

## Wife Mask 361

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Across the room, Jason fixed his eyes on her, half his face hidden behind a mask. Though the mask concealed most of his face, there was no mistaking the astonishment in his gaze.

"Ahem!" A cough slipped out of Elliana as she tried to recover her composure. Quickly, she slid off Cole's lap and moved to the sofa. She dropped into the cushions, seized the nearest glass, and drained the water in a single go.

Watching the scene unfold, Myles, Aron, and Hugh looked completely fed up. This scene...

Jason fiddled with his collar, outwardly calm, yet inwardly, his emotions churned in chaos. Nothing in recent memory had unsettled him quite like what he'd just witnessed. To him, Cole had always seemed aloof around women, but watching that wild-haired, less-than-glamorous woman throw caution aside and kiss Cole in front of everyone was unthinkable. Worse still, he could hardly believe that Cole actually looked pleased about the whole thing. Had Cole lost his mind?

Seeing the usually composed and steady Jason, now at a loss, Myles, Aron, and Hugh were secretly amused. They had survived the daily torment of witnessing the couple's affectionate display back at Regal Grove, so it delighted them to see someone else caught off guard for a change.

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A hint of embarrassment flashed across Lance's face. "It broke down."

Without missing a beat, Cole looked Lance up and down and gave a flat reply. "You're out of Luck. My car's full."

Cole didn't miss a thing. One look at Lance's eager glances toward Elliana, and he was already connecting the dots. That whole story about the broken-down car? It reeked of a weak excuse to ride with them, and he knew exactly who Lance had been hoping to sit near.

Thanks to Jeff, who had developed feelings toward Elliana and even considered marrying her in ten years, Cole had developed a sixth sense for sniffing out his wife's admirers.

There was no denying Elliana's natural charm, and people always seemed to gravitate toward her. Cole couldn't shake the feeling that Lance, much like Jeff, was harboring his own motives-maybe

even trying to edge in and steal Elliana away. That was why he made up his mind to stay alert, refusing to give his wife's admirers even the slightest chance to slip through and take what wasn't theirs.

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"Well, you just placed a big deal. I figured I should offer some premium service," Elliana said with a cheeky smile and a shrug.

A low chuckle escaped Cole as he leaned in close, brushing his lips near her ear. "What do you say we have sex tonight?"

Without missing a beat, Elliana shook her head. "Not happening. That billion-dollar package doesn't include any extended services."

Cole pressed a kiss to her ear, his tone dipping into something far smoother, darker. "Then let's negotiate. Name your price-I'll cover it."

Still unshaken, Elliana gave another firm shake of her head. "Absolutely not. You can't buy your way into that, Cole. I already told you-we're not rushing this."

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As Elliana absorbed Merlin's passionate declaration, her internal perspective shifted like tectonic plates finding new alignment. Perhaps Merlin possessed more honor than she had previously credited him with. True, Merlin could manifest as an ice-cold troublemaker when the mood struck him, particularly where she was concerned, but when Hailee entered the equation, his loyalty burned with the intensity of forged steel.

Cole typed. "Your reasoning resonates with me completely, and you have my full support. So tell me, how do you intend to make this right for Hailee?"

Merlin's strategy emerged with crystalline clarity. "I demand that Norwood, Joslyn, and Trinity present themselves before Hailee and offer their apologies with genuine remorse. Should Hailee choose to extend her forgiveness, then we can consider the matter resolved. However, if her heart still carries the weight of their wrongdoings and plots, then the Craig family will continue to feel the full force of my displeasure. I'll maintain relentless pressure until Hailee feels she finally has her justice."

Cole responded with businesslike efficiency, "Understood completely. I'll deliver your term to the Craig family without delay."

Then, Cole's tone shifted toward the personal as he fired off another message. "Now that we've settled the pressing matters, I find myself curious about something more intimate."

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Elliana, still leaning on Cole's shoulder, read his message and burst into laughter. Her giggles shook her body, which in turn made Cole bounce with her. He looked at her and couldn't help but laugh along-sometimes joy was just that contagious.

Then, as their laughter quieted down, another message from Merlin lit up the screen...

Merlin texted. "Your wife is something else. What do you even see in her?"

