

## Wife Mask 121

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With energy in their steps, Elliana and Hailee jumped out and began weaving through the lively crowd, heading straight for the Loftus family diner.

Though both turned heads, their vibes couldn't be more different. Hailee gave off wholesome sunshine, the classic sweetheart charm. Elliana, on the other hand, carried herself like a heroine out of a high-stakes drama—striking, magnetic, unforgettable.

Side by side, they stole the spotlight-like two stars casually strutting through a movie set lit by neon and streetlights.

A couple hundred feet in, Hailee lit up and pointed down the lane. "That's it! My family diner, right there."

Elliana followed her gaze to a cheerful, glowing sign that proudly read Loftus's Comfort Eats in bold block letters.

Squeezed between neighboring eateries, the diner gave off an inviting warmth. The smell of something delicious wafted into the street, and through the pristine windows, Elliana spotted a bustling crowd. Clearly, this place was a local favorite.

Inside, a man in a spotless chef's coat moved like a whirlwind, bouncing between the kitchen and dining area with practiced urgency.

"That's my dad," Hailee said with pride, motioning toward the man. "ALL our recipes come straight from the family vault. Way better than the usual stuff—and they won't burn a hole in your wallet. That's why people never stop coming."

"Looks like I'm about to have the best meal of the week," Elliana said, grinning as the taste played out in her imagination.

With a bright smile lighting up her face, Hailee pushed open the door and guided Elliana into the warm, inviting diner.

Behind the counter, Hailee's father, Briggs Loftus, was juggling plates when he caught sight of Hailee. His tired eyes lit up instantly. "Hey there, sweetheart!"

When he caught a glimpse of Elliana next to Hailee, he paused mid-step and blinked. "Well, now—who's your stunning friend?"

"That's Elliana Marsh," Hailee replied, nudging her with a grin. "She came for the food everyone keeps bragging about."

Waving them over, he motioned to a booth near the back corner. "You'll like this spot—quiet, cozy, and perfect for first-timers. I'll cook up something real good for you."

"Appreciate it," Elliana remarked, her smile both warm and polite.

Hailee's dad let out a soft chuckle and disappeared behind the swinging kitchen doors.

Before heading off, Hailee leaned down and said, "Sit tight. I'm gonna lend my dad a hand in the back."

Elliana gave her a simple nod, her smile lingering.

Once Hailee was alone, Elliana sank into the booth and glanced around. The air buzzed with casual conversation and the clink of utensils. From the nearby murmurs, she gathered that Hailee's dad had a good reputation—friendly, steady, the kind of guy who got along with just about anyone. Hearing that only made things click—of course Hailee was so grounded. She'd been raised right.

A few minutes later, Hailee returned, balancing two plates piled high with food. "Alright, Elliana, time to feast!"

"Perfect," Elliana said, already reaching for her fork. But just as she was about to taste the first bite, a burst of shouting erupted from the street outside...

A burst of noise echoed from the street, but neither Elliana nor Hailee paid it any attention. It felt distant, and neither of them had a taste for unnecessary drama.

Wearing a small apron dusted in flour, Hailee looked every bit the hardworking chef's daughter—her cheeks still warm and rosy from her time in the kitchen.

As Elliana reached for her fork, Hailee flopped into the seat across from her, clearly ready to eat and gossip in peace.

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Before they could dive in, Hailee suddenly jumped to her feet. "Hold up," she said, grabbing an apron from the counter. "It gets hot in here, and food tends to fight back. Better cover up."

Elliana chuckled at the thoughtful gesture and tied it around her waist without protest.

Once Elliana was geared up, both women settled in again, plates steaming, conversation ready to flow.

But before Elliana could taste her first bite, the earlier noise came crashing through the front door like a storm.

Elliana's eyes darted to the entrance—and there Myles was, dressed to impress in a crisp, tailored suit. He stormed in, trailed by bodyguards dressed head-to-toe in black. Among the easygoing regulars, they looked like they'd wandered in from a movie set.

