

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

### Chapter: 31

"I did."

"So, what's the plan here?" he asked with a teasing glint. "You want me to carry it around and miss you every second I smell it?"

Elliana gave him a small pout, clearly exasperated but still soft-spoken. "It's meant to help with allergies. If you keep it on you, the pet fur won't bother you. You let me keep my cat-I figured it's the least I could do to make sure you're not suffering for it."

Without a word, Cole gave a small nod and slipped the sachet into the inner pocket of his suit.

Cradling her cat, Elliana turned away and made her way toward the bedroom.

Cole trailed behind, eyes on her as she gently set the cat down on the sofa. "I'm heading out on a business trip tonight," he said quietly. "Not sure when I'll be back, so if anything gets too much, just call me."

"Where to?" she asked, not turning around.

"Valland," he answered. "I'm meeting with Dr. Milena Atkinson."

Wait-he was going to see her? Elliana had just reached to scratch behind her cat's ear when the name stopped her cold. Her gaze lifted to the tall man by the door. "Is it for someone close to you?"

The trace of a smile tugging at Cole's lips faltered, just for a second. "Two years ago, Jeff pulled a reckless stunt that ended with the Henderson family's third daughter plummeting from the second floor. The injury damaged her spine-she's been unable to stand since. Things have only gotten worse, and now her life's hanging in the balance. We brought in every top specialist we could find, but none could fix what was broken. Our families used to be close, but that accident drove a wedge between us. If she dies, there's no repairing what's left. Right now, everything depends on Dr. Atkinson."

Pausing, he added, "I had spent a long time trying to locate Dr. Atkinson, but this elusive healer was a master at keeping the location secret, and no one had a clue what Dr. Atkinson even looked like. Tracking Dr. Atkinson down was incredibly challenging. Word has it that Dr. Atkinson just finished a major surgery in Valland. My team hasn't picked up any signs of Dr. Atkinson leaving yet, so I'm guessing Dr. Atkinson is still in the area. I'm planning to head there myself and see if I can finally meet them."

After Cole's words sank in, Elliana gently bit her lip, torn over whether she should admit that she was Milena Atkinson. A beat later, she chose silence. Her secret wasn't ready to surface—not yet. Compassion may have been the compass of a real doctor, but even Milena couldn't say yes to everyone. Too many hands reached for her—some out of desperation, others with control in mind. Her safety and the balance she maintained relied on staying hidden. And more than anything, she had no interest in becoming tangled in the dramas of the wealthy families.

Elliana tilted her head slightly and offered a calm smile.

"Safe travels."

Before leaving, Cole reached out, gave her hair a light, unexpected pat, and walked out without a word.

With her cat nestled in her arms, Elliana moved to the tall window and watched his car disappear into the distance, a faint unease blooming quietly inside her. Their marriage might've been strange, and their time together short, but he had shown her more warmth than anyone had since her mother died.

Dinner came, and with Cole away, Elliana had to face the Evans family alone.

Luckily, Irene and Jeff were confined to their rooms, and the rest of the household kept quiet under Ruben's looming authority. No one dared stir trouble.

After finishing dinner, Elliana stepped back into her bedroom and sank into the comfort of a soothing bath.

With Cole gone, Elliana finally took the chance to scrub away the heavy makeup, washing her face clean until the skin beneath could breathe again. She stepped out of the bathroom without changing into pajamas, a thin towel lazily thrown over her shoulders as she worked through her damp hair with gentle fingers.

Just then, a sudden movement in the room caught her attention—a tall silhouette standing silently inside. A startled gasp slipped out before she could stop it. "Ah!"

Shock jolted through her, and she froze in place.

Most women, caught half-dressed, would instinctively cover their bodies. Elliana, however, reacted differently—her hands flew to hide her face instead. Ever since she was five, she had obeyed her mother's advice to keep her beauty hidden, and veiling her face had turned into second nature.

The towel, already short, barely skimmed her thighs when worn properly. Pulling it upward to hide her face only left more of her bare skin exposed, unintentionally revealing more than it concealed.

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Cole hadn't been prepared for what he walked into—his steps faltered, and for a moment, he just stood there, stunned. She stood barefoot on the velvet rug, her legs drawn subtly together, the curve of her waist hinted at through strands of wet hair. That towel, shorter than any mini-skirt, clung to her like it didn't want to stay in place.

Without the layers of garish makeup, her complexion was flawless—smooth, luminous, untouched. Even with half her face hidden beneath her palm, the curve of her brows, the clarity in her wide eyes, and the soft skin of her forehead were enough to steal someone's breath.

It was the kind of vision that could make any man forget his next thought.

Cole couldn't look away. His pulse surged, unsteady and fast, betraying the calm exterior he tried to maintain.

