history.

Of course, none of that made it to Hailee's ears. Elliana simply gave a nonchalant shrug. "Habit I never quite dropped," she said with a casual smile.

Hailee gave Elliana a playful look, puffing out her cheeks in disbelief. While most girls would die for even a fraction of Elliana's looks—some even chasing it with surgery—here Elliana was, hiding it under quirky camouflage.

Hailee chuckled to herself. Elliana was truly something else.

Elliana and Hailee stepped out of the hotel and hopped into a cab bound for Willow Lane.

About an hour later, they reached the entrance to the lane, which was bursting with life. Crowds wove between stalls, and the air was thick with the scent of grilled meats and spices, a rhythm of chatter and clatter filling the space.