Confusion flickered across Elliana's face. What the hell was Myles doing in this place?

Before she could piece anything together, Briggs—cheerful and ever the host—hurried over with a welcoming grin. "Looking to eat, gentlemen?"

With a cold glint in his eye, Myles adjusted his glasses and spoke like it was business as usual. "Our boss wants this spot cleared. Everyone else—out. We're taking over the diner."

Elliana stared, dumbfounded, her fork frozen in midair. Cole was really clearing out an entire diner for a meal? Had he lost it? Cole was Ublento's top dog, the kind of guy who dined at a swanky private restaurant. What business did he have showing up at a family-run eatery on Willow Lane? If Cole felt like mingling with the locals, why not do it subtly—blend in, eat quietly, and leave like a normal person? Reserving the entire diner like it was some large event? He had clearly taken a detour into madness.

Myles's request backed Briggs into a corner. Briggs' modest diner thrived on familiar faces and returning customers. High-profile customers didn't just stroll in and call for a private event.

"Uh, sir, I-" Briggs said, voice unsure.

Before Briggs could finish, two more suits-Aron and Hugh- strode in like they owned the block. "All clear outside," one of them said. "Just need this place cleared."

A flicker of disbelief curled at the edge of Elliana's mouth. Out of every corner joint in the city, Cole chose this one. Was that a coincidence, or was he here because of her? She adjusted her gold-rimmed glasses, fingers trembling slightly. No way he'd recognize her—he'd never seen her without the layers of her usual disguise.

As her thoughts spiraled, Myles gave a subtle nod, and the bodyguards sprang into action-silently slipping thick bundles of cash into each patron's hand like it was a planned ritual.

"Our boss will be here soon," Myles announced, loud and flat. "Take the money and grab dinner somewhere else."

Elliana's eyes flicked to the wads of cash-easily ten grand a bundle. Cole probably spent more on neckties. But to these locals, it was rent, bills, maybe even a fresh start. The room shifted from grumbles to quiet gratitude as they took the cash and slipped out with hesitant smiles.

Moments later, the once-bustling diner stood hollow—emptied out like a stage waiting for its lead actor.

Part of Elliana wanted to slip out before things escalated, but the untouched meal in front of her said otherwise. She'd waited too long for that food to just walk away. Anyway, she would linger to figure out what kind of game Cole was trying to pull.

Just as her fork hovered over the plate, Hugh swaggered up and tapped her shoulder. "Hey, you waitress, break time's over. My boss is on his way. Tables need clearing. Chairs need wiping. Let's go!"

The food was right there—one bite away—but Elliana sighed and set her fork aside, irritation bubbling under her calm. As much as she wanted to snap, this wasn't her turf, and she wasn't about to stir up trouble for Hailee's family. With the diner's apron on, it made sense they'd mistake her for a waitress.

With a resigned shrug, Elliana stood up and began stacking plates and wiping surfaces.

Hailee rushed over, trying to intervene. "Elli—"

A quick raise of Elliana's hand cut Hailee off. She didn't want her name to fly around—not now.

Puzzled, Hailee leaned in close and whispered, "Elliana, you're not staff. You're here to eat. I'll tell them—once they know, they'll leave you alone."

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Before Elliana could even reply, Hugh shouted, "What're you two waitresses yapping about? Hurry up and clean!"

"It's fine," Elliana murmured, gently squeezing Hailee's hand. "Let's just roll with it."

With a breath and a quiet huff, Elliana rolled up her sleeves and got to work, clearing plates like she'd done it a hundred times.

Briggs, realizing this crew meant business, clammed up and joined the cleanup.

Throwing an apologetic glance Elliana's way, Hailee grabbed a tray and fell into step beside her.

Once Elliana, Hailee, and Briggs had every table gleaming, Cole walked in with his usual shine, bodyguards trailing behind him. At his side was a woman who carried herself with a kind of charm that didn't have to try.