Their eyes locked—just for a moment—and then, without a word, Cole started moving toward her.

The moment Cole moved toward Elliana, an invisible alarm went off in her chest. Every nerve screamed danger. Her first instinct was to bolt—to retreat behind the bathroom door—but the towel clinging to her body made even a step too risky. One wrong move and she'd reveal more exposed skin.

She muttered curse inwardly. Last night she'd been imprisoned by too much fabric—

tonight, it was the lack of it holding her hostage.

While she racked her mind for a solution, Cole closed the distance. Her chest tightened as her knees gave way, sending her tumbling back onto the sofa. Cole didn't stop—he leaned in, arms braced around her, caging her between his body and the cushions.

Panic flooded her. She would've shoved him off if her hands weren't otherwise occupied—one gripping the top of the towel over half of her face, the other clutching the hem at her thighs like her life depended on it. Trapped beneath his looming presence, escape wasn't even a realistic option.

Seeing her curled up beneath him, small and flushed, Cole whispered in a gravelly voice, "Honey, you seem so eager. Wouldn't it be wrong of me to leave you disappointed?"

His head dipped closer, lips heading straight for hers.

"Stop right there!" she blurted, voice sharp with panic. "This isn't what it looks like! I'm not trying to seduce you -I swear!"

Cole halted, lips a breath away. His eyes lingered on her fluttering lashes like a predator sizing up whether to pounce. "The agreement, huh?" he murmured, eyes never leaving her face. "Yet last night, you showed up in my bed without warning. Tonight, perfect timing again—you're wrapped in a single towel the second I walk in. And now you're claiming it's not what it looks like? Sounds like a classic case of hard to get, honey."

He pressed a slow kiss to her forehead, his breath warm against her skin. "You don't need to play games with me. If you want to get laid with me, I'm more than happy to grant your wish. That's what husbands are for, isn't it?"

His breath grazed her cheek, sending a wave of heat down her spine. Her heartbeat thundered in her chest. "Can you get up first, and then let's talk?"

Cole didn't move off her. Instead, his lips traveled gently -her forehead, then eyelids, then the tip of her nose. One hand moved with purpose toward the edge of her towel, slowly pulling to unveil the other half of her face.

Elliana's grip on the towel tightened in an instant. "Don't!" "Still hiding from me?"

"I'm not wearing anything on my face... I might terrify you," she said, voice barely above a whisper.

She was truly on edge. Her slender frame quivered faintly, and her wide, tearful eyes silently begged him to let her go.

Something in Cole shifted. Her vulnerability reached places he didn't know he had, and for a moment, the thought of scaring her felt unbearable. Still, he didn't let her go without a tease. His palm landed with a playful smack against her partially exposed bottom, the sound echoing like mischief through the quiet room.

Heat surged to Elliana's cheeks in an instant. Her whole face burned red.

The moment Cole turned his back, she bolted for the bathroom. In record time, she threw on a loose nightgown and slapped together a rushed layer of makeup. Sloppy or not, it gave her courage. If he tried that again, she'd fight back with fire.

Storming out of the bathroom, she shot him a glare sharp enough to cut glass. "I thought you were flying out. Why are you back here suddenly?"

Cole stared at her face, now smeared like a wild painting, yet his thoughts remained tangled in the memory of how captivating she looked before. "Well, somehow, I sense your burning excitement calling me back, so here I am."

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"Cut the nonsense and talk straight!"

"Heh..." Cole Laughed under his breath. Once she had clothes on, it was like watching someone suit up for battle—her fire returned with a vengeance.

Raising a folder in one hand, he explained casually, "Just forgot this. I'm out the door in a minute."

Elliana pressed her lips into a pout, silently wishing he'd hurry up and disappear. Before, a hint of unease had nagged at her for not warning him about his futile trip as she'd chosen to keep her secret identity under wraps. But now? That unease had evaporated.

"I'm heading out." With that, Cole really walked right out.

Elliana rushed to the door and locked it the second it clicked shut behind him, breathing out relief.

The moment Cole stepped outside, he flung the folder to his assistant and headed

straight for another room-cold shower, no hesitation.

Teasing Elliana had completely backfired, leaving him aroused and barely clinging to his last shred of restraint.

After Cole walked out, Elliana kept herself wide awake for a long while, gripped by the fear that he might come back without warning.

The memory of their encounter played on repeat in her head, each scene making her cheeks flush and her heartbeat drum against her ribs.

Her phone buzzed abruptly, cutting through the silence. She snatched it up. "Hello?"

Darin's voice came through sharp and furious, saying, "Elliana, who told you it was okay to take your mother's things?"

Elliana let out a cold laugh. "And why would I need your approval to touch my own mother's things?"

"Those things carry my memories! They mean nothing to you. Bring them back. Now."

