

## Beneath His Ugly Wife's Mask: Her Revenge Was Her Brilliance

### Chapter: 11

But Cole? He looked genuinely curious. Something in his eyes said he was waiting to see what Elliana would do next.

Just then, Ruben broke his silence. His voice cut through the tension like a blade. "Elliana, there's something crucial I'm entrusting to you. You can't afford to fail. Understand?"

The second Ruben brought up Elliana's name, the energy in the room shifted. Conversations quieted, heads turned. Elliana caught on quickly, setting her utensils down and straightening in her seat, her composure calm and deferential.

Though his eyes held warmth, Ruben spoke with the kind of command that left no room for argument—his voice carried the weight of years and power. "Elliana, you were pulled into this marriage against your will. The public scandal surrounding the Evans family isn't something you caused, and it's not something that can reasonably be placed on your shoulders to repair. You don't need to carry the weight of that burden. Still, Irene did have a point. The matriarch of this family should have both integrity and ability. It can't be someone who never completed elementary school. Because of that gap in your education, I'm giving you one year to catch up. I'll make sure you're enrolled in the best school, and by next summer, you'll need to take the SATs and earn a place at a university."

The silence that followed was sharp. Eyes flicked across the table, unreadable, cautious. The unspoken thought echoed in every mind at that table—how could someone with only a primary education pull off SATs in twelve months? Even Trinity, the star student, wouldn't pull that off in such a short time, let alone Elliana, the seemingly good-for-nothing. This task made their recent PR nightmares look like child's play. They could practically see the headlines—Elliana failing spectacularly, dragging the Evans name through the mud.

Still, seeing how fiercely Cole had defended Elliana earlier, no one was bold enough to voice their thoughts.

Even Jarrett, ever composed, looked uneasy. "Dad, isn't that a bit much to expect from her?"

Ruben paused and then gave a slow nod. "Yes, it's hard. But the woman who leads this family must endure pressure. If she can't handle this, how will she guide a household as large and complicated as ours?"

Trinity's eyes gleamed for the briefest second before she slipped on a sugary smile. "Elliana, you see, Ruben clearly has faith in you. If you ever hit a wall with your studies, I'd be happy to help all the time."

"I won't be needing that." Elliana shifted her attention to Ruben, her expression calm and unwavering. "Ruben, I may not have attended school recently, but I've been studying on my own. I want to sit for this year's SATs."

The room froze. All eyes snapped to her, stunned. With barely a week left before the SATs, was she actually serious? Even Ruben, always the picture of composure, raised his brows in disbelief.

Elliana simply gave a quiet smile and added, "You heard correctly."

Honestly, the notion that taking SATs had never grazed Elliana's mind. But since Ruben had set the challenge, she wouldn't back down. Thankfully, registration was still open this year—otherwise, she'd be starting high school at twenty.

Ruben studied her carefully, then gave a slow nod and turned to Cole. "Have her registered to take the SATs at Kant High School."

"Understood," Cole replied, his eyes settling on Elliana. Something about her quiet confidence lifted his mood— unexpected, but welcome.

Once the meal ended, Ruben looked over at Elliana with a gentler tone. "Do you have a study plan? I could set up a tutor if you'd prefer."

"I'll take care of the studying myself," Elliana replied with quiet assurance. "But today... I want to visit my family."

Her calm reply surprised Ruben—he had expected the kind of intensity Trinity showed for the upcoming SATs. Words almost left his mouth, but he bit them back. Family matters came first, and he understood that much.

"Considering all that happened yesterday, it's probably best you go back and smooth things over with your family," Ruben said. "Take Cole with you."

Ruben didn't give her time to respond. He called Cole over immediately. "Put together something thoughtful for the Jones family. Make it generous."

Elliana parted her lips to object, but before she could get a word out, Cole had already reached for her hand. "Come on. Let's go."

With no better option, Elliana bid Ruben farewell and followed Cole out the door. The moment they were beyond earshot, she slipped her hand from his. "You don't need to babysit me. I can grab a cab and go on my own."

Without warning, Cole's arm slid around her shoulders, drawing her tightly against him.

Then, Cole began walking alongside her toward the car. "The agreement, remember? We've got to keep up the act. You'll need to help me keep the other women at bay, and we've got to make sure my grandpa stays pleased, too."

## **Chapter: 12**

He didn't wait for a reply—just opened the door and motioned for her to get in.

Though his tone rubbed her the wrong way, Elliana let it slide. He had agreed to her conditions, and for now, they seemed to be finding a rhythm that didn't involve clashing swords.

