

Wife Mask 181

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Darin never dreamed Elliana would actually accept his invitation. He was equal parts stunned and elated. "Elliana, how about dinner at the Ublento Hotel? My treat," he offered.

Elliana raised an eyebrow. Now, the Ublento Hotel wasn't just any place—it was a gold-plated wallet-drainer. This was the first time Darin had ever splurged like this on her. Her smile grew sharper, edged with irony. "Sure."

Conveniently, she was already at the Ublento Hotel. No need to lift a finger—just a trip downstairs.

"Where are you now? I'll swing by and pick you up," Darin added eagerly.

Glancing down coolly, Elliana replied, "No need. I'll get there myself." After all, it was just a matter of going downstairs.

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Darin caught a glimpse of the order and felt his heart sink like a stone. But he plastered on a grin, not daring to let his pain show.

Elliana saw right through him, of course, but played dumb. After wrapping up her lavish order, she leaned back and tossed out casually. "So, what's the big idea inviting me here?"

"Oh, nothing major. Just wanted to share a meal with my girl and see how you're holding up," Darin replied insincerely. Truth was, he was terrified that if he spilled his real motives too soon, Elliana could bolt. His game plan was to let her enjoy the food first and then ease into the ask.

Elliana knew exactly what he was up to. But since he wanted to play the doting dad, she was happy to play along. Anyway, it wasn't her cash going up in smoke—she was profiting off his dime. She was the owner of the Ublento Hotel, after all.

When the food arrived, Elliana dug in, savoring every bite while giving Darin's questions half-hearted, barely-there answers.

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"Mr. Jones, you banking on Mom not showing up to call you out on this?" Elliana quipped, her tone dripping with sarcasm.

Darin's face darkened. "Elliana, I get it-you think I wasn't good enough for her. But it's the truth. She was the one who pursued me."

"Why?" Elliana pressed. "What did she see in you?" "I don't know."

"Do you love her?"

"More than anything."

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Trinity turned on the charm, sweet-talking everyone as they tore into their gifts with wide, happy smiles. She was clearly trying to make up for the mess she caused this morning, using charm and goodies to win back everyone's goodwill.

Elliana paused near the foyer, a crooked smile tugging at her lips.

Just then, Trinity offered a box to Jeff. "Here, Jeff! Got you a super realistic SA24 submachine gun replica!"

While the others were stoked about their gifts, Jeff didn't even reach for it or smile—nothing. "Thanks, but no. Give it to someone else."

Trinity's smile wavered. "But Jeff, I thought you were all about guns?"

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"Enough!" Louisa tugged at her son's arm. "What are you doing, picking fights with a kiddo? Sit down!"

Grumbling under his breath, Lance finally sank back into his seat.

Jeff let out a scoff and was just about to sit when he caught sight of Elliana at the doorway. His entire face lit up like a kid spotting his favorite snack. He sprinted over.

"Elliana! You're back!"

His sudden warmth was a complete 180 from his earlier attitude toward Trinity—and it left the whole room feeling a little unsettled. Especially since Jeff used to be one of Elliana's loudest critics.

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Before Trinity could react, Elliana had dipped a finger into the cream and, with graceful precision, smeared it across Trinity's cheek.

Trinity recoiled with a shriek. The cream seared instantly, like acid on delicate skin. "What the— Ah!"

Trinity clutched her face and bolted from the room, the sound of running water soon echoing from the bathroom.

The room exchanged confused glances. What just happened?

Elliana returned to her seat and gently placed the jar on the table, a cool smirk playing at her lips. Since Trinity wanted to play dirty, she would respond with elegance and precision, letting the whole room witness who would come out on top.

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Without waiting for a reply, she spun on her heel and walked off.

Jeff scrambled after her. "Wait! I meant—" "Get Lost!" Her voice cracked like a whip.

Jeff stopped dead in his tracks, stunned into silence. He hadn't meant to upset her. He just wanted to show he cared—that he wasn't like the others who only made things worse for her. Why did she and Cole both react as if he were the villain? What had he done that was so wrong?

But Elliana didn't look back. She didn't consider his feelings or his confusion. She'd said her piece and left it at that.

Back in her bedroom, Elliana shed the weight of the day beneath a steaming, comforting shower. The hot water dulled the tension in her shoulders and cleared the fog from her mind. Tomorrow, she'd be visiting Barbara for a follow-up consultation—and she still had to dig deeper into the mystery of the Scorpion King.

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Merritt nodded, buying her logic hook, line, and sinker. With his clout, snatching another man's wife would definitely stir up some gossip. Plus, Kiara and Darin had a young son, so cutting ties wasn't exactly a walk in the park. "Do as you see fit," he said dismissively.

Paige jumped in, quick to keep the good vibes going. "Thank you so much for wiping the internet clean for me. Without you, I'd be toast by now."

Merritt's face suddenly darkened, like a storm cloud rolling in. "Scrubbing the web was no big deal. What's got me worried is something else entirely."

Paige and Kiara exchanged nervous looks, totally in the dark about what he meant. If something was rattling Merritt, it had to be bad. Their stomachs started tying themselves in knots.

"Our meeting with Luciano went down on my private turf, and I've got John, a world-class cybersecurity guru, locking down my network. Normally, it's tighter than a drum." His expression grew grimmer. "But this time, someone took the video, and John didn't even catch a whiff of it."

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"Why not Cole?" Paige suggested quickly.

In Ublento, no name carried more weight than Cole Evans. His influence stretched far beyond city Lines—he was practically untouchable. If Merritt could secure his favor, there would be nothing to fear.

Paige figured if she played it right, she could use that alliance to worm her way back into Cole's world.

She waited, certain her idea would impress. But Merritt gave her a cold, amused glance. "Paige, you were once engaged to him. Surely you know how difficult that would be. Why would Cole ever stoop to forming alliances with the likes of us?"

"I do know," she said, recovering smoothly. "But I'm not talking about an alliance. I'm talking about leverage. Make Cole owe you. That way, if things go south, you'll have a favor to cash in."