

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

### Chapter: 21

These executives had always kept up appearances with Darin, but today, something about their expressions was off—guarded, amused, almost pitying. One of them, a known troublemaker who'd already seen the footage of Kiara's disgrace, leaned in with a faux-innocent grin. "Mr. Jones, where's that brilliant wife of yours today?"

Darin's smile faltered for a beat before he forced it back into place. "She had something urgent come up. Couldn't make it."

The executive nodded, barely hiding his smirk. "Ah, such a shame. Everyone knows your wife is stunning—and daring. You're a lucky man, Mr. Jones. The rest of us can only envy you."

The other executives turned away, shoulders shaking as they tried not to burst out laughing.

Darin, still riding high on what he thought were genuine compliments, beamed even brighter and puffed up with pride. "You flatter me. How about a drink? My treat."

But before anyone could answer, Paige tugged urgently at Darin's sleeve and murmured, "Dad, we've got a serious problem."

Confused, Darin took her phone and glanced at the screen. In an instant, his smile vanished. His entire face went stiff. The dots connected all at once—the sly grins, the mock-flattery. They hadn't been praising him. They were mocking him, and he'd practically rolled out a red carpet for the humiliation.

"Seems Like you have something urgent to handle, Mr. Jones," one of the executives said smoothly, barely holding back a smirk. "We'll catch up another time."

The executives could barely hide their amusement as they quickly walked away.

Darin stood frozen, humiliated heat creeping up his neck. His fists clenched at his sides as fury surged through him, hot and overwhelming, ready to boil over.

Kiara's life had always slipped by under the radar. Once word got out she was Paige's mother, the scandal detonated like a bomb. Within moments, it dominated every trending chart online.

Social media ignited with ruthless commentary.

"Oh my God! Did I seriously just watch that? Paige's mom is a complete train wreck!"

"Paige always gave off this elegant, flawless vibe. Now her mom's out here acting like trash?"

"As they say, like mother, like daughter. Was Paige's whole persona a sham? Have we been fooled all along?"

"Is no one gonna talk about Paige's dad? Since he's impotent, then he couldn't blame his wife for making out with other men. I mean, she's still in her forties—it's not like her sex drive just vanished. His impotence must have left her feeling deeply frustrated."

"Come on, even if she wanted to cheat, at least have some decency and do it behind closed doors. Groping with a dozen men in public is just gross."

Darin's hands shook as he scrolled through the comment section, his blood pressure spiking with each new post. The internet wasn't just mocking Kiara—they were crucifying him, branding him a weak, impotent joke of a man. He felt utterly exposed, stripped of pride. How the hell was he supposed to show his face in public now?

Darin's fury snapped into something colder, sharper. Kiara had dragged his name through the mud—she was going to pay for it.

Paige flinched under his thunderous look. "Dad, please, there's got to be a mistake. Mom wouldn't—she wouldn't do something like that."

"Get out of my way!" With a violent shove, Darin knocked her aside and stormed off toward the main hall.

Paige staggered, her heel slipping as she nearly lost her footing. A sharp ache spread through her chest. Darin had always doted on her, treated her like a princess—the family's shining jewel. She never thought he'd shove her aside like she was nothing.

But she didn't have the Luxury of falling apart. Swallowing her hurt, she clenched her jaw and raced after him.

At the hall's doorway, her courage wavered. She froze, heart hammering in her chest. The noise, the crowd, the scandal-it all hit her at once. Panic surged, and she ducked into a shadowed corner, too ashamed to step into the chaos.

## **Chapter: 22**

Meanwhile, inside a private room, under the effect of aphrodisiac, Kiara had stripped down to nothing but her lacy underthings, a few sleazy men's hands on her.

Suddenly, the door exploded open. Darin stormed in, fury etched into every line of his face. The crowd outside shoved forward, hungry for spectacle.

The men turned, clearly irritated by the sudden intrusion. One of them growled, "Who the fuck are you?"

Without answering, Darin stormed forward and delivered a brutal slap across Kiara's face.

Kiara yelped, the sharp crack echoing through the room. "Ah!"

The blow jolted her out of her stupor. Dazed, Kiara blinked up at him. "H-Honey? What's happening?"

Darin's expression was twisted with rage. "You dare ask me that?"

