

## Wife Mask 251

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After a momentary silence descended, Manley scrutinized Merlin's stormy face. "Merlin, what's with that face? Are you unwell?"

Merlin offered no response. Instead, he reclined against the sofa and sealed his eyes against the world.

That suffocating sensation enveloped Merlin again after witnessing Cole and Elliana's intimate moment. His mind replayed Hailee's teeth sinking into his wrist, refusing release. The whisper of her lips against his skin had ignited a fever throughout his body. Like poison coursing through his veins. He couldn't possibly vocalize this affliction. Manley would subject him to merciless ridicule if he ever confessed.

The next day, the aircraft descended upon Regal Grove's helipad as the first light fractured the horizon.

Cole and Elliana remained entwined in slumber, and not one soul dared disturb their sanctuary.

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After Merritt's men took Elliana, Kiara had prepared herself for the news of Elliana's demise. But instead of tragic news about Elliana, she got word that Paige had been seriously wounded.

Paige's eyes filled with panic. "Mom, is this real? Am I actually alive?"

"You're still alive!" Kiara said again and again, her voice trembling with relief. "You're back in Ublento now. The surgery went well, and you're going to be okay!"

Paige looked around the hospital room, her tension slowly fading. After a moment, she let out a long breath. Then, a weak sob escaped her lips. It really felt like she had brushed shoulders with death.

Yesterday, after Merritt's death, panic had completely taken over. The moment gunfire erupted on the yacht, Paige had run in circles, terrified and directionless. And when she saw Elliana taking down everyone in her path, the fear had struck so hard that her knees gave out. Terrified that Elliana might come for her next, she made a split-second decision-she threw herself in front of Cole and

took the bullet. She'd made a desperate gamble, risking her life to earn Cole's gratitude, hoping he'd feel obligated to protect her afterward. So far, it looked like her plan had worked.

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Kiara wasn't ready to believe any of it. "Paige, are you sure you didn't get it twisted? Elliana's just a nobody. There's no way she's some cold-blooded killer."

"Mom, I saw it with my own eyes!" Paige snapped back. "You weren't there. I saw how scary she's become. I thought I was going to die. That's why I threw myself in front of Cole's bullet. I had to, just to survive and make it back to Ublento."

Darin finally began to grasp the gravity of it all. He sank back in his seat, completely shaken.

Kiara, after a moment of silence, suddenly lit up with a plan. "Cole never liked Elliana to begin with. Now that he owes you his life, we can use that. We can get him to take care of her for us!"

Paige stared at Kiara like she was missing the point entirely. "Mom, were you even listening? Cole thought Merritt had killed Elliana, and that's what made him snap. He gunned down Merritt and wiped out everyone else on that yacht. He's obsessed with her!"

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Lenard's expression was serious. "Miss Jones, we owe you more than we can say. Just tell us what you want."

That was exactly what Paige had been waiting to hear. She kept her tone modest, her voice calm as she said, "I am Raylan's fiancée and will be his wife someday. Vivien's like a sister to me. I didn't do it for a reward. I did it because I care."

Her words sounded humble, but the message behind them was loud and clear-she was staking her claim as Raylan's future wife.

Lenard didn't reply right away. His face gave nothing away.

Raylan took hold of Paige's hand. "Paige, I'm going to marry you. That's not even up for debate."

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Before walking out, Lenard gave Paulina a subtle but telling glance.

Not long after, Raylan and Vivien followed Lenard out of the room.

The second the door shut behind them, Paige exhaled slowly, the weight of tension slipping from her shoulders.

Kiara moved fast, walking over to close the door tightly and turn the lock, making sure no one could walk in or overhear anything by accident.

Darin, all grins, eased up beside Paulina. "Ms. Fletcher, to what do we owe the pleasure?"

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This realization made Paige draw a sharp breath, her heartache threatening to suffocate her. Cole's indifference made it clear that pursuing any romantic conversation would only bring more pain. Under these circumstances, she decided that seizing this moment to demand concrete benefits represented her best strategic move.

Having made her choice, Paige offered Paulina a calculated smile and declared, "Since we're being direct, I'll skip the pleasantries. I have three conditions."

Paulina's lips curved upward. "Please, Miss Jones, continue."

As Paige gathered her thoughts, Kiara rushed forward, lowering her voice to whisper urgently, "Paige, think carefully before you speak. Given Cole's cold attitude, if you don't make the most of this chance, you'll never get another opportunity to negotiate for advantages."

"Mom, I understand what's at stake," Paige replied with quiet confidence.

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He then typed back to Paulina. "Approved."

After receiving Cole's instruction, Paulina looked back at Paige and conveyed. "Mr. Evans has no objections to your second condition."

The breath Paige didn't realize she was holding came out in a quiet rush.

Kiara and Darin, sensing the shift in atmosphere, visibly relaxed.

"Miss Jones, shall we hear the third condition?" Paulina prompted.

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Darin quickly shot a glance toward the door, then turned back and scolded her in a low voice.

"Watch your mouth. Paulina was raised by the Evans family—Cole sees her as a sisterly figure. Her position isn't low."

Kiara stiffened, and no retort came. She bristled with frustration and then turned her ire on Paige. "I mean, three conditions? Why didn't you ask for more? And honestly, your demands are too soft. You should've gone all in—forced Cole to divorce Elliana and marry you. That would solve everything!"

Paige gave her mother a look laced with irritation and contempt. "Mom, do you really think Cole is someone who can be pressured like that? If I overplay my hand, he won't negotiate—he'll retaliate. He has the power to crush the Jones family without blinking."

Darin sighed and shot Kiara a cold look. "So thick-headed!"

Kiara, chastened, lost her temper and then asked, "So, what are you planning to ask for as your third condition?"

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In the past, Cole had carried himself as an unflappable leader—sharp, stoic, impossible to shake.

Lately, though, he was utterly insufferable, always trailing after Elliana, murmuring sweet nothings, clinging to her hand like a teenager with his first crush.

They'd gotten used to Cole's commanding presence, his icy detachment. Watching him now, hopelessly lovestruck, was enough to make their skin crawl.

Not to mention, everyone was still shell-shocked from the last time they'd stumbled into one of Cole and Elliana's affectionate sprees—an afternoon that had dissolved into a thunderous fight and left the entire staff on edge for days.

Lesson learned. This time, unless Cole specifically summoned them, nobody was risking an appearance. The last thing they wanted was to witness another meltdown, or worse, get caught in the blast radius if things exploded again.

Sick with boredom, Hugh couldn't help grumbling under his breath as he slouched further down the bench. "Aron, when exactly did Mr. Evans turn into such a lovesick disaster?"

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Myles shrugged off the truth. "Mr. Evans got roughed up last night. He needs some downtime, so we're laying low."

Jason accepted that explanation with a nod. "Heard Merritt tried to snatch Elliana. That's why I hustled back to Ublento. I'll go find Cole now."

Catching Jason's intent, Myles darted a glance at Aron, silently signaling him to step in.

When faced with outsiders, Elliana would slip into her full disguise, making every bit of her look ugly and ordinary, but now she'd dropped the facade. If Jason or Trinity caught a glimpse, her secret would be toast.

Reading the cue, Aron took off at a sprint toward Elliana. He crashed through the doors and found Cole and Elliana tangled together, whispering tender words on the couch.