With the last table wiped down, Elliana considered slipping into the kitchen to avoid attention—but one step into that oven-like heat had her retreating. Instead, she quietly slid behind the counter, hoping to stay unnoticed.

The moment Cole entered, Elliana lowered her gaze, her hair falling like a curtain to shield her face. But curiosity got the better of her when she caught a glimpse of a striking woman hanging off his arm.

Dressed in tailored black slacks and a sleek shirt to match, Cole moved like a storm wrapped in silk. His tall silhouette and sharply cut features carried an unmistakable chill that instantly stole the room's attention.

Elliana could tell something was off about him. His appearance hadn't changed, but the energy around him was no longer familiar—it pulsed with something bolder, darker. She remembered him as calm, a little rebellious maybe, but subtle—never one to flaunt his power. He was the type to fly under the radar, not show up with fanfare and bodyguards at a diner tucked into a working-class street.

Today, though, Cole's eyes held a dangerous gleam-carefree and arrogant. He walked like the world was his and no one could tell him otherwise.

Elliana couldn't pinpoint what had flipped the switch in him, but every instinct screamed that this version of Cole spelled nothing but trouble. Best to keep her distance.

Clinging to Cole's side, the woman was all curves and confidence, barely covered in a tight red tank and shorts that left Little to the imagination, strutting in heels like she was walking a runway straight into chaos.

Where others might've fallen under the woman's spell, Elliana felt only discomfort. The woman's overpowering perfume smothered the air, making her stomach turn. This was Cole's type now? She nearly rolled her eyes.

In Elliana's mind, she was already tearing him apart with relentless sarcasm.

Loftus's Comfort Eats stood right in the center of blue-collar Willow Lane. The tables and chairs, while clean as could be, clearly wore the marks of time.

The woman gave the place a single glance and curled her nose in distaste. "Mr. Evans, don't you think this place is a little shabby?" she asked, her voice dripping with so much fake sweetness that Elliana got goosebumps.

After everything that had happened the night before, Elliana couldn't help but wonder—had the drugged Cole been with this woman and fallen for her?

As Elliana continued firing silent daggers with her eyes, Cole and the woman made themselves comfortable at a table.

Cole's tone was oddly gentle, the kind of calm that didn't match the chaos. "All that luxury stuff is flash and noise. This place? It's got soul. Feels good to change it up."

With a honey-sweet smile, the woman leaned closer, voice a silky purr as she said, "Didn't peg you for the humble type, Mr. Evans. But if you're around, even diner food tastes Like heaven."

Mid-sentence, the woman made a show of adjusting her top, lowering it even further—as if she were inviting Cole to admire the view. There was zero shame in her game. She played to the crowd and dared them to look.

The bodyguards dropped their gazes to the floor, steering clear of the moment like that was part of the assignment.

Nearby, Aron and Hugh shared a split-second grimace, while Myles just arched an eyebrow, clearly wondering what planet this woman came from.

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Myles, Aron, and Hugh had assumed Cole's visit to Willow Lane was all about finding Elliana. But then, out of the blue, Cole had phoned Manley with a request to send a woman over. Then, this woman had arrived, wrapped in red and attitude, and left the whole team quietly stunned. Seriously? This type? None of them thought Cole would give her the time of day. Yet, there she was, not just tagging along-seated beside Cole like she belonged.

Trying to read Cole was like chasing smoke—no one had the slightest clue what he was playing at.

Elliana, still camped behind the counter, had the misfortune of witnessing every exaggerated pout, every eyelash flutter from the woman, and the occasional smirk from Cole. It was stomach-turning.

As the woman leaned in again, clearly angling for more attention, Cole gave a slow smile and murmured, "Let's eat first. I'll get us a hotel after."

The meaning behind that Line wasn't lost on anyone.

The woman shifted in her seat with giddy energy, eyes lighting up like she'd just won a prize.