Kiara's hands trembled violently as she realized just how exposed she was. A strangled cry escaped her lips as she bolted upright, yanked the nearest curtain from the wall, and wrapped it desperately around her half-naked body. "H- Honey, I..."

She tried to explain, to insist she didn't understand what was going on—but before the words could form, vivid flashes of the night came crashing down on her. Every sordid detail. Every drunken laugh. Every filthy touch. Her lips parted in horror. The blood drained from her face. She was finished. There was no coming back from this.

By now, the gawking crowd had pieced it together. A hush fell over the room, broken by murmurs snaking through the guests.

"Wait... That's Paige's dad, right? He's not bad-looking, honestly. You'd never guess he's troubled by impotence."

"Don't be fooled. You can't judge a guy's dick by his face. Plenty of pretty ones are just for show."

The mocking voices around Darin only fueled his shame until it boiled over. His expression twisted as he lunged at Kiara again, no longer the composed, silver-tongued doctor everyone respected. That version of him had vanished, replaced by a man completely consumed by wrath.

Kiara's shrill cries echoed off the walls as she cowered, hands raised in a useless attempt to shield herself. "Please, honey, Listen to me! It's not what it looks like—just let me explain! Don't do this here. Let's talk at home!"

But Darin couldn't hear her. Reason had long since drowned beneath the tidal wave of rage. All he could see was betrayal, and all he wanted was retribution.

Around them, the spectators stood frozen, not out of concern but perverse fascination—morbidly entertained by the chaos unfolding before them. It wasn't until Paige's call lit up Darin's screen that a sliver of rationality pierced through his fury. Her calm, steady voice cut through the noise in his head, forcing him to pause. Grinding his teeth, he yanked Kiara toward the door and dragged her out.

Later, slumped in the passenger seat of their car, Kiara turned her battered face toward Darin, eyes brimming with tears. "Honey, please... I'm telling the truth. I think Elliana drugged me. She must have spiked my coffee."

Clenching his jaw, Darin's voice snapped out like a whip. "Stop blaming Elliana for everything! Did she whisper in your ear to humiliate me in public? To say I'm impotent?"

Kiara's breath hitched. Her lips parted, but no words came. She'd vented about Darin a hundred times in private, but never to his face. Not even once. She always wore the mask of the perfect wife, doting and sweet. But now, under the haze of whatever she'd taken, the truth had spilled out.

"That wasn't me," she said shakily. "It was the drugs. I didn't mean a word of it."

"Shut your damn mouth!" Darin roared, his hand cracking across her cheek again. "You think that dull Elliana's got the brains to pull this off? You and your scheming daughter have mocked and bullied her since day one, and she never once fought back! I know exactly what you really are."

Kiara reeled from the slap, her ears ringing, but she bit back any response. One wrong word, and Darin might drag out the past she'd spent years trying to bury.

Years back, Kiara had ditched Darin for a wealthier man who promised her the world as long as she became his mistress. At that time, Darin had been broke, struggling to build a name for himself. She'd thought she was trading up. But life had looped back cruelly. Even after all these years, her dumping him had still been a sore spot for him.

Later, after Elliana's mother died, Darin had married Kiara, not out of love, but because Paige was brilliant, polished, and a credit to his name.

### **Chapter: 23**

Since then, Kiara had bent over backward to keep her spot secure. She gave Darin a son and acted the part of a perfect wife—all just to keep her place in the family. But now, all of it was unraveling.

Darin's voice cut through the air like a blade, low and brimming with disgust. "You've completely humiliated me, and Paige's reputation is going to take a hit too. From now on, stay quiet. Don't embarrass us any further."

Kiara's heart slammed against her ribs as she snatched up her phone and frantically checked the news. Her fingers trembled with every swipe. She had planned for Paige to marry into the city's most elite family. Reputation was everything. If this scandal spiraled any further, it would ruin everything.

But the moment she refreshed the feed, her breath caught. A new headline had taken over, drowning out her own disaster with something even more explosive...

The internet exploded with chatter, and every discussion pointed back to Paige.

"With everything that's gone down, I'm starting to think the bride swap wasn't just sudden—it was strategic. Maybe the Evans family uncovered something sketchy about Paige and needed a quick replacement, so they threw Elliana in."

"Exactly! What other reason would the Evans family have to dump the most talked-about socialite and have Cole marry someone no one's even heard of? Cole's not an idiot—he must've had a good reason."