Memories? Elliana felt a cold wave of laughter rise deep within her chest. "Mr. Jones, have you forgotten how you tossed your vows aside and paraded your mistress around like royalty? Don't insult my mother's memory by pretending you cared. If she knew you were still clinging to her, she'd be disgusted."

The word Dad no longer belonged to him. Not in her mouth. Not in her memory.

Darin was struck silent, and Elliana caught the sound of a deep, weary sigh escaping him.

She kept their conversation curt. "Was that all? Or is there more, Mr. Jones?"

"If you're refusing to hand over her things, then there's something else you must agree to."

"And what exactly would that be?"

Darin sounded somewhat embarrassed. "Elliana, I want the five hundred million back—the money I gave you."

The moment those words left his mouth, Elliana couldn't help but laugh-sharp and biting.

Ever since Kiara's scandal exploded, business partners had been fleeing like rats from a sinking ship. Darin, now desperate and discredited, didn't have the nerve to turn to Cole for help. Still, with the Jones Group bleeding money, he came crawling to Elliana—shamelessly asking for the wedding gift he'd prepared—originally for Paige, no less.

Not a chance Elliana was giving it back. "Mr. Jones," she said, voice dripping with sarcasm. "Aren't you even a little embarrassed saying that out loud?"

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Darin was a bit flustered and angered. "'Elliana, the financial mess the Jones family is in began because of you. As a daughter of the Jones family, you're accountable for both its rise and its collapse. You can't just stand back and watch the Jones Group fall apart!"

"Mr. Jones, what you're saying isn't true. This money was set aside for Paige, and she's the reason for the financial mess. Be honest—if you'd known I was the one marrying into the Evans family, would you have spent a single cent?"

"Fine, Paige was the cause," Darin said loudly. "But you're the one who took the funds. The Jones Group is drowning, Elliana. You really want to watch your father's legacy go down in flames?"

"My mother built the Jones Group with her hands—her formulas, her reputation. That money came from her brilliance. I never once reaped the benefits of the family name, so why should I be the one to save it now?"

Darin, coming to terms with the failure of this reasoning, shifted his tactics and eased his tone. "Elliana, I know I've treated you unfairly over the years. If you're unwilling to return the money, I understand. But could you speak with Cole about investing in the Jones Group? The Evans family has more money than they know what to do with, and even a small sum from them would be enough to keep the Jones Group afloat."

Elliana rebuffed his request without hesitation. "Are you being serious, Mr. Jones? I'm nothing more than a worthless, unattractive woman. Do you honestly believe I have any sway over him?"

Darin fell silent. Deep down, he knew she couldn't change Cole's mind. He was just driven to the edge by desperation.

Elliana gave a small, amused laugh. "Honestly, Mr. Jones, your best bet is to dress Paige up and marry her off fast. Maybe she'll charm some rich fool into saving you."

"Keep your filthy mouth shut!" Kiara's rage exploded through the speaker, Loud enough to make Elliana wince.

"Elliana, you jealous snake!" Kiara shouted. "How dare you plot against Paige? She's Ublento's crown jewel, the woman meant to marry the richest man!"

Elliana took her time flicking imaginary dust from her ear. "I gave a suggestion, that's all. If it doesn't suit you, throw it out. When Cole finally tosses me aside, you'll have your golden chance to shove Paige into his arms."

Without another word, Elliana ended the call. She imagined the Jones household in utter chaos and grinned. Their panic made up for her sleepless night—and for the first time in hours, she had felt ready to close her eyes.

Back at the Jones family's estate, as soon as the call cut off, Darin spun and struck Kiara across the face with a loud crack.

"Ah!" Hitting the floor, Kiara grabbed her cheek, now red and swollen, and glared up at him with fury. "What is your problem? Why did you hit me again?"

Clenching his jaw, Darin jabbed a finger toward her face. "You worthless idiot! We're in desperate need of Elliana's help, and you insulted her? Now that you've pushed her too far, how exactly do you expect us to deal with the financial crisis in the Jones family?"

Kiara didn't back down. "Like she'd help even if I begged? Get real! Ever since she took Paige's place and married Cole, she's been ruthless. She's got a spine now, and she's not scared to use her words like weapons. She never talked like that before!"

Even Darin couldn't deny it anymore. Elliana used to keep her head down and bite her tongue, but now her words stung like barbs, Laced with sarcasm that made his blood boil. The worst part was, he couldn't do a damn thing about it. As part of the Evans family, Elliana became untouchable. Whether Cole doted on her or not didn't matter—disrespecting her now would be no different than spitting in Cole's face.

Paige, who had been silently observing with a frosty gaze, said suddenly, "Elliana isn't wrong."

The comment hit like a slap. Kiara and Darin both turned to her in disbelief.