Soon, the vehicle eased away from the gates of the Evans estate.

Inside the quiet car, the faint scent of Cole's cologne lingered between them. It wrapped around Elliana like a memory—one that brought the entire mortifying blur of last night rushing back, heating her face instantly. Sure, nothing actually happened—but she'd undressed him, curled up against him, and stayed there the whole night. It was beyond embarrassing.

Wanting to escape the awkwardness, she closed her eyes and faked sleep. But the hum of the engine and the warmth of the seat lulled her. Before long, sleep began to tug at her for real, though her mind stubbornly kept replaying scenes from the night before.

"What's running through your mind? You're blushing so much!"

Cole's words snapped her eyes open, dragging her back to reality. Only then did she notice—they weren't moving anymore. The car had stopped.

She found herself leaning against him, his hand steady at her waist, one finger lazily tracing the curve of her lip. His voice dipped low-smooth and full of mischief. "Honey, didn't you just beg me for hugs, kisses, and to be lifted into the air like a princess? Want me to do so right here?"

Elliana was still half-asleep when Cole leaned in and planted a soft kiss on her lips. Her heart did a backflip the moment their lips touched, her long lashes fluttering like a startled butterfly. Just like that, her first kiss was history.

Cole pulled back, locking eyes with her. "Was that enough?"

Elliana's eyes blazed with fury as she shot him a glare. "We just laid down the rules. Why're you pulling this crap again?"

"Wasn't it your request?" Cole gave her an innocent look and pointed out the window. "I figured you had some big reason, so I played along.."

Elliana followed his gaze and realized they were already parked outside the Jones family estate.

She whipped her eyes back to him, still steaming. "Why the heck would I ask for that?"

Without a word, Cole handed her his phone.

Another video recording? Elliana frowned, baffled by his obsession with recording everything.

Grabbing the phone, she hit play.

The video showed Cole focused on driving while she dozed against the car window. Then, out of nowhere, she mumbled, "Come here, darling, give me a kiss and a hug..."

Elliana stared at the screen, stunned into silence. She wanted to explain she was dreaming of her cat, not Cole. But there was no way he'd believe her, so why bother? She could only grit her teeth. Honestly, losing her first kiss like this was what she brought on herself. Still, the more she stewed, the madder she got. Who knew one tiny drink from yesterday would hit her so hard? Even a nap turned into a trainwreck.

She shoved the phone back at him and climbed out of the car.

Cole watched her slender figure walk away, his throat tightening. How could her lips be that soft, that sweet?

Despite the awkwardness, Elliana forced herself to turn and wave. "Thanks for the lift. Catch you later."

Quick as a flash, Cole reached through the open window, snagged her phone, tapped a few things, and handed it back. His voice was low and smooth. "Call me if you need me."

Elliana glanced at her screen. His number was saved, and he was now her contact on the social platform.

### **Chapter: 13**

"I'll swing by to pick you up later." With that, he sped down the road.

Elliana pocketed her phone and headed toward the Jones family house.

Upstairs, Paige had been glued to the window, watching the whole scene, a storm brewing in her chest. She'd stayed up all night, hoping for the news that Elliana had been murdered and Cole had become single again. But instead of a scandal, she saw Cole personally dropping Elliana off, the two of them looking way too chummy.

As Cole's car vanished, Paige's eyes filled with tears, her nails digging into her palms. She couldn't make sense of it. Why would Cole go along with this farce? Didn't he care that Elliana was just average? If he really didn't mind, then what was she supposed to do now?

Panic set in, bubbling just beneath her skin. Paige stormed off in search of Kiara.

As Paige stomped into the living room, Elliana stepped through the front door. Paige's face twisted in rage as she hissed, "Elliana, you two-faced snake. What sick game did you play to hook Cole?"

Elliana wasn't here to trade insults. She just came to collect her mother's things. Thus, she chose to throw a quick jab at Paige. "Paige, you must have forgotten. I didn't lift a finger, and then Cole became my husband. Believe me, I'd love to pull a few tricks, but I just didn't get the chance..."

And with that, she breezed past Paige and started up the stairs. Still, she couldn't resist twisting the knife. "Oh, and just so you know-Cole and I slept together last night. What can I say? That body, that strength, those skills.. Paige, it's a shame you'll never get to experience that."

Elliana disappeared around the corner, leaving Paige seething behind her.

Upstairs, Elliana could still hear Paige's unhinged scream echoing. Smiling, she stepped into the room where her mother's belongings were kept. But the sight before her made her heart sink.