"Whatever's happening, I just want to hear Paige's side. I've supported her for years—she should at least get the chance to tell her story."

"Just yesterday, Paige had her wedding snatched away. She went live late at night, crying her heart out and garnering the sympathy of her millions of fans, who all went on the attack against Elliana. Now with Paige's mom's drama hitting the news, maybe Paige will go live again to explain everything?"

"Still holding out for Paige to say something!"

Kiara kept scrolling, but the deeper she went, the more anxious she got. Her nerves were completely shot. Paige still had diehard fans in her corner, but their voices were starting to drown in a sea of backlash. Her title as the city's reigning socialite wasn't exactly secure anymore.

Across town, Elliana sat with her phone in hand, quietly scanning the chaos unfold. ALL the drama swirling around had conveniently shifted focus away from the Evans family, and the hate aimed at her was finally cooling off. To be honest, she was more than a little pleased with how it was turning out.

She never expected to take Paige down with one move, but she could see the cracks forming. Rebuilding that picture-perfect image? Paige was in for a long, messy climb.

Cole smirked as he looked her way. "You used one disaster to distract the public. That's some next-level strategy. Honey, should I hand over the PR department to you?"

Giving him a sharp glare, Elliana replied, "I don't have time for your jokes. I've got actual work to do. Later."

With that, she simply spun on her heel and walked away without a glance back.

As she disappeared into the distance, Cole's lips tugged into a grin. That fiery spark of hers? He was definitely into it.

Before he could follow her, a trembling voice rang out from behind. "Cole!"

Tears still clinging to her lashes, Paige rushed toward him. Her gaze was drenched in sorrow, hesitation, and something that resembled love. After barely sleeping the night before, she looked completely worn out.

"I understand you were forced to marry Elliana," Paige said, voice trembling. "I'm not angry—I just.. I miss you more than I can explain."

This vulnerable persona had always drawn sympathy and admiration from men—it was exactly how she had gained such a huge fanbase and so many admirers. But to Cole, it came off as theatrical and irritating. The amusement on his face disappeared instantly.

Though they'd technically been engaged for years, Cole had never made any effort to connect with Paige. Whenever they bumped into each other, he'd ignore her completely without saying a word. In truth, they were practically strangers.

The few times they crossed paths, Paige had tried so hard—always smiling, always eager. But Cole's indifference chipped away at her confidence, turning her from bubbly to cautious in the blink of an eye.

Paige pressed on. "None of this would've happened if it weren't for Elliana. She spiked my mom's drink to humiliate her in front of everyone. Now I'm stuck in the fallout, and my reputation's gone to hell. I don't understand why Elliana acted like this. My mom and I treated her nicely, but she's always been jealous. Of my looks, my grades, everything. She keeps taking things from me—now even you. Please, Cole, stay away from her. She's dangerous. Since she'd turn on her mother, what makes you think she wouldn't turn on you too?"

#### **Chapter: 24**

Cole had tuned Paige out at first, tired of the same low trick. But the moment she twisted her words into venom against Elliana, something inside him stirred—sharp and hot. He nearly cut her off right there.

Right when Cole opened his mouth to respond, Elliana reappeared in the hallway. With a smirk tugging at his lips, he bit back what he was about to say.

Oblivious to Elliana's approaching and mistaking Cole's smile for a sign of affection, Paige's heart skipped a beat. Without hesitation, she dove into his arms. "I'll wait as long as it takes, Cole. Forever, if I have to!"

But before Paige could even settle into the moment, a slim hand shot between them and tore Cole from her grasp.

Thrown off balance, Paige stumbled forward and crashed ungracefully to the floor. Sharp pain lit up her knees, but the fear of being caught in such a humiliating pose sent her scrambling upright. The idea of her fall going viral made her stomach turn.

Paige spun around and finally caught sight of Elliana. Her entire body went stiff. Her

thoughts scrambled to catch up. Elliana had drunk the coffee laced with the drug and should have been unconscious by now, trapped in a room and gangraped by several men. So how on earth was Elliana just standing there, calm and unharmed, like nothing had ever happened?

Paige had lingered behind, waiting eagerly for Elliana's collapse. Instead, her carefully laid trap had completely unraveled before her eyes.