Elliana couldn't help the eye-roll. Seriously? Cole was actually buying into all that fake sweetness? Pathetic.

"Hey, you, come over!" Cole's voice sliced through the diner's low hum like a blade-sharp, direct, impossible to ignore.

Elliana's head jerked up instinctively and realized he was calling her. What the hell did he want now?

Elliana froze for a second, caught between playing along and vanishing into the kitchen.

As always, Hugh skipped finesse and stomped over. "Did you not hear him? Get over there!"

With a quiet exhale of frustration, Elliana approached the table, casually placing the menu in front of him without a word.

Cole didn't bother looking at the menu. Instead, he leaned back in his seat, watching her with unsettling ease—his stare slow, steady, and impossible to read.

Elliana's pulse stumbled. That look—it almost felt like recognition. Was he starting to put the pieces together? No. She shut the thought down before it could grow roots. For fifteen years, not a single person had laid eyes on her true face. There was no chance Cole could recognize her.

Across the room, heads turned toward Elliana—Myles, Aron, Hugh, even the guards couldn't help it. A gorgeous, poised waitress in a place like this? Total surprise.

Hailee and Briggs stood off to the side, tight-lipped and visibly uneasy, caught between worry and confusion.

The silence stretched, heavy and disorienting. Elliana finally broke it, tapping the menu with practiced calm. "We've got ten house specials today, sir. What can I get started for you?"



Elliana wished Cole would just look at the damn menu already. Anything to get those sharp eyes off her.

But Cole didn't budge. He just kept staring at Elliana—silent, unreadable, and relentless.

A fluttering drum in Elliana's chest sputtered into an uneven pause. Suspicions of him recognizing her flooded her mind, but she soon dismissed them. There was no way he could recognize her, so she coaxed her heart back to a steady rhythm. Still, his gaze bore into her like a physical force, making her too tense to even draw a full breath. Antagonizing him was the last thing she needed. After he stormed out last night, their dynamic was already strained. Now wasn't the time to push her luck. Playing it cool, keeping her distance—that was her only safe bet.

The diner felt oppressively quiet, like the air had gone stale.

Myles, Aron, Hugh, and even the bodyguards—they were all side-eyeing the tension, utterly baffled by Cole's intense fixation on a mere waitress.

Off to the side, Hailee and Briggs looked like they were bracing for a bomb to go off, nerves fraying for Elliana's sake.

Seated opposite Cole, the woman felt a sense of threat as this stunning waitress had attracted Cole's attention. Her lips tightened.

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But Cole couldn't have cared less about what others thought. His gaze lingered on Elliana as if drawn by a magnet. Because to him, she was breathtaking—undeniably, aggravatingly beautiful. She drove him out of his mind. She'd played him, kept him at arm's length with that icy attitude—but damn it, he couldn't stop wanting her.

Bathed in the diner's soft, golden light, Elliana looked even more luminous—like a spotlight had chosen her and refused to move.

Cole remembered the first time he'd glimpsed her real face: long hair tumbling loose, that fierce makeup stripped away, a towel hiding most of her features except her eyes and brow.

Now she stood before him with sleek glasses veiling her upper face, her mouth and nose fully revealed. Between the two moments, Cole had assembled her like a puzzle-half of her face at a time.

Just like he'd guessed on their wedding night, Elliana was drop-dead gorgeous.

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Cole didn't spare the woman a glance. His voice remained calm, smooth, and cutting. "But she's got one thing going for her."

Elliana's gaze tightened, pulling her eyebrows together. She couldn't care less whether this woman possessed any merit. And why was he telling her this?

"She's upfront about being a seductress. No pretending. Unlike some people who look all sweet and innocent but are stone-cold inside, reeling guys in and then ghosting them..." His gaze lifted to meet Elliana's, a half-smile tugging one corner of his mouth, equal parts amused and dangerous. "So tell me, are you one of those heartbreakers?"