Rita, Elliana's mother and a medical prodigy, had always been sensible, never one to cause drama. Even when she discovered Darin had an affair and even an illegitimate daughter, she had decided against confrontation, choosing instead to pour herself into researching medical treatments.

Then one night, a fire had torn through the Jones family home. Acting decisively, Rita had dragged Elliana to safety, whispered a few final words, and run back into the flames, never to return.

The world had written Rita off as dead, but Elliana didn't buy it. She knew, deep in her soul, her mother was still out there somewhere.

She was determined to find her mother. And she'd uncover the truth behind that fire, no matter how long it took.

Rita's keepsakes were few—a photograph and a few treasured items. Elliana gathered them with care. Nothing was getting left behind.

Meanwhile, downstairs, Paige had found Kiara and burst into tears. "Mom, what do I do now?"

Kiara's gaze darkened like a brewing storm. "Be patient. Once we capture those compromising photos of Elliana and spread them online, let's see how long the Evans family holds onto those absurd traditions."

Paige blinked in shock. "What are you planning?"

"We'll do this..." Kiara leaned in and whispered something into Paige's ear. Paige's eyes

lit up. "Mom, get more guys involved. I want Elliana ruined. Utterly gangbanged!"

Just then, Elliana walked back down the stairs. Kiara was quick to paste on a warm, sugary smile as she said, "Elliana, darling, I reserved a private room at Royal Club. Let's have a family dinner to celebrate your recent marriage."

Elliana smiled sweetly, seemingly unaware of the trap being laid. "Sounds wonderful..."

In a tucked-away private room of the Royal Club, Cole lounged on the sofa, legs crossed, cool as a cucumber. Across from him, his three friends—Allan Shaw, Merlin Blakely, and Manley Swain—gawked at him, their minds bubbling with thoughts over his recent marriage to Elliana.

In Ublento, the Evans, Shaw, Blakely, and Swain families were the big dogs. Aside from being Cole's tight-knit crew, Allan, Merlin, and Manley were the heirs to their respective legacies.

After watching Cole in silence for a bit, Manley's eyes sparkled with mischief. "Cole, you've been sitting there, not eating, not drinking, and not even sparking up a smoke. Don't tell me that Elliana, that so-called plain Jane, has you in a depressive slump?"

#### **Chapter: 14**

Manley then let out a dramatic sigh. "You're too straitlaced, man. ALL those family rules and traditions are weighing you down. If it were me, no way I'd sign up for that! If they tried to stick me with someone that plain, I'd rather have my head lopped off and tossed to my grandpa for a game of kickball!"

Allan lifted his glass, a sly grin tugging at his lips. "Cole, if you're really feeling that down, we'll drink with you until you forget your own name."

Cole flicked his eyes toward them, his lazy glance screaming, "Why do you guys think I'm down in the dumps?"

Cole hadn't touched food, drink, or cigarettes because he was still savoring the sweet memory of that kiss lingering on his lips. No way was he washing that away.

Unlike the mischievous Manley, Allan had a sleek, polished vibe. He sipped his drink slowly, his smile sharp. "Looks like we got worried for nothing."

At that, Merlin leaned back on the sofa, eyes shut, stealing a quick catnap. Having retired from the international special forces, he had a frosty, intimidating aura. He wasn't

much for chit-chat, blunt as a sledgehammer, and frankly, not the life of the party.

Cole didn't bother to explain anything. As he casually glanced over, his eyes caught Elliana strolling in, flanked by Kiara and Paige.

"Is Elliana really that naive?" Manley snorted. "Kiara and Paige were out for her blood yesterday, and now she followed them here? Isn't she worried they'll sell her down the river? What a dope!"

Manley flicked his cigarette away and stood. "Cole, like it or not, she's your wife now. If she gets into trouble, it's your name on the Line. I'm gonna grab her and bring her over."

Cole shot him a calm look. "Sit down and mind your own business."

Manley blinked. "What? You want Kiara and Paige to end Elliana and make you a widower?"

Allan's calm voice cut in. "Cole's not that guy. If he's staying out of it, he's got a plan. Let's just kick back and see what happens."

Manley shrugged. "Fine, I'll check the cameras." Merlin didn't even crack an eye, completely checked out.

Elliana, meanwhile, trailed the Jones family into a private room.

Darin, who'd always treated Elliana like she was invisible, suddenly turned into Mr. Hospitality. "Elliana, order whatever you want tonight. It's on me."