Elliana wasted no time. She glided forward, looped her arm around Cole's, and delivered her line like a knife dipped in honey. "Following in your mom's footsteps, are we? Must be hereditary-this obsession with other women's husbands."

"You-how dare you!" At the mention of her mother's shame, heat rushed to Paige's cheeks. "That was low, Elliana! You're the one who stole Cole from me. He was supposed to be mine!"

With a smug tilt of her lips, Elliana smiled. "I didn't steal anything. Fate handed me a husband, and I intend to keep him. So don't set your sights on my husband-he's not falling for your tricks. The Evans family has standards, Paige. And Cole doesn't trade loyalty for drama."

Then, Elliana looked up at Cole, eyes glinting with confidence. "Right, darling?"

Every time Paige heard Elliana call Cole "darling," it was like a knife twisting in her chest. She'd always believed Cole was hers, but now Elliana was tossing around that pet name, pushing her to the edge of a breakdown.

Elliana, meanwhile, was having a blast. She leaned into "darling" a few extra times, just to twist the knife deeper.

Cole watched Elliana's bold little performance, his eyes glinting with warm amusement. His voice came out low, almost lazy. "Yeah."

Elliana grinned, thrilled at how smoothly Cole was playing along. She turned toward Paige with a smug smirk. "You hear that? Try hitting on my husband again, and I'll make sure the whole internet knows what you pulled!"

With that, Elliana grabbed Cole's hand and gave it a sharp tug. "Come on, darling, let's head home."

The six-foot-three CEO, usually colder than a winter night, trailed after Cole like a loyal puppy.

Paige stood there, frozen, her brain fritzing out. She couldn't wrap her head around it. Why was Cole indulging Elliana like this? How did that plain Jane manage so?

Elliana didn't let go of Cole's hand until Paige was out of sight. Only then did she finally release him.

Cole had been enjoying the warmth of her grip, and when she pulled her hand away, a twinge of disappointment hit. "Weren't you supposed to be busy? Why did you come back?"

Elliana arched a brow. "Our agreement says I'm supposed to keep those unwanted admirers off you, right? I was just doing my job. How'd I do?"

Cole's lips quirked into a sly smile. "And who told you I don't like Paige?"

Elliana blinked, caught off guard. Before she could respond, Cole's deep voice rolled in again. "I don't recall ever telling you that."

It was like a bucket of cold water to the face. Elliana pressed her lips together. He was right. He had never actually said he disliked Paige. She had just assumed it from how he acted around Paige. Now he was teasing her, and she was left scrambling for a comeback.

## **Chapter: 25**

Still stewing, Elliana didn't notice Cole lean in, his teasing smirk growing. "Honey, that excuse is cute, but it's not hiding the jealous vibes you're throwing off."

Elliana nearly laughed out loud. Was he saying she came back because she was jealous? True, it wasn't about their agreement. If another woman had been all over Cole, she wouldn't have batted an eye. She only came back to mess with Paige. Anything that wiped that smug grin off Paige's face was worth her time.

"So you're saying you like Paige?" Elliana shook her head with a dramatic sigh. "Man, what a waste of those flawless Evans family genes. You look all polished and high-class, but your taste is straight-up garbage."

Cole coughed, nearly choking on air. He hadn't braced for that level of shade.

Elliana shot him a glare, her tone sharp. "Sorry for crashing your time with her earlier. But it's not too late. That fool's probably still out there, daydreaming about popping out your babies."

Cole rubbed his temples, a headache brewing. When Elliana opened her mouth again, he stepped forward, backing her against the wall. His voice dropped, low and dangerous. "Elliana, keep talking like that, and I'll kiss you quiet."

Her breath caught, and she dialed back the sass fast. "Alright, fine. But you got to tell me who you're into and who you're not. How else am I supposed to know who to fend off next time?"

"I don't go for fools. And I'm definitely not planning on kids with any of them."

"Fair enough."

For a second, they just stared at each other and then burst out laughing at how absurd the whole exchange was.

And their posture wasn't exactly subtle.

"Heard a kiss can cut through awkwardness," Cole said, a sly grin on his lips. "Want to test it?"

Elliana shoved him back and turned to leave. Who'd have thought the cold Cole could turn into a full-on flirt in a heartbeat? One minute he was all business, the next he had her against a wall, slinging cheesy lines. She was at her limit. To hide her flushed cheeks, she booked it out of there.