Paige's mind flashed back to that awful moment—Cole just stood there, letting Elliana tear her down in public. That was when the truth clicked. Cole hadn't been tricked or swayed. He had hated her all along. Even if Elliana hadn't stepped in, he would never have made her his bride. She couldn't even imagine how he would have canceled the wedding if nothing unexpected had happened that day. That title—wife of the wealthiest man in Ublento—was out of reach now. Whether Elliana kept it forever or not didn't matter. It would never belong to her.

"Don't stress yourselves, Mom. Dad. I'll handle the mess Jones Group is in," Paige said, cool and steady.

And with no further explanation, Paige turned on her heel and climbed the stairs. But in her heart, she made a promise -she'd save the Jones Group and crush Elliana beneath her heel when the time came.

The next few days passed in silence. The Jones family kept their heads down, and no one from the Evans family's side caused Elliana any trouble. Following Ruben's wishes, she played the part of a studious girl, nose buried in SATs.

On the evening of the third day, she picked up a call that completely took her by surprise.

### **Chapter: 35**

Paige was the one calling. "Morning, Elliana! Hope you're up and shining!"

Paige sounded like sunshine, as if she hadn't been embroiled in scandal just days ago. Either she'd done some deep self- reflection or was simply better at bouncing back than anyone gave her credit for.

Elliana had expected Paige to lay low for a while after the recent upheaval, but she was surprised at how quickly Paige had made a comeback.

After the scandal exploded, the entire internet was waiting for Paige's response. Her massive following—eighty million strong—swarmed her profiles, demanding answers.

Silence wasn't an option if Paige planned to keep her crown as Ublento's top socialite.

That same night, she dropped a statement that set everything ablaze again. "I'm truly sorry for stirring up public tension like this. I never meant to upset anyone. ALL I'll say is, my mother is a good woman— decent and honest. Someone framed her. I know who it was, but I can't name names. Maybe I'm just too soft-hearted to fight back."

Once that post was live, Paige vanished. No replies. No further clarifications. No matter how wild the gossip got, she kept her mouth shut.

While Paige's social media stayed quiet, she was anything but idle. Behind closed doors, she fed her inner circle with scripted stories and planted "leaks" in fan communities. One name kept surfacing—Elliana's.

That was when Paige's fans lit the internet on fire with fresh accusations.

"Elliana's nothing but trash. She wrecked Paige's engagement and dragged Paige's mother into it. How can someone be so vile?"

"Poor Paige is kind to the core. Even after being harmed by Elliana, she still values their sisterly bond and can't bear to expose Elliana's wrongdoings."

"Word is, Paige and her mom pity Elliana because she was this poor, plain girl who'd lost her mother young. They treated her nicely, but she stabbed them in the back."

"Elliana's just jealous—Paige is beautiful, smart, everything she's not. Elliana wanted to pull Paige down out of spite. Such twisted people make you lose faith in humanity!"

Paige had spent years polishing her reputation, turning herself into Ublento's undisputed icon. And she'd gotten really good at spinning any story her way.

After this wave of strategic moves, the harsh remarks aimed at her dropped noticeably. Still, she wasn't all-powerful and had no way to shape every mind. A few fans had started to see beyond the surface.

"You all tear down Elliana for being plain and unremarkable while lifting Paige up as some stunning prodigy. But if that's really true, then how on earth did Elliana manage to outsmart both Paige and her mother?"

"Exactly. None of it adds up. I'm starting to think the truth might flip the whole story upside down."

Most fans stayed loyal to Paige, but a small handful started asking questions—and that was enough to keep the tide from tipping completely. Neither Elliana nor Paige had claimed full victory yet. Elliana hadn't been crushed, and Paige hadn't fallen.

With the focus on Elliana and Paige, the Evans family was removed from the center of the discussion, transforming what began as a debate over a family alliance into a fierce showdown between two women.

Despite Paige's lighthearted tone, Elliana caught the edge behind Paige's words. That cheerful act didn't fool her— Paige was hiding something beneath the surface.

With a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes, Elliana asked, "So, Paige—what's this call really about?"

"I wanted to let you know," Paige said brightly, "my engagement party with Raylan is tomorrow. You and Cole are invited, of course. The official invite should've reached the Evans family's estate by now."

This caught Elliana off guard for a second.

Raylan Hudson had once been Elliana's fiancé, a union brokered by Rita and Lenard Hudson, Raylan's grandfather, during their youth.

After Rita's death, Lenard had tried to honor the old promise. But Raylan wanted no part of it. He'd called Elliana ugly to her face and directed all his affection to Paige without shame. But Paige had never returned his interest—not genuinely, at least. The Hudson family had a decent reputation in Ublento, but their power didn't come close to what the Evans family held. And with Cole available then, she saw no reason to settle for Raylan.