Elliana found it laughably ironic. For fifteen years, Darin hadn't given her the time of day, letting Kiara torment and humiliate her while she was stuck in some crumbling shack out back. She could've keeled over and rotted for months before anyone noticed. Now, out of the blue, he was playing doting dad? He just wanted to milk her Evans family connection for all it was worth.

Kiara slid a cup of coffee her way with a smile faker than a three-dollar bill. "Elliana, have some coffee."

Elliana gave a faint smile. Kiara wanted her six feet under, yet here Kiara was, playing sweet stepmom. Did they really think she'd fall for it and drink?



"Thanks." As Elliana took the cup, she smoothly nudged another one toward Kiara. "You should have some too."

"Oh, absolutely," Kiara said, keeping her smile plastered on as she sipped from her cup. "This coffee's pretty good. Elliana, go on, drink yours."

Elliana smiled and knocked back the coffee in one fluid gulp.

Paige, watching from the sidelines, was practically vibrating with glee, waiting for the show to start.

Over in the other room, Manley was glued to the surveillance feed. He bolted upright. "Yo, did you see that? Elliana swapped the coffee cups!"

Allan raised an eyebrow, amused. "Slick move."

## **Chapter: 15**

Manley spun toward Cole, eyes gleaming. "Cole, your plain Jane might have some brains after all."

Cole's lips twitched into a faint smile.

Merlin, finally curious, sat up and shuffled over to the screen for a better look.

Just then, on the feed, Elliana pressed a hand to her forehead. "I'm feeling woozy.." She didn't even finish before face-planting onto the table.

Kiara and Paige both smirked, smug as cats with cream. Darin, still in the dark, frowned. "What'd you give her?"

Kiara tilted her chin up, her perfectly made-up face beaming with pride. "Yup, I spiked her coffee. We're about to send her upstairs with a few guys, snap some juicy photos, and splash them all over the internet. That'll sink her for good!"

Seeing Darin's frown deepen, Kiara pushed harder. "Darin, you can't seriously think she's gonna bring us any benefit. She'll only make the Evans family hate us and drag us into the mud! Our future's riding on Paige. Only Paige can lock down Cole!"

Hearing this, Darin's doubts melted away. "Alright. Do it neatly. No loose ends. She's still Mrs. Evans, after all."

Kiara's smile turned cold. "Don't worry. I've got this handled."

Soon enough, Elliana was carted off to a private room.

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Elliana didn't move a muscle, playing the part of a sleeping doll. Only after the soft click of the closing door did she let her eyes flutter open.

Flat on her back in a bed that wasn't hers, she stared blankly at the ceiling while cruel laughter echoed in her thoughts—cold, bitter, and all her own.

Whatever lingering hope she'd held onto for Darin had just been snuffed out. She'd wasted years longing for fatherly love that had never existed. And each time they met, it was like reopening the same wound.

Years back, Darin had been nothing more than a struggling doctor from a small town, barely making ends meet. Kiara, his first love, hadn't hesitated to dump him for a man with deeper pockets and a deed to his name.

Later, Darin had taken Rita's research—her brilliance—and turned it into an empire. The Jones Group rose on the shoulders of her work. And once he'd made it, he discarded both Rita and Elliana and crawled back to Kiara without shame.

Not only had Darin been heartless toward Rita, but now he was offering up Elliana like a pawn to be sacrificed. That was the final crack for Elliana. Whatever bond once existed had snapped. She was done calling him "father." If he wanted a show, she'd give them one. And when the curtain fell, she'd make sure they were the ones left scorched.

The door creaked open again. A group of lecherous men stepped in, each one recoiling in theatrical disgust at the sight of Elliana on the bed.

"This gig's a joke. We're supposed to screw her and snap pictures? That's trauma I'm not getting paid enough for."

"Shut up. The Jones family's paying three times the usual. Suck it up and think of the cash."

"She's got a decent body at least. Just close your eyes and pretend it's someone else."

While crude jokes bounced around the room, belts loosened and shirts started hitting the floor.

Meanwhile, in another room, Manley shot up from his seat and jabbed a finger at the computer screen. "Cole, are we seriously watching this go down? You're not going to stop it?"

### **Chapter: 16**

Manley waited for a reaction, any reaction—but Cole only reclined in his chair, expression unreadable, fingers pressed together in thought.

With a frown and a glint of amusement, Manley flopped back into his seat. "So this is your plan? Let your wife get dragged through hell just to cut her loose? Thought you cared about your name. When the headlines crown you the king of cuckolds, how about letting me be the first to sit down with you for the full story?"