As Elliana stepped out of the Royal Club, a soft meow stopped her in her tracks.

She froze. That sound hit her like a memory. Scanning around, she searched for the source.

Cole, following casually behind her, paused, watching her with curiosity.

A tiny white kitten sat at her feet, gazing up with bright eyes. "Meow! Meow!"

"Darling?" Elliana crouched down, heart racing. After a close look, she was sure. It was the kitten she'd lost over a year ago!

Darling had been a gift from Elliana's best friend, Adah Norris, who brought the kitten from a small town. When Darling first arrived, it had been a fluffy little thing, and Elliana had raised it with care, showering it with love. They'd been inseparable until Paige, eaten up with jealousy, dumped Darling somewhere far off. Elliana had sobbed her heart out over it.

Seeing Darling alive and well, tears welled in Elliana's eyes. She scooped up the kitten, hugging it tight, and kissed its tiny head. "Darling, I'm never letting you go again. Never!"

Cole stood nearby, watching quietly, his expression unreadable. It then hit him who Elliana had been calling for in her sleep.

Elliana stood, clutching the cat close, and looked at Cole with hopeful eyes. "Can I bring Darling home?"

Cole wanted to say no. His allergies would make him suffer. But somehow, the refusal never slipped out. "Yeah, it's cute."

"For real?" Elliana beamed and shoved the kitten into his arms. "Then you hold it!"

### **Chapter: 26**

Cole stared at the fluffy bundle, instant regret washing over him. He wished he could rewind and staple his mouth shut. To him, this cat was not cute. He could already feel the misery coming. He would deal with a stuffy nose, itchy eyes, sneezing fits, and possibly even wheezing...

Cole felt like he'd backed himself into a corner. Casting aside how his family would react if he brought this cat home, he stood frozen, wondering if he should take the cat from Elliana's grasp and cradle it. Hesitating now would make him look like a fraud—he'd just praised how adorable it was. Yet, the moment he grabbed it, his allergies would flare up.

Trapped in this whirlwind, Cole sidestepped the whole issue. "This kitten looks like it's been fending for itself for a while. Let's take it to a vet, make sure it's okay."

Elliana blinked. Cole, CEO of ten companies and too busy to breathe, was actually volunteering to hit the vet with her?

Cole was already sliding into the driver's seat. "Come on."

Cradling the cat, Elliana slipped in beside him and gave him a sideways glance. Her voice softened. "Thanks."

Cole smirked. "How are you planning to thank me?"

Her eyebrow quirked as she asked, "How would you like me to thank you?"

He didn't miss a beat. "The best kind of thanks a woman can give a man is a kiss, honey."

Elliana shot him a look and then turned away to watch the scenery roll by. She could tell he was in one of his playful moods again, tossing out flirty lines just to mess with her.

Cole's smirk deepened. She was too much fun when she got flustered-half exasperated, half blushing. He never got tired of riling her up.

Meanwhile, back at the event, the lecherous men paid to rape Elliana were dragged out one by one, faces bloodied, limbs trembling from the beating they'd received.

Manley emerged between two lines of towering bodyguards, his features darkened with a wicked smirk. "Pathetic trash. Show your faces around here again, or work for the Jones family, and I'll see to it you can't take another step or twitch a muscle!"

The lecherous men had no idea who Manley was, but they knew better than to test him again. Whimpering, they dropped to their knees. "We're done! That's it for us! We swear!"

"Then fuck off." Manley's voice cracked like a whip, and the lecherous men bolted, stumbling over each other in their scramble to escape.

Elsewhere, as Cole's car pulled into the vet's parking lot, he glanced sideways. "You go ahead. I'll wait here."

Just the fact that Cole had driven her to the vet was already beyond Elliana's expectations. No way was she expecting him to tag along inside. Hugging the cat close, she slipped out of the car and headed for the door.

Once Elliana disappeared inside, Cole's phone buzzed with a video from Manley. The screen lit up with Manley's smug face. "Yo, Cole, I've given those creeps a sound beating."

Cole swiftly tapped out a reply. "Appreciate it."

About thirty minutes later, Elliana stepped out of the vet's office, cradling the freshly groomed cat. She opened the car door and slid into the seat beside him.

Darling, the adorable cat, looked pristine and smelled wonderfully crisp.