Something in Cole's tone sent a jolt through Elliana, her pulse kicking up without warning. A part of her couldn't help but wonder—had he recognized her? Was this his twisted way of calling her out? Then again, the odds were slim. It just didn't add up. In his mind, she had been the quirky girl with the loud clothes and too much eyeliner. The heartbreaker he was dissing was some pure, pretty type. He didn't refer to her. It seemed getting rejected by her wasn't the only hit to his ego. Some other beauty must've strung him along, dangled a promise, and then walked off without Looking back.

Elliana had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. Seriously? Mr. Billionaire Brooding over heartbreak like a lovesick teen? All that money, all that charm-and still couldn't land a steady win? Ragging on a random waitress like this? Just how many heartbreaks had it taken to turn Cole into this bitter, dramatic mess?

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"Elliana, seriously-leave it to me," Hailee said as she grabbed ingredients like it was second nature. "This whole thing's ridiculous. I'm sorry it got dumped on you."

A quiet sigh escaped Elliana. "No, Hailee, this is on me. You and your dad are caught in my mess."

And it wasn't just this diner. The guards posted outside meant the whole block was probably losing customers. The guilt sat heavy on Elliana's shoulders.

As Elliana and Hailee kept chatting, the crisp sound of heels striking the floor rang out behind them. Then, the woman strutted in like she owned the place.

Hailee held her ground, her voice calm but resolute as she said, "Sorry, ma'am, customers aren't allowed back here. I'll have to ask you to return to the front."

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Elliana's fingers clenched tighter, this time with full intent.

"Ow-hey!"" the woman shouted, her confidence cracking.

The woman flashed her teeth, words laced with venom, as she blurted out, "You pitiful little waitress, you're doomed! Do you even have a clue who's sitting out there? He's in a whole different world than you. Cross him, and you're toast! I'm his woman. Come at me, and he'll make you regret ever showing your face! Let go, you psycho waitress!"

Elliana's smile was cold, her voice colder. "No, sweetheart. You're the one who is finished."

No amount of screaming helped. Elliana's grip was locked in place, unshaken and merciless.

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A ripple of bewilderment passed through the crowd as people exchanged looks—what the hell had just happened?

Myles was the first to recover, snatching a tablecloth and rushing over to shield the woman.

Blindsided by Elliana's fearless confession, the woman crumbled, her pride in shreds. She turned toward Cole, her voice shrill and desperate as she whimpered for sympathy, "Mr. Evans, that lowly waitress just snapped-she's trying to steal you from me! Out of pure jealousy, she tore my dress and threw boiling soup on me! You have to do something about this!"

Gasps rippled through the crowd as all eyes swiveled to Elliana. No one expected the gentle waitress to turn savage like that. Over a man, no less. She'd just gone full rogue. Then again, who could blame her? Cole was rich, ruthless, and infuriatingly handsome. Women going unhinged for a guy like that? Par for the course.

The crowd swallowed the woman's sob story whole—everyone except Cole. He wasn't fooled for a second. He knew Elliana far too well. He still remembered the night he'd tried to sneak into her bed

stark naked, only for her to boot him out like yesterday's trash. She'd made it brutally clear she didn't want him.

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Everyone tensed, ready for Cole to snap at her. But he did the opposite—he leaned in, gaze burning into hers, his mouth so close that it made her breath hitch. What came out of his mouth left everyone stunned.

Elliana braced herself, ready for Cole to fire off some warning shots. Instead of backing down, she cocked her head and met his stare head-on, not a flicker of fear in sight.

The second their eyes met, a teasing grin tugged at Cole's lips. He let out a slow breath and said, "Well now, you've definitely caught my eye, honey."

Even though his tone was gentle, his words struck Elliana like a jolt of lightning straight to the brain. Her pulse faltered, missing a few beats as her brain tried to keep up. What on earth was he trying to say with that?

Cole looked at her with a mix of charm and danger, the kind of stare that could spark nerves in the bravest soul.