Cole shot Manley a glare cold enough to freeze him in place. "Say one more word and I'll make sure it's your last."

Before anyone could react, loud crashing erupted from the computer speakers. Heads whipped toward the screen—only to see Elliana explode into motion. In a blur of strikes and counterattacks, she floored every man in the room. Her movements were sharp, fluid, Lethal—Like watching a trained operative dismantle a dozen fools in seconds.

Manley's mouth hung open. "What the hell? I thought she was some fragile little flower—does that look fragile to you?"

Allan turned to Cole, realization dawning in his eyes—Like he'd just connected a trail of clues that had been in front of him all along.

Merlin's eyes sharpened as he watched the screen. Every instinct he'd honed as a soldier roared to life—this wasn't just some ordinary woman.

With the last lecherous man unconscious on the floor, Elliana tilted her head toward the surveillance camera. A flicker of realization crossed her face. She reached into her pocket, pulled out her phone, and started typing fast.

Within seconds, the screen in the surveillance room went pitch black.

"What the—" Manley scrambled to the keyboard. "No way. The whole system's been wiped! Who the hell had the guts to hack into my family business's network like this?"

Without a word, Cole rose to his feet and strode out, his expression unreadable.

Back in the room, Elliana slipped her phone back into her pocket and moved toward the door. She paused to check the peephole.

Sure enough, the hallway was crawling with Kiara's guards. They weren't just loitering—they were stationed. Once she left through that door, they'd know.

Elliana didn't waste a second. She hurried back to the bathroom, pushed the window open, and climbed out without hesitation. Her hands gripped the drainpipe as she descended carefully, inch by inch, before sliding herself into a narrow ventilation opening on the far side of the building.

Right as Elliana was about to leap down, she went rigid. Standing in the hallway, tall as ever and twice as furious, was Cole.

Elliana's breath caught. "Why are you here?" she asked, stunned.

Cole didn't bother answering. With a storm brewing behind his eyes, he marched forward, grabbed her by the waist, and plucked her off the windowsill like she weighed nothing.

Elliana barely had time to catch her breath, let alone speak, before he spun her around and pinned her wrist to the wall. The sudden motion jarred her spine against the cold surface, drawing a sharp inhale from her lips.

"What is wrong with you?" Elliana snapped, glaring up at him, irritation sparking in her voice.

Cole stepped in, his chest nearly flush with hers, wall at her back, frustration written in every taut line of his body. "Seventeenth floor. Climbing walls like it's some action film. Have you lost your mind?"

Getting caught had never been part of Elliana's plan. Judging by the fire in his eyes, he was more than angry—he was furious. Her teeth caught her lower lip, buying her a second to think. Then, chin high, she looked away from him. "Whatever I do is my own

business. You don't get to interfere. We agreed-your life, my life, separate. That was the deal."

Not his business? She actually had the nerve to say that out loud? Cole's expression darkened, his jaw clenched. He was her husband, damn it-and she expected him to stand by while she dangled off buildings like a lunatic? Unbelievable. The nerve on this woman was almost impressive. Every inch of her screamed defiance. Maybe it was time she remembered what it meant to be his wife.

Elliana could sense the tension rolling off Cole, his fury almost crackling in the space between them. Her heart gave a nervous jolt. She figured she might have gone a step too far this time and decided it was probably wise not to stir the beast any more than she already had. Flashing a quick, nervous smile, she tilted her head up. "Let's just—"

Before the sentence even finished, Cole silenced her the only way he knew how-his mouth crashed down onto hers, wild, forceful, and utterly unforgiving.

## **Chapter: 17**

Trailing behind Cole were Allan, Merlin and Manley, all three of them freezing in place the moment they caught sight of what was happening.

Manley could hardly believe what he was seeing. "Hold on, are my eyes messing with me, or is Cole actually kissing that plain Jane? Cole's never once shown the slightest interest in women for years. And now he's all over Elliana? This is unreal. It's completely shattering everything I thought I knew!"

Spinning toward his friends, Manley threw his hands up. "Seriously? Either of you gonna comment, or am I losing my mind alone?"

Allan loosened his tie, clearly rattled. "Yeah.. I didn't see this coming either."

Merlin said nothing. His gaze, sharp and unreadable, stayed locked on the scene, his thoughts racing.