Cole's eyes flicked to Elliana, cradling Darling in her arms. "So, what's the report?"

"It's just a little skinny," Elliana said, beaming. "Some food, some cuddles-it'll be its adorable self in no time."

Cole smirked, started the engine, and eased the car back onto the road.

### **Chapter: 27**

Elliana took out her phone, snapped a quick photo of the cat nestled against her chest, and fired off a message. "Adah, I found Darling!"

Adah and Elliana had been inseparable since childhood, bonded not just by age but by shared scars from turbulent upbringings.

Their mothers had been just as close—best friends who had vanished together the night the Jones family's estate burned to the ground. Neither woman was ever seen again.

Adah's grandmother had never warmed up to Adah's mother. Declaring Adah cursed, she had shipped Adah off to distant relatives in some rural backwater and never called her back.

Rumors spread fast after the fire. Whispers had accused Elliana of starting the fire and murdering Adah's mother. But Adah never once believed it. No matter what the world said, her faith in Elliana never cracked.

Adah texted back in seconds. "Elliana, I heard you tied the knot with someone from the Evans family. You hanging in there all right?"

Elliana smirked and wrote. "Stole Paige's dream man. What do you think?"

Adah fired off a laughing emoji. "Come on, spill it! What's the story?"

Elliana filled her in on the rundown of the mystery marriage. "Still no idea who signed us

up at City Hall. I'm working on tracking it down."

Adah didn't miss a beat. "They're saying Cole's a total heartthrob-every girl's daydream. Is that for real or pure rumor?"

Cole was practically a legend, but impossible to pin down—no photos online, barely any sightings in public. Until the day he rolled up to the Jones estate to claim his bride, Elliana hadn't even known what he looked like.

Back in the day, Elliana and Adah used to speculate about Cole's looks for fun. Now, with the real deal sitting right beside her, Elliana figured it was time her bestie got a peek.

With a sly glance at Cole, Elliana tipped her phone to the side, grabbed a quick profile shot, and sent it straight to Adah.

Adah's response buzzed back almost instantly. "Damn. He's even hotter than I imagined. Certified heartthrob. Be honest -are you into him?"

Elliana thought back to the first time she laid eyes on Cole -how she'd toyed with the idea of snatching him from Paige just for the thrill. She didn't even try to lie. "Yup."

"Did you shoot your shot yet?" Adah texted back. "Not even close," Elliana responded frankly. "Why? He think you're not his type or something?"

Elliana cast Cole a sidelong glance, her lips twitching with amusement. "Apparently, he's into ugly women. With my terrible makeup, I am far from attractive, but he keeps sneaking in hugs, stealing kisses, whispering sweet nothings. . Honestly? I'm convinced he's got a few screws loose."

Before Adah could fire back, Cole's voice cut in, smooth and teasing. "Honey, I noted you snap secret pics and side-eye me Like I'm the main course. Who are you chatting with, huh?"

As he spoke, he reached for her phone, a mischievous glint in his eye...

Elliana swiftly pulled her phone out of Cole's reach, clutching it to her chest like a lifeline. But the damage was done—Adah's voice message started playing loud and clear in the tense silence of the car. "No way, Elliana! Did Cole steal your first kiss?"

Mortified, Elliana froze. Her cheeks went up in flames as the words hung in the air. She didn't have to look to know Cole had heard every syllable.

Sure enough, Cole's grin was smug, his eyes dancing with delight. "Whoops. Didn't mean to rob you of your first kiss. If you think it's unfair, go ahead and reclaim it-kiss me."

With a searing look, Elliana snapped at Cole, "I'd rather dump a mug of steaming coffee on you!"

Cole threw his head back and laughed, completely unbothered.

## **Chapter: 28**

By the time they pulled into the Evans family's estate, Cole's phone was ringing. He stepped aside to answer, leaving Elliana to walk into the mansion with the cat curled in her arms.

Inside, Ruben's voice rang out in the foyer mid-tirade. "Thank God we didn't let Paige marry into the Evans family, or the Evans name would be dragged through the mud! Sure, Cole marrying Elliana might seem like a downgrade, but it's actually a blessing in disguise."

Jarrett echoed his sentiment with a nod. "You're absolutely right, Dad."

Irene, listening from the sidelines, simmered with frustration. She had counted on negative press to pile pressure on Elliana, but the scandal surrounding the Jones family had diverted attention.

