

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

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Elliana lifted her head slowly, and a quiet smirk formed as she met Kiara's eyes. "Brace yourself. I'm about to turn this whole place upside down."

Without another word, Elliana started making her way toward the stage, each step deliberate, steady, and unstoppable.

Kiara could hardly contain herself. Finally, the chaos she'd been craving was about to unfold—and she was ready to watch Elliana fall apart.

The crowd stirred as whispers spread. One by one, heads turned toward Elliana, dressed in blue, heading for the stage.

Elliana didn't need designer labels to stand out. The dress she wore hugged her just right, turning heads with its effortless charm and drawing every eye as she passed.

The second Elliana stepped near the stage, Raylan's expression hardened like stone. Back when they were kids, Elliana had been the picture of beauty in his eyes. He used to follow her around, certain she was the girl he'd grow up and marry. But everything changed after the fire. She had been left disfigured, her mother gone, and from that moment on, he couldn't stand the sight of her.

Even if time had spared her face, he still wouldn't have chosen her. The past had buried any chance she ever had. To him, a woman without power, connections, or status wasn't worth marrying. At best, she might be good for a brief distraction—never a wedding band. Her nerve to show up like this, likely clinging to old feelings, only deepened the revulsion he already carried.

Raylan moved in front of Paige like a wall, eyes narrowing at Elliana as he said, "What are you trying to pull now?"

With a soft smile, Elliana turned to the host and asked, "Mind if I borrow that

microphone for a minute?"

Once Elliana held the microphone, she walked to the center of the stage. She cheerfully announced, "Just a little reminder for everyone-Raylan and I have actually been engaged for quite some time."

"No way!" Gasps and whispers rippled through the hall like wildfire.

"So Elliana actually showed up to ruin the celebration. Things are definitely about to get entertaining!"

"Two women fighting over one guy? On stage? This is pure drama!"

"Sure, it's juicy, but let's be real—Elliana will only end up humiliated."

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Seeing Elliana finally attempt to crash the wedding, Paige's pulse quickened with excitement, though she carefully arranged her features into a mask of distress. To sell the performance, she discreetly pinched her arm, coaxing real tears to spill down her cheeks.

Paige stated in a choked voice, "Elliana, must you always act this way? Since childhood, you've competed with me for everything. Whatever captures my interest, you immediately covet for yourself—even my engagement. I embraced you like my own sister, constantly yielding to your desires. Even when you snatched Cole from my grasp, I swallowed my heartbreak, retreating with silent tears. Now, having finally begun healing and daring to start anew with Raylan, you appear to stake your claim on him despite wearing another man's ring."

As the words tumbled out, Paige's voice cracked with manufactured emotion, tears streaming unchecked down her flushed face.

Raylan, visibly moved by her apparent anguish, squeezed her shoulder and gave her a reassuring glance.

Paige melted into his protective embrace, casting a look toward Elliana. "Tell me, what would it take for you to release me from this lifelong competition?"

Kiara, who had been anticipating this precise moment, swiftly joined the charade. "Elliana, I have been loving you as my own daughter all these years, but you've tormented Paige at every opportunity. We continuously stepped back, only for you to push forward more aggressively. Now you seek to strip away everything Paige treasures, trampling all moral boundaries. You stand here as Mrs. Evans, yet crash Paige's engagement celebration to claim Raylan-what does this reveal about your loyalty to Cole? And what does it say about your respect for Raylan?"

Paige's vulnerable demeanor and Kiara's seemingly righteous fury resonated powerfully with the assembled guests.

"Such malice from Elliana-utterly selfish and creating a spectacle!"

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"Her tactics are both foolish and disgraceful!"

"Someone capture this wedding-crashing fiasco and post it online! Let the internet community shower her with the shame she deserves!"

Darin rushed forward at that moment. In the aftermath of Kiara's scandal, he desperately needed this engagement party to salvage the Jones family's reputation and couldn't tolerate further disruptions. Spotting Elliana on stage, his expression darkened as he clenched his jaw and bellowed, "Elliana, you disgraceful girl, descend the _ stage immediately and get the hell out of here!"

Kiara had endured Darin's humiliation and mistreatment in recent days. If not for Paige securing Raylan's investment to alleviate the Jones family's financial crisis, her future would have remained bleak. This moment presented the perfect opportunity to align herself with Darin, so she delivered another Oscar-worthy performance, collapsing tearfully against his shoulder. "Darling, please implore Elliana to spare our poor Paige this torment."

Darin, still revolted by Kiara's previous actions and words, had no desire for physical contact. Yet, with countless eyes upon them, he couldn't reveal their discord, so he reluctantly embraced her, patting her back in feigned comfort.

Witnessing this tableau, the crowd's hostility toward Elliana intensified.