Elliana had no chance to brace for it. The kiss wasn't soft or tentative—Cole had deepened it before she could react, his tongue slipping past her defenses like he'd done this a hundred times. Heat surged through her like a shockwave, scattering thought and instinct alike. It was unfamiliar, intoxicating, and completely short-circuited her ability to resist.

By the time her mind caught up, the kiss had already left its mark-her lips buzzed, her

breath uneven.

Hands shaking, she pressed against his chest and tried to shove him away. "You're way out of line. Who told you kissing me was okay?"

Cole finally let her breathe but didn't release her. Holding her close, his voice dropped to a steady, deliberate tone. "Now tell me, honey—do I have the right to get involved in your business?"

Elliana's thoughts were still scrambled, but she managed a glare. "Back off. You're one step away from pushing me too far.

Cole chuckled, amused. "Oh? What's your next move then? Planning to knock me out like you did those losers in the other room?"

Elliana stilled, the realization dawning in her eyes—he'd watched everything from the surveillance footage. "If you want to find out firsthand, I'd be more than willing to demonstrate."

No sooner had the words left her lips than Elliana sprang into motion. She wasn't naive—Cole had skill. That much was obvious from what she'd witnessed the night before. But today gave her a chance to test the waters, to see who truly held the upper hand if they ever went toe-to-toe again.

Right before things could escalate, Manley darted between them, waving his arms like a referee over his head. "Alright, timeout! You're newlyweds, not cage fighters. Save the tension for a steamy reunion. Let's go cool off with a drink, yeah?"

Reluctantly, they all headed back to the private room, the tension still crackling in the air.

After witnessing everything just now, Manley didn't dare say another bad word about Elliana. In fact, he was suddenly on his best behavior, like Elliana was royalty.

Since Cole was on her side, then looks didn't matter. Affiliation with Cole alone commanded respect—and he wasn't stupid enough to test that.

As soon as they sat down, Manley jumped to pour Elliana a drink. "Here you go, something to take the edge off."

Elliana offered a polite smile and lowered her gaze. "I don't drink."

Without a word, Cole reached for the juice, filled a glass, and slid it over to her. She accepted it calmly and took a slow sip.

The men across from them froze, speechless. Cole—Mr. Untouchable himself—had just served someone a \_ drink. Willingly. And not just anyone-Elliana, the woman they'd all written off as plain and forgettable.

The couple couldn't have looked more mismatched. Cole exuded polish and power. Elliana, in their eyes, looked painfully out of place. Yet, here these two were, sitting together, intimate, aligned, and entirely unfazed by how it looked.

Grinning now, Manley leaned across the table, curiosity gleaming in his eyes as he said, "So, Elliana.. Rumor has it you've been stuck in the back room for years. Where'd you learn to fight like that?"

"Self-taught," Elliana said smoothly, her faint smile giving away nothing.

### **Chapter: 18**

Not for a second did Manley believe her. That kind of skill didn't come from watching TV or sparring in a basement. But one glance at Cole—and at Elliana's calm expression-told him to drop it. This was one mystery better left untouched.

Without a word, Merlin tilted back his glass and emptied it in a single swallow. The next moment, he snapped his wrist— and the wine glass flew through the air, aimed directly at Elliana's face.

Allan and Manley paled instantly. The move had come out of nowhere, too fast to predict and far too fast to stop.

Merlin had once ranked among the elite in international special forces, and his aim was nothing short of lethal. If that glass struck Elliana, the outcome would be far from pleasant.

But inches from Elliana's skin, a hand cut through the air and caught the glass mid-flight.

Cole had moved first. Always did. No hesitation. He clenched his fist and shattered the glass with a sickening crack, shards cascading to the floor. His glare pinned Merlin like a steel blade. "What the hell was that?"

They'd been friends since they were kids, bonded through years of battle and blood—but never before had the air between them been this close to breaking.

Elliana, meanwhile, stayed perfectly calm. She'd sensed Merlin's attack coming and had every confidence she could've dodged it. But deep down, she'd also known Cole wouldn't let anything happen to her, so she'd stayed right where she was.

Unbothered by the fury aimed at him, Merlin gave a casual shrug. "Take it easy. Ms. Marsh fights like someone who's seen combat despite her claim of self-teaching. That kind of reflex? Doesn't just show up on its own. I wanted to test the truth."

Cole's jaw tightened. His voice dropped to a growl as he said, "You really expect me to buy that garbage?"

"Cole, she's dangerous," Merlin said, voice clipped and steady. "My instincts don't lie, and everything about her sets off alarms—sharp and deadly ones. You really believe a person locked in a storage room for fifteen years just happened to come out with that kind of skill? There's got to be hidden layers we can't even begin to guess at! That marriage of yours was suspicious from day one. Keep her around, and you're practically inviting chaos."