When Elliana entered the room with the cat, Irene's expression shifted-her eyes glinting with satisfaction. She knew Cole had a pet fur allergy severe enough to warrant household restrictions. Ruben had explicitly banned furry animals from the premises after a past health scare. Irene was confident that Elliana had just made a critical mistake.

The moment the cat was noticed, palpable tension settled over the room.

Jeff, mid-conversation with Trinity, shot Elliana a disdainful look and remarked, "Seriously? Stirring up drama again? Can't even handle yourself and now you're dragging in a stray? Who said that thing was allowed here?"

Elliana eyed the rude kid and suddenly remembered he'd been the one who had pressured her to drink that glass of wine at the wedding. To be noted, she'd felt dizzy the next morning. That glass of wine must have been spiked. Jeff's behavior, Manipulative and calculating at such a young age, reminded her more of Paige's bratty brother than what was expected from a member of the prominent Evans family.

Still, with Ruben observing nearby, Elliana chose not to engage. She kept her composure and greeted the elders with polite restraint.

With Cole off the scene, Jeff stepped up his bravado. "Hey, you ignoring me? No furry ritters allowed in this family—get that cat out of here this instant!"

Jeff kept yapping about throwing the cat out like it was garbage, and Elliana finally snapped. Her eyes narrowed, voice laced with frost. "So animals with fur are banned, huh? Why are the bald ones free to roam? Shaving doesn't make them less of pets, does it?"

Jeff, his hair recently shaved, stiffened, his mind lagging behind.

Everyone else caught on immediately. A few covered their mouths, struggling not to laugh. Word was Elliana was a Little rough around the edges—no filter, no finesse—but that jab hit squarely.

It took Jeff a solid five seconds to catch on. "Wait.. You're calling me names? How rude!"

Elliana didn't flinch. Watching the red creep up his neck, she felt a rush of smug satisfaction. She didn't care about her image, and it had its perks.

Trying to make her look nice with a fake attempt to break the tension, Trinity jumped in with a dry laugh. "Come on, Jeff. Elliana didn't mean anything by it. She probably just didn't know about the no-pets rule."

Right on cue, Cole stepped through the doorway.

Jeff sprang to life, pointing an accusing finger. "Cole! This woman brought a cat! I told her to get rid of it, but she refused—and then she insulted me!"

Trinity bit her tongue and took a step back, silently hoping Cole would scold Elliana in front of everyone.

Elliana faced Cole directly, cat still nestled in her arms, her expression uncertain. "I didn't know. Is raising a cat really not allowed?"

"It is allowed," Cole said with a subtle smile. "The butler has set up a special room for the cat, and we've arranged someone to care for it."

A ripple of disbelief swept through the room. The no-pets policy existed because of Cole's severe allergies—was he seriously tossing that rule aside?

Trinity's bitterness surged hot and sharp. She'd been smug when Elliana replaced Paige and married into the Evans family, convinced that Elliana would get tossed out fast, clearing the path for her to become an item with Cole. But now Cole was treating Elliana like she mattered. Like she was the one worth making exceptions for.

Trinity refused to accept this. That was supposed to be her role—the admired, irreplaceable woman in Cole's orbit. No way was she letting Elliana steal that spotlight. She softened her features with a mock concerned look and turned to Ruben. "It's sweet for Cole to dote on his wife, but his health should come first, don't you think?"

### **Chapter: 29**

Ruben held absolute sway over the household, and everyone knew his soft spot for Cole ran deep.

Trinity felt Elliana was dancing on a landmine—and she was buzzing with anticipation to see Ruben explode.

The room tensed as every gaze shifted to Ruben.

As expected, Ruben's expression darkened, thunder gathering behind his eyes.

Jeff seized the moment, eager to stir the pot. "Grandpa, isn't she putting Cole in danger by bringing that cat in?"

Before anyone could answer, a sharp crack echoed through the room. Ruben had slammed his ceramic mug onto the marble table, the sound ringing like a gunshot.

The grand living room fell so quiet that one could hear a pin drop.

Trinity kept up her concerned charade, but inside, she was doing a victory jig.

Louisa Evans, Emmanuel's better half, scanned the room without saying a word. Sharp as

a tack, she knew it was best to stay out of the fray.

Irene caught Jeff's eye, her chest swelling with pride. Her son always had her back when the chips were down.