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Even though Paige had no real interest in Raylan, she had continued to string him along solely because he was Elliana's fiancé. Whenever Raylan stopped by the Jones family's home to visit her, she would purposely summon Elliana, forcing Elliana to watch as Raylan tried to charm her. Once Raylan was gone, she would brag and ridicule Elliana.

Elliana had played along with the act, pretending to be heartbroken and jealous. Once, she'd even staged a late- night river scene, threatening to throw herself in. The whole world bought into the idea that she loved Raylan more than life. Now that Paige had

finally accepted Raylan, it was obvious she wasn't after love—it was payback.

The thought made Elliana chuckle inwardly, and a playful impulse stirred within her. She put on a show of anguish and cried out, "Paige, how could you marry Raylan? Raylan is mine!"

Paige couldn't help but savor the "heartbreak" in Elliana's voice—it was like music to her ears. With a smug smile, she taunted, "You must be feeling pretty miserable knowing Raylan's about to marry me. If you still think he belongs to you, come to my engagement party tomorrow and take your best shot. Try stealing him back."

Paige's voice carried a teasing edge, laced with allure. Clearly, she still believed Elliana was the same "gullible" girl from before.

Elliana was more than happy to play along. Her acting skills kicked in, she even sounded like she was holding back tears. "I'll definitely be there. Raylan means everything to me, and I won't let anyone else have him!"

"I'll be waiting." Once Paige finished speaking, she ended the call without hesitation.

Kiara, who had been sitting nearby the entire time, could hardly contain her excitement. "Paige, you're brilliant! That idiot Elliana totally fell for it! If she actually has the guts to crash your engagement party and try to steal your fiancé, I'll make sure it blows up online, and she'll be all over the news. And once that happens, Cole will be dragged into it too. By then, Elliana will definitely be kicked out of the Evans family!"

A cold glint passed through Paige's eyes as she narrowed them. "Tomorrow, Elliana will make herself the biggest fool of the town."

Right after ending the call with Paige, Elliana heard a knock at the door. When she opened it, she saw Paulina Fletcher, the housekeeper, holding an envelope.

Elliana took the envelope from Paulina and opened it, revealing a formal invitation. The moment she saw the venue, her lips curled into a smile. The event was scheduled at Ublento Hotel.

Ublento Hotel sat in the heart of the city, covering over 20, @00 square meters. Inside, the decoration screamed luxury, offering every high-end comfort imaginable. Their signature cuisine had made a name for itself all across the city. At the center of the venue was an enormous ballroom. It regularly held elite corporate events, extravagant

banquets, and some of the most lavish weddings in the city.

This high-end location didn't come cheap, and everyone knew it. Its guest list regularly included tycoons, celebrities, and the city's elite. Just receiving an invitation to an event there had become a mark of one's social standing.

Knowing how much Paige adored extravagance, it was no surprise that Raylan picked this place for their engagement celebration.

A playful idea crossed Elliana's mind. Since she was actually the mysterious owner of Ublento Hotel, should she treat Paige to an unforgettable surprise?

Elliana was up early the next morning, already washed and glammed up by the time she stepped into her expansive walk-in closet.

There had been racks of clothes and shoes waiting for her, handpicked for the wedding day. Over the past few days, Cole had sent over even more outfits, each tailored perfectly to her size and straight off the runways of luxury brands adored by Ublento's socialites.

The sparkling dresses lined up like a parade of spotlight-stealers, but none of them fit what Elliana had in mind for her grand "surprise" on Paige's engagement party. She wasn't looking to stand out. Those flashy designer labels were simply too loud for the occasion.

Eventually, she settled on a long-sleeved dress with a quiet kind of elegance. The deep peacock blue didn't scream for attention, and she even stuck a small sticker over the designer's label to keep things discreet.

The dress wasn't from any stores. It was a private, high-end commission from Rosa, an international designer whose work didn't even hit the market. With the logo hidden, there was little chance anyone would notice.

Just then, Paulina stepped into the room holding a new gift box. "Mrs. Evans, Mr. Evans heard about the engagement party you're attending today. He picked out some jewelry for you to wear."

It hadn't crossed Elliana's mind that Cole, all the way in Valland, would even think about such details. Her chest tightened a little.

"Thanks, Paulina." Elliana flipped open the box. One glance and her lips twitched in shock. Cole definitely didn't hold back.

Inside the box was a necklace—a stunning piece crafted by Rosa. It was called Endless Love, a design that had recently swept up dozens of international awards and earned Rosa the title of a design prodigy.

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Critics praised Endless Love. Collectors fought over it. Even a handful of major national museums had tried to obtain it for permanent display, only to be outbid by a mysterious billionaire who shelled out a billion dollars without batting an eye.

Elliana had never once considered that the mysterious buyer might be Cole. What left her even more stunned was realizing that the masterpiece was now hers to wear.