Merlin paused, his eyes sharp and unyielding. "And let's not overlook what happened to your father..."

The public might've been clueless, but Cole's inner circle knew the real story about his parents.

Years back, Cole's dad, Jarrett, had rolled in from overseas with a woman named Sophie Seydoux on his arm. He dropped the bombshell that he was marrying her. Sophie was a knockout, seemingly perfect, but she was a total enigma—no family, no past, a blank slate.

In the Evans family, an heir's wife had to come from a solid, traceable background. Ruben and Diane had been dead set against it. But Jarrett doubled down, threatening to walk away from his inheritance if they didn't greenlight Sophie. In the end, Ruben and Diane caved.

Thankfully, Sophie had kept a low profile after the wedding. She ran the household like a pro, stayed out of the spotlight, and was tight with Jarrett. Soon after, they had Cole.



But fifteen years ago, Sophie had vanished into thin air. One day she was there, then the next, poof, gone, like she'd been erased.

Jarrett had been gutted. He searched high and low, but she was nowhere to be found. The years of heartache and exhaustion broke him. Now, he was seriously ill.

After Merlin's words, Cole's temper cooled a bit. But he didn't take Merlin's advice. His voice stayed steady, unyielding. "That's the last time."

With that, Cole grabbed Elliana's hand and strode off.

Watching them go, Merlin's brows knitted, powerless to change Cole's mind.

Allan let out a soft sigh. "Cole's always marched to his own beat. We can fret all we want, but it's no use. He'll sort it out his way."

Manley, though, flashed a grin. "I don't know, guys. I'm kinda digging this. Haven't you noticed? Cole's finally got some spark back."

Allan and Merlin swapped a glance and nodded. Manley had a point. Cole was usually a closed book, cold as stone. But today? Something was different.

### **Chapter: 19**

Manley rubbed his chin. "Elliana might not be attractive, but she's got something. No way Cole would be into her otherwise. I'm dying to figure out her deal."

Allan and Merlin didn't say a word, but deep down, they were just as curious.

Outside the room, Elliana yanked her hand free. "Enough. We need to talk."

Cole stopped, his piercing gaze locking onto her determined eyes.

Elliana held his stare, her voice firm. "What was that kiss about?"

She couldn't shake it. That morning's kiss was light, all for a show, but the recent one? It felt real.

Cole's lips curved into a slow, teasing smirk. "You can climb into my bed and snuggle up, but I can't steal a kiss? Sounds like a raw deal to me. That kiss was just you paying me back."

He thought it unfair and thus did so? Elliana was floored. Of all the things he could say, that was his excuse? She'd never met someone so downright bizarre. Keeping her cool, she forced a tight smile. "Your friend's right. You should steer clear of me. It's safer for both of us."

Cole's eyes glinted with a dark, playful edge. He reached out, giving her cheek a gentle pinch. "In my world, you could be the most dangerous woman on the planet and do whatever you damn well please."

Before she could blink, Cole grabbed her hand again and started walking, tugging her along.

His strides were long, his grip like iron. Elliana had to hustle to keep up. "Where are we going now?"

"Home."

"Can't. I've got things to handle." "Like what?"

"Cleaning up your family's PR mess." Cole stopped dead in his tracks.

Elliana whipped out her phone and started dialing. "Hello? I've got a tip you're gonna want to hear.."

Back in a private room, Paige and Kiara were getting antsy. They'd been waiting forever for those scandalous photos of Elliana to drop, but nothing came through.

"Mom, what's the holdup?" Paige asked, nerves fraying.

Kiara frowned, checking her phone. No reply. "I'm going upstairs to see what's taking so damn long."

Saying this, Kiara left the room. As she moved, something felt off. A wave of heat hit her, her skin prickling like it was on fire. Her head spun, and a strange, wired energy coursed through her. She brushed it off, blaming stress from Elliana and too many sleepless nights, and kept heading for the elevator.

The elevator was across the dance floor, forcing her to weave through the crowd.

The club was dark, sultry, with slow, sensual music pulsing through the air. Couples

swayed close, locked in tight embraces, lips brushing skin, whispers trading heat.

Kiara's breath caught. Something wild stirred inside her, a hunger she couldn't pin down. Her body burned, her mind fogged, and suddenly she was gliding through the dance floor like a woman unhinged.