Cole replied right away, "That's none of your business, Merlin."

Merlin's reply came immediately. "Then you stay out of my business. If your wife has a problem with me, let her say it to my face. I want to see if she's got anything more than throwing a rock my way."

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Jason shook his head and chuckled. He didn't stop Jeff.

Jason knew all about the messy history between Jeff and Elliana. Jeff could be reckless, but his heart was in the right place. He was deeply thankful to Elliana for her sacrifice of Venacure for his sake.

Jason figured, perhaps, in Jeff's eyes, she was a superhero -maybe even bigger than him.

Jason kept walking with a bright smile on his face.

But Lance suddenly stopped. "Jason, go ahead. I'll wait here for Elliana too."

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Lance was three years older than Elliana, and even he looked like he'd take a bullet for her. What was it about Elliana? Almost every Evans male was tripping over himself for her.

Jason gave up trying to figure it out and headed for the villa, shaking his head.

Inside the villa's dimly lit living room, Ruben sat slouched in the main armchair, his grip tightening around his cane like it was the only thing keeping him grounded. Worry weighed heavily on his face, but he remained silent.

The other Evans family members circled Ruben, cloaked in the same uneasy hush.

Bonnie dabbed at her eyes with a crumpled tissue, barely holding herself together. Beside her, Trinity sat with her shoulders trembling, eyes swollen and rimmed with red.

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Still, Trinity knew how to put on a show. Even with rage bubbling inside her, she kept up her sweet act, looking like the poor soul caught in the middle of family drama.

Cole didn't answer Ruben right away. Instead, his eyes locked on Norwood and Joslyn. His voice was flat. "Mr. Craig. Mrs. Craig. Got anything to say?"

Back in the day, Norwood and Joslyn treated Cole with polite distance, always with an air of seniority. Now, they were bowing, faces full of desperation.

Joslyn pleaded, "Cole, for the sake of the old friendship between our families, please help us this time."

Norwood jumped in. "You're friends with Merlin, right? Can you talk to him for us?"

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Ruben didn't step in. He sat there, praising Cole in his mind. Cole was bolder than even he had ever dared to be. Choosing Cole as the family head had been the right call.

Every cutting word Cole threw at the Craigs was exactly what Ruben had longed to utter. Hearing those truths spoken out loud felt like a weight lifting off his chest.

Bonnie, who had tried to manipulate the Evans family into defending the Craig family, now couldn't even lift her head. Her pride was crushed beneath Cole's words.

The once-proud Craigs now looked like lost mutts—exposed, disgraced, and humiliated.

Trinity was mortified. She had always kept up a perfect image in front of Cole. But now, she felt like a wilted flower crushed underfoot, her pride in ruins. To cling to what little favor she had left in the Evans family, she couldn't keep quiet any longer. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she said, "Cole, I knew I was wrong to believe lies without bothering to check the truth yesterday. I hurt Hailee, and I regret it. I want to apologize to her in person."

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"Tell them to wait there. I'm on my way to get Hailee."

Since the Craig family desired to apologize to Hailee, it was only natural for them to come to her doorstep. Yet, for them to visit Hailee's home would weave unnecessary complications into her peaceful existence.

Hailee's dwelling nestled along Willow Lane, where a humble community of neighbors remained unaware of the tempest that had erupted between Hailee and Boris. Should the Craig family descend upon that place and unleash their dramatic gestures, they would shatter the tranquility that Hailee and her father cherished, while igniting whispers that would spread like wildfire through every doorway and garden gate.

Similarly, orchestrating the Craig family's apology within the walls of Hailee's workplace would prove equally disastrous. The bitter discord between Hailee and the Craig family had remained confined to the exclusive circle of guests who had witnessed yesterday's engagement party catastrophe—the broader world remained ignorant of these private battles. Should this conflict seep into Hailee's professional sanctuary, it would poison her career prospects and force her into uncomfortable explanations with colleagues who deserved no part in this messy affair.

Therefore, Merlin selected the Evans family residence as the stage for this crucial apology. This carefully chosen venue, with Ruben serving as an influential witness, would etch an indelible impression upon the Craig family's consciousness, ensuring they would never dare repeat their grievous mistakes.