A flush crept into her cheeks, making her squirm in quiet embarrassment. Because she was Rosa. When she launched the label, she'd built it on a guiding principle: to make the rich part with their spare wealth, never to take from those who had none to give. That was why the brand's prices sat firmly at the top of the fashion pyramid.

Even with their steep price tags, her designs remained in high demand, turning into favorites among affluent women and socialites. Every time a new season's collection launched, it would sell out right away and quickly become scarce.

In addition to the regular seasonal collections, her company also accepted high-end custom orders. The gown she had on today was one of them. It had been tailored specifically for the Evans family—an eight-million-dollar design.

Now here she was, draped in a dress her company had made for Cole and adorned with jewelry he'd purchased. She had profited handsomely from both. She couldn't shake the slight unease.

Noticing the shift in her expression, Paulina approached with careful eyes. "Mrs. Evans, is something wrong?"

Trying to keep her tone light, Elliana offered a wry smile. "This jewelry is just too expensive. I will pass it."

Paulina smiled in return after hearing her words. "Mr. Evans has thought you might feel that way, so he asked me to deliver a message."

Elliana looked up with curiosity. "What did he say?"

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Paulina promptly relayed Cole's message. "Mr. Evans has said that as his wife, you're not just attending a party. You're representing him. That means you should carry yourself with the kind of presence expected from the wife of the richest man in the city."

That pulled a subtle smile from Elliana. For someone like Cole to care about outward appearances seemed laughable, especially since he'd chosen her, a plain Jane in the public's eyes due to the horrible makeup she \_ had deliberately painted herself with. This message was clearly his way of persuading her to wear the necklace, probably worried she'd be underestimated at the banquet. Still, she could see the thought behind it.

Once Paulina noticed Elliana's reaction soften, she stepped closer and asked, "Mrs. Evans, would you like me to help you put it on?"

"Sure," Elliana replied with a faint nod.

With a careful touch, Paulina picked up the billion-dollar necklace as if it were made of spun glass and gently clasped it around Elliana's neck.

Though Elliana's dress didn't boast vivid colors or daring cuts, it was refined. The tailoring hugged her figure just right, and the fabric shimmered subtly under the light. With the necklace resting against her collarbone, she looked striking in an understated, unforgettable way.

Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said for the shocking makeup that clashed harshly with everything else.

Paulina had been about to pay Elliana a compliment, but once her eyes landed on Elliana's face, she swallowed her words.

Paulina stated, "Mrs. Evans, breakfast is ready downstairs. Hugh will take you to the banquet afterward."

Reaching for a lace shawl, Elliana draped it around her shoulders, letting it fall just enough to cover the glittering necklace. "Isn't Hugh usually with Cole? Why isn't Hugh in Valland with him?"

"Mr. Evans only brought Myles and Aron with him this time. Hugh and I stayed behind to assist you. If there's anything you need, we're here," Paulina replied.

Elliana paused.

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Everyone knew the Fletcher siblings weren't just employees— they were Cole's inner circle. Paulina, the oldest, had a calm, no-nonsense demeanor and ran Cole's household like a fortress. Myles, her brother, had a mind like a steel trap and served as Cole's most trusted advisor. Aron and Hugh, the younger two, were trained in close combat and handled everything from tight security to high-stakes confrontations.

No matter where Cole went, the four were never far behind. But this time, he had left Paulina and Hugh at home. For Elliana.

Once again, Elliana found herself thrown off balance by Cole's thoughtfulness.

After finishing her preparations, Elliana left the Evans family's estate in a car, with Hugh behind the wheel.

Elliana's arrival at Ublento Hotel was quiet and unannounced. But the moment she stepped into the hall, she ran straight into someone she would've rather avoided— Vivien Hudson.

Vivien, Raylan's sister, had always idolized Paige and had never passed up a chance to tear Elliana down. And now, with the engagement party in full swing, Vivien was already spoiling for a fight.

"Elliana? This is Raylan and Paige's engagement party. What on earth are you doing here?" Without even giving Elliana a chance to speak, Vivien jumped straight to accusations. "Don't tell me you're still clinging to some fantasy about Raylan. For Christ's sake, this is his engagement celebration, not your personal sob story. He's completely obsessed with Paige. You? He finds you repulsive, so scram!"

With Vivien's outburst, a crowd began to form as onlookers gathered to see the scene play out.

Picking up on the attention, Vivien said, growing louder as she fed off the whispers around her, "Are you ignoring me on purpose, Elliana? If you don't leave, I swear I'll get security to drag you out myself."

Her threats gave the onlookers something to chew on. Murmurs spread like spilled wine across a white tablecloth.

"Isn't Elliana married to Cole, the richest man around? What's she doing at Paige's engagement party, acting like she's here to wreck the whole thing?"