"Elliana disrupts Paige's engagement celebration to torment both Paige and Kiara. What manner of person behaves so cruelly?"

"Paige and Kiara are too forgiving and tolerant. In their position, I'd have security shatter Elliana's legs before tossing her into the street."

"Can someone contact Cole and inform him of his wife's behavior? I'd wager he'd tear into Elliana himself!"

Overhearing these murmurs, Paige and Kiara exchanged triumphant glances. They had executed their performance flawlessly, manipulating the scene with precision. Elliana now bore the irrevocable label of wedding-crasher. Once news of this incident spread online, society would completely ostracize her.

Raylan, already inflamed by Paige's tears, suddenly snapped, "Elliana, cease this disruptive spectacle immediately!"

Elliana had observed quietly, allowing them ample time to complete their dramatic production. After they finished their carefully orchestrated parts, she remarked with mock confusion, "I never claimed I came to disrupt this party. Why are you all thrusting this accusation upon me?"

The crowd faltered. Elliana indeed hadn't declared intentions to crash the wedding. Had they collectively misinterpreted her intention?

Paige, gnawed by a sinking feeling, hastily interjected, "You commandeered the stage and announced your connection with Raylan at my engagement party. If that doesn't constitute crashing the celebration, what does?"

Facing Paige's tear-streaked accusation, Elliana adopted a fake aggrieved expression. "I truly didn't come to disrupt your celebration, but rather to seize this opportunity to announce something important."

Announced something? Whispers rippled through the crowd, curiosity building about Elliana's true intentions.

Kiara, sensing their carefully constructed narrative unraveling, quickly countered, "I understand your jealousy and resentment. Why bother with pretense? Seeing how your wedding-crashing has angered everyone, are you now fabricating an alternative reason? Your malice knows no bounds!"

Hearing this, Raylan immediately roared, "Security! Remove this contemptible woman at once!"

Upon hearing Raylan's command, security guards surged forward to seize Elliana from the stage.

In that precise moment, Raylan's grandfather, Lenard, appeared.

Lenard, who had wielded authority over the Hudson family dynasty for decades, walked over with a presence that instantaneously silenced the bustling banquet hall. Every whisper died on tense Lips.

Raylan moved to descend from the stage, but Lenard raised one commanding hand, freezing him in place. Lenard turned his penetrating gaze toward Elliana and declared, "Speak your mind freely, child. I stand behind you."

"Grandpa!" Shock transformed Raylan's features. He'd never comprehended his grandfather's inexplicable affection for Elliana or his insistence on their union even after her disfigurement. Today should have cemented his future with Paige, yet here stood Lenard, apparently sanctioning Elliana's disruption of everything they'd planned.

Sensing Raylan's rigid posture, Paige felt her stomach plummet. While she desperately wanted to use this event to destroy Elliana's reputation, she hungered even more desperately for marriage to Raylan. Any misstep now could prove catastrophic. Having reconciled herself to the zero chance of being with Cole, she clung to Raylan as her final chance at marrying up. If Elliana demolished today's celebration, she might never again capture a man of Raylan's caliber.

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Kiara and Darin felt the tension crackling in the air, reminiscent of that fateful day when Elliana had taken Paige's place and wrapped up the wedding ceremony with Cole. Having already lost the chance to latch onto the Evans family, they couldn't stomach losing the chance to connect with the Hudsons.

Both Kiara and Darin opened their mouths to intervene but wilted under Lenard's formidable gaze, swallowing their protests.

Elliana acknowledged Lenard with a respectful nod before delivering her message to the

public with deliberate grace. "As everyone present knows, Raylan and I are bound by an engagement. This arrangement was personally orchestrated by my mother and Lenard."

Knowing glances ricocheted through the crowd. They'd expected Elliana wouldn't release Raylan without a struggle. Her denial about disrupting the wedding rang hollow—she was merely employing more sophisticated tactics. Murmurs rippled through the gathering.

"I originally believed Raylan would surely eject Elliana without hesitation. But now, with Lenard championing her cause, the outcome suddenly hangs in balance. She might actually derail this entire engagement."

"Her audacity truly confounds me. If she succeeds, imagine the relational carnage that would follow."

"I'm particularly curious about Cole's reaction to all this."

Just then, Elliana's voice cut through the speculation. "I stand before you today to announce my intention to dissolve any past connection with Raylan Hudson!"

A profound silence smothered the grand hall. No one had anticipated this stunning reversal.

After several heartbeats of stunned quiet, conversation erupted with renewed intensity.

"It appears we misjudged Elliana's motives entirely. She never intended to disrupt this engagement party—we've wronged her."

"Wasn't she supposedly obsessed with Raylan? How could she relinquish him so casually?"

"Those rumors originated with the Jones family. Their reliability has always been questionable."

"The naked panic on Paige's and Kiara's faces moments ago— truly Laughable now."