Jeff smirked at Irene's approving look and then shot Elliana a look that screamed, "You're done for, loser!"

"Get on your knees!" Ruben's roar shattered the silence.

The whole room jumped at Ruben's fury. Normally cool as a cucumber, Ruben turned into a fire-breathing dragon when riled up, and the family knew it.

When Elliana didn't flinch, Jeff leaped in. "What're you still standing there for, you eyesore? Grandpa said kneel! You... Ow!"

With a heavy thud, Jeff hit the floor, knees first.

Everyone blinked, realizing Ruben had smacked Jeff's knee with his cane.

Jeff grimaced, clutching his leg. "Grandpa, why'd you hit me?" Ruben's eyes burned like coals. "I asked you to kneel!"

Shock rolled through the room. Jeff, still full of himself, muttered, "I didn't do anything wrong!"

Ruben snorted. "Elliana is Cole's wife-the lady of this house! Disrespecting her isn't just rude. It's disgraceful. If I don't rein you in now, this family will look like a circus!"

Jaws dropped around the room. No one had expected Ruben to turn his wrath on Jeff instead of Elliana—the rule-breaker with the pet. The whole script had flipped.

Trinity smelled trouble and started inching toward the shadows, trying to fade into the background.

Irene, gutted for Jeff, spoke up. "Ruben, please, Jeff was just trying to follow your rules..."

"You kneel too!" Ruben thundered before she could finish.

For years, Irene had walked around with the air of a queen. Now, the thought of

kneeling in front of everyone shattered her pride like glass. But Ruben's steely stare left no room for protest. After a pause, she glanced at her husband, hoping for backup.

"Bertram.."

### **Chapter: 30**

But Bertram didn't flinch. "Dad said kneel, Irene. Do it."

With clenched teeth and burning cheeks, Irene dropped beside Jeff, the humiliation crashing down on her.

Ruben's eyes narrowed at the pair. "Jeff's insolence is a direct result of your spoiling, Irene. You're both grounded for three days. Use that time to chew on what you've done."

Tears slid down Irene's face as she said, "Understood."

Still nursing his pride, Jeff protested, "Fine, I'll take the hit for disrespecting Elliana. But she broke the no-pet rule. That's gotta count for something!"

Before Ruben could respond, Cole smoothly stepped in. "If pets are a problem, Elliana and I can just move out. No need to stir the pot."

At these words, everyone froze.

Jeff shut up instantly. If Cole moved out over this, his punishment wouldn't stop at being grounded. Ruben would probably tan his hide.

"You little brat!" Ruben tapped Jeff's head with his cane. "Cole's the family lead. If he wants to let Elliana have a pet, he has every right. Who do you think you are to question that?"

Jeff's face drained of color. "But Cole's allergic to pet fur..."

Jeff got another cane tap and a glare from Ruben, who stated, "He's a grown man. He doesn't need some snot-nosed kid fussing over his health."

Chastened, Jeff looked up. "So, can I get a pet too?" He'd been dreaming of getting a fierce, majestic Alaskan Malamute. If Elliana was allowed a pet, maybe the door was open for him too.

Ruben's expression turned to stone. "One pet is more than enough for this house!"

Jeff's shoulders slumped in defeat. So much for that dream!

Across the room, a few exchanged looks. Ruben's bias was loud and clear—he'd do anything to keep Cole content.

Elliana, enjoying the sweet perks of being Cole's wife, had to stifle her laughter.

Cole felt like chuckling but kept it classy. After a quick farewell to Ruben, he took Elliana's hand and led her upstairs.

Once they were upstairs, Elliana peeked at Cole. He'd let her keep the cat even though it made him sneeze. Her heart melted a little. "Thank you."

"How exactly do you plan on thanking me?"

This familiar question made Elliana wary. Wary of another "kiss request," she yanked her hand back. "No kissing. But I've got a present for you."

Cole paused, interest piqued. "What kind of present?"

From her shoulder bag, Elliana carefully drew out a small object and extended her open hand toward Cole. "I brought this for you."

Resting in her palm was a delicate sachet, its simple cloth stitched by hand and decorated with tiny, ornate flowers— elegant despite its modest material.

Cole took it gently and lifted it to his nose. A light blend of flowers and herbs drifted up, subtle yet soothing. "You made this?"