"Sounds like you missed the old gossip. Elliana was so in love with Raylan back then that she nearly hurled herself into a river for him."

"But still, she married Cole. Why would she even glance in Raylan's direction anymore?"

"Just think about her position. She's a \_ useless, unattractive woman. How could she possibly hold her place in the Evans family? She probably knows she's bound to be thrown out some day, so now she's trying to latch onto Raylan. Lenard's fond of her and could back her up."

"Exactly, I've heard the same thing. Lenard's been pushing Raylan to stick to the engagement with Elliana. If it weren't for that, she would've been out of the picture a long time ago."

"This is going to be gold. A wedding crasher? In public? I'm here for every second of it."

Completely unbothered by the whispers, Elliana reached into her bag, pulled out her invitation, and waved over the nearest security guard. "I was invited to this event. So why is there a watchdog yapping at me? Is this how you handle security around here?"

"Elliana, you despicable woman!" The insult hit hard. Vivien's face twisted in outrage as she lifted her hand, ready to slap Elliana.

Kiara, observing from a distance, promptly ordered a security guard to step in. She took satisfaction in seeing Elliana being troubled but didn't want Vivien to mess up Elliana's supposed attempt to crash the wedding. She had already arranged for someone to secretly capture the scene on camera, fully prepared to turn it into a headline-worthy scandal.

Moving in swiftly, the security guard stepped between Vivien and Elliana. "Miss Hudson, please chill down. This is Mr. Hudson and Miss Jones's engagement party. Please don't make a scene."

Vivien's fingers twitched, but she stopped herself. With a sharp huff and a glare, she dropped her hand.

Just then, Paige walked into the hall with Raylan on her arm, all eyes swiveling toward the newly arrived couple as if the earlier tension hadn't existed.

Paige was radiant in a flowing white gown that shimmered under the chandeliers. Hair accessories rested on her head, catching the light like stardust. She held herself with the quiet grace of royalty, a gentle smile curving her lips as her eyes scanned the crowd with calm confidence.

Beside her, Raylan looked every bit the gentleman in a crisp white suit tailored to perfection. Tall and effortlessly handsome, he turned slightly toward Paige, his eyes warm with affection, and a soft smile played on his lips.

### **Chapter: 39**

A hush fell over the crowd before gasps rippled through the room. "Look at them! They're like a royal couple from a storybook."

"They're perfect together. She's the most admired socialite in Ublento, and he's the heir to the Hudson Group. It's like watching a real-life fairy tale unfold!"

Vivien, eager to make her presence known, stepped forward with a bright smile. "Have you seen Paige's dress? It's a custom piece from Emily's newest collection—worth half a million. Raylan bought it for her."

Emily wasn't as globally known as elite brands like Rosa, but her designs were still a dream for many in the Luxury world.

Vivien's eyes gleamed with pride as she added, "And that's not even the best part. The hair accessories, earrings, and necklace she's wearing? All designed by Emily too—together they cost thirty million."

"Wow!" The group of young socialites exchanged an envious glance. "Raylan must really adore Paige."

Vivien cast a cold, condescending glance at Elliana and sneered, ""Elliana, didn't you marry the richest man in the city? So why do you look so ordinary? No jewelry at all, and you've even covered the logo on your dress. Is life really so bad in the Evans family that you can't even afford a proper outfit?"

Her words hit their mark, and soon, the others in the room began to notice Elliana's simple appearance. Compared to Paige's radiance, her outfit seemed dull and unremarkable.

The fabric of Elliana's dress was decent, and the design was creative, but the absence of a visible brand label was telling. In this circle, it wasn't just about looking good— it was about showcasing high-end brands. Without a prestigious label, something was simply considered worthless.

ALL around Elliana, women sparkled with diamonds and luxury labels, their appearances polished to perfection. In contrast, Elliana looked painfully plain. Not even a pair of earrings adorned her ears, making her stand out for all the wrong reasons.

Whispers of judgment rippled through the crowd, their faces filled with disdain.

"Seems like the rumors are true. Elliana has no real standing in the Evans family. They don't even bother to make her look good. It's clear she's not treated like the lady of the house."

"Exactly. She might've snatched the marriage, but what's the use? She's still living like an outsider in that house."

"Paige is the real winner here. She didn't marry into the Evans family, but look at her now—adored by Raylan, showered with gifts, living like a queen."

Paige, standing nearby, couldn't help but smirk. This was just what she had wanted-let the world see: even though Elliana had married into a powerful family, Elliana was still beneath her, always would be.

"Really, Elliana, we should thank you. If you hadn't shamelessly taken that marriage, Raylan might've ended up stuck with you. What a tragedy that would've been-for him, of course." Vivien let out a shrill laugh, tossing her hair dramatically. "Honestly, Elliana, just accept it-you're stuck in a cold, loveless marriage while Paige and Raylan are living the dream. It must burn, doesn't it?"