Her jacket hit the floor. Her heels clicked faster. Every good-looking guy caught her eye, and she didn't hold back. She slung her arms around random shoulders, pressing close, her words bold, flirty, downright reckless.

The whole club froze, eyes glued to Kiara. Whistles and cheers erupted as she turned the place upside down, every move screaming for attention she couldn't even explain.

### **Chapter: 20**

Kiara had always been a head-turner, and she spared no expense keeping it that way. Even in her forties, she exuded a provocative allure—her curves, her painted lips, the tilt of her chin—all meticulously preserved to captivate.

But tonight, with her outfit barely clinging to decency and her inhibitions long abandoned, the spectacle she made was scandalous even by her standards. A few lecherous men, emboldened by the atmosphere and her open invitation, closed in—grabbing, groping, laughing.

"Ma'am, you must be starving for attention. No man at home to keep you company?"

Kiara spat the words with contempt, "I've got a husband, but he's impotent. I've put up with that loser Long enough."

"Well then, tonight's your lucky break. We'll turn today into an unforgettable thrill."

In a digital age where humiliation traveled faster than truth, Kiara's disgrace exploded across every platform within minutes. News crews swarmed the scene, chasing a story juicier than the Evans family's headline-grabbing bride swap just the day before.

Tucked discreetly behind a decorative screen on the second floor, Elliana observed the chaos with icy detachment. Everything was unfolding exactly as she'd orchestrated. She'd already pored over the analytics Irene had flagged—the wave of coverage, the comment patterns, the suspicious spikes. Paige was clearly behind the smear campaign, weaponizing her fandom to fan the flames.

As the city's reigning socialite, Paige had amassed a staggering eighty million followers

online. Under her subtle cues, her army of loyal fans launched relentless verbal attacks on Elliana, dragging her name through the mud without pause.

"Elliana's nothing but an ugly nobody! She's not even worthy of breathing the same air as Paige-yet somehow she stole Paige's spot and married into the Evans family? This is a pathetic joke!"

"Elliana clearly trapped Cole with some dirty scheme and forced his hand. The Evans family probably had no other option. There's no way a man Like Cole would willingly marry garbage like her!"

"Let's be honest-Cole's the real victim. He and Paige were a perfect match, but that despicable bitch Elliana wormed her way between them. It's sickening!"

"Paige was sobbing on her livestream tonight. I couldn't stand it-she's way too kind to be treated like this!"

"Elliana is a disgusting tramp! Stole her own sister's fiancé? That kind of woman deserves to be humiliated publicly!"

The mob of enraged fans kept piling on, an endless flood of vicious remarks targeting Elliana. Even the Evans Group's official account was swamped by furious comments, as the mob demanded her removal from the Evans family.

Their voices were so loud, so relentless that they drowned out any trace of reason, creating the illusion that the entire city wanted Elliana banished from the Evans family.

But Elliana had already analyzed the data. To her, the outrage was nothing more than a noisy illusion. All it would take was exposing Paige's carefully constructed image for the fraud it was-once her followers saw the rot beneath the gloss, the frenzy would collapse on its own.

And today, the Jones family's plot had gifted Elliana the perfect weapon. Kiara's public meltdown had nothing to do with Paige directly, but the connection was close enough to smear Paige by association. Elliana didn't hesitate—she seized the moment.

Standing beside Elliana, Cole observed the unfolding chaos with a mix of curiosity and admiration. The calm, calculating way she turned the tide left him genuinely impressed.

Meanwhile, Darin and Paige had been holed up in their private room, anxiously waiting

for any word from Kiara. But when their messages went unanswered and every call rang through to voicemail, they finally gave up and went looking for her.

Out in the hallway, they ran into a few familiar executives. Darin, ever the opportunist, immediately launched into small talk, trying to fish for investment leads and salvage potential deals.

Not long ago, the Jones family had made a flashy spectacle of announcing a five-hundred-million-dollar wedding gift—an aggressive move that gutted their financial reserves.

Darin had counted on Paige securing her place in the Evans family to seal those strategic partnerships and bring in fresh capital. But with Elliana suddenly taking Paige's spot at the altar, everything had unraveled.

Elliana's reputation as an unremarkable, plain woman with no social standing made her a liability in the eyes of potential allies. No one wanted to tie their future to a woman the Evans family might discard at any moment, and that doubt cast a long shadow over the Jones Group.

Now teetering on the edge of collapse, the Jones Group was running out of time. Darin was at his breaking point— exhausted, panicked, and plagued by sleepless nights.