Elliana's gaze turned cold as she looked at Vivien with a calm yet cutting expression. "Maybe. But even in a loveless marriage, I'm still Mrs. Evans. That title alone carries more weight than someone who's been chasing after the Blakely name for years and still couldn't get it."

Vivien's smile faltered.

Everyone knew about Vivien's long-standing crush on Merlin. She'd thrown herself at him for years, but he had never shown an ounce of interest. Elliana had hit where it hurt the most.

Seeing the amused expressions of those around her, Vivien's face flushed with embarrassment. Her fists clenched at her sides, and her eyes glistened with tears, but she said nothing.

Watching Vivien falter, Paige inwardly rolled her eyes. What a useless ally. Vivien can't even handle a few words from Elliana.

Just then, Raylan's gentle smile faded. His eyes darkened the moment they landed on Elliana. "Who let this disgrace in?"

Paige placed a delicate hand on his arm, her voice soft and sweet. "Raylan, don't be mad.. I was the one who invited her. She's my sister, after all. I couldn't just leave her out on a night like this. That would be too cruel."

Raylan sighed and tapped her nose playfully. "You're too soft for your own good."

## **Chapter: 40**

A rosy blush touched Paige's cheeks. "Will you come with me to say hello? Just for a moment?"

Raylan looked annoyed. "Why bother?"

"My father's watching," Paige said gently. "I don't want to make the family look divided on such an important day."

Reluctantly, Raylan gave in and walked with Paige. His steps were confident, but his face showed clear disdain the moment they approached Elliana.

Paige was loving every second of it. The contrast between Raylan's warmth toward her

and his coldness toward Elliana made her feel victorious. Her smile was graceful, but her eyes carried a subtle challenge. "Elliana," she said sweetly, "thank you for coming to our engagement party. Raylan's been spoiling me so much-he picked everything for me, from the venue to the gown and even my jewelry. Everything's perfect. I couldn't be happier."

Every word from Paige dripped with sweetness, but her smile carried the weight of a challenge. She, much like Kiara, waited with thinly veiled excitement for Elliana to cause a scene.

Elliana wasn't fooled for a second. With her voice calm but pointed, she said, "Paige, isn't it a little eager to get engaged to Raylan when the arranged engagement promise between him and me still exists?"

Raylan's face turned cold in an instant. "Paige invited you out of kindness. I only tolerate your presence for her sake. So, think twice before you make a scene, or you'll regret it."

He wrapped an arm around Paige like he was shielding her from something dangerous, making a show of his loyalty for everyone to see.

A sly smile crept across Paige's face. Without saying a word, she lifted her hand just enough for the diamond ring to catch the Light-and Elliana's attention.

From the crowd, someone exclaimed, "That's the famous Emily's signature ring! I saw it online-it's worth two million!"

"Two million dollars? That's insane! Paige must be living the dream with how much Raylan pampers her. With a ring that expensive, the wedding's bound to be nothing short of a spectacle!"

ALL eyes darted to Elliana's empty hands. The silence was brief, but the judgment in their eyes lingered.

Kiara's heart practically danced in her chest, though she kept her face as gentle and understanding as ever.

Kiara said, pretending to be concerned, "Elliana, although you took a marriage that wasn't yours and are clearly unhappy, it was your choice. You can't blame anyone else. Honestly, I'd be upset too if I were in your shoes. Paige just got Lucky with someone who actually knows how to love."

Raylan gazed at Kiara. "Mrs. Jones, don't waste your time on someone like her. It's time to get this ceremony started."

Raylan reached for Paige's hand and guided her as\_ they walked off together.

Onlookers didn't hesitate to put space between themselves and Elliana, treating her presence Like something contagious.

"Elliana..." When Paige looked over her shoulder and spotted Elliana standing alone, something in her chest surged with smug satisfaction, though she kept her expression soft and sympathetic.

Raylan walked Paige to the center of the stage and gently took the microphone from the host. Flashing a bright smile, he said, "We're so glad all of you could come to celebrate our engagement."

The room hung on his next sentence, every eye fixed on him with eager anticipation.

Clinging to Raylan's arm like she belonged there, Paige soaked up every ounce of the attention, her smile as radiant as her diamond.

With everyone looking elsewhere, Kiara leaned close to Elliana and whispered, "Watching the guy you love dote on another woman-hurts, doesn't it? Weren't you planning to wreck the party today? Well, now's your chance."

Afraid Elliana might chicken out, Kiara pushed further, her voice dripping with cruelty as she said, "You're not scared, are you? I get it, though. You've never had the guts to shake things up. Just stand there and let Paige enjoy everything you lost."