As these damning observations circulated, Paige's and Kiara's expressions soured visibly. They had failed to anticipate Elliana's maneuver. Where was the dramatic disruption they had expected?

Raylan's features hardened into glacial fury. He had always despised Elliana, dreading her potential entanglement in his life. Yet now she publicly announced their separation, cunningly repositioning herself as the one rejecting him. This humiliation burned like acid. In a surge of rage, he seized her wrist in a vise-like grip, forcing words through clenched teeth: "Who gave you the audacity to pull this stunt?"

Elliana laughed softly, effortlessly extracting her wrist from his grasp. "Mr. Hudson, please preserve what dignity remains to you. I am a married woman. My husband, Cole Evans, stands as the wealthiest man in Ublento—far superior to you in every measure. I harbor no desire to trade husbands."

"You-" Raylan's fury choked his words in his throat. Elliana's calculated statement invited dangerous misinterpretation, implying he pursued her despite her resistance. Infuriating beyond measure!

Ignoring his smoldering rage, Elliana turned to offer Lenard a respectful bow. "Sorry for this drama."

Genuine disappointment shadowed Lenard's weathered face as he sighed deeply and turned away without another word.

The moment Lenard vanished from sight, Paige dissolved into genuine tears. Being an Ublento's premier socialite, she should have received Lenard's blessing and acknowledgment on her engagement to Raylan. Instead, Lenard departed without a single word to her, leaving her exposed to public humiliation!

Each passing second fueled Paige's resentment until it exploded from her in a raw accusation. "Elliana, you're miserable in your life, so you can't bear to witness my happiness! You deliberately orchestrated this humiliation, didn't you?"

"How could I possibly be unhappy?" Elliana blinked. "My marriage brings me tremendous joy. I came genuinely to celebrate your engagement."

"Is that so? Then let's demonstrate to everyone exactly how 'happy' you truly are!" Paige's lips curled into a vicious sneer as she suddenly lunged forward, violently tearing away the label Elliana had carefully placed to conceal the logo on her dress...

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Paige crumbled into disarray, her calculated composure shattering. In her desperate quest to humiliate Elliana, the engagement party had vanished completely from her

mind. She ripped the sticker off Elliana's dress and sneered, "Elliana, since you're basking in such happiness, why not reveal to everyone which designer crafted that dress of yours?"

Every eye in the crowd below shifted toward the exposed logo on Elliana's gown.

In the prestigious Evans family, the heir's wife embodied the family's standing. Regardless of her internal position, her public appearance must remain flawless—a living testament to the elite family's reputation.

Earlier, watching Elliana conceal the logo, guests had assumed it might not bear an illustrious international name. Yet, the exquisite design and sumptuous fabric suggested it still came from a respectable house.

Now, curiosity rippled through the room. Which brand adorned Elliana's frame, and did it befit the wife of the wealthiest man in the city? If not, it would broadcast her precarious position—a placeholder who could be discarded at any moment.

An uncomfortable silence blanketed the room. When the crowd finally glimpsed the logo, a collective gasp erupted, followed by an excited buzz of whispers.

"Can it be? Is Elliana wearing a custom Rosa creation?"

"It is Rosa! I've heard their custom pieces start at a million. The fabric draping Elliana looks impossibly luxurious. Can anyone fathom the price?"

"I recall now! That fabric is woven with actual gold and silver threads—known throughout fashion circles for its unparalleled opulence and scarcity."

"No wonder her silhouette captivates. It's clearly extraordinary—crafted from the most sublime materials, bearing Rosa's signature. That gown must cost a king's ransom!"

"I've navigated the fashion industry for years, and by my estimation, Elliana's dress would command around eight million."

"Eight million? The Evans family allowing Elliana such extravagance? Who dares claim she lacks favor?"

"Compared to that, Paige's five-hundred-thousand Emily dress seems almost pedestrian."

"The richest irony? Emily's designs have long faced industry criticism for allegedly mimicking Rosa. Paige standing there in Emily beside Elliana, draped in authentic Rosa—Paige appears woefully outclassed, several echelons beneath."

The murmurs sliced through Paige like knives as she teetered on the edge of collapse. Never had she imagined that beneath that innocuous sticker lurked Rosa's prestigious mark. The revelation blindsided her completely. Her scheme to disgrace Elliana had backfired catastrophically, leaving her drowning in her own humiliation. She couldn't—wouldn't—accept this reversal!

Paige hissed, "Elliana, if your dress commands such a fortune, why hide the logo?" Her voice trembled with barely controlled rage. "Is it a counterfeit you feared would invite mockery?"

Her accusation planted seeds of doubt among the whispering guests.

Elliana regarded Paige with amused detachment, as though observing a particularly entertaining clown. "Paige, why must you always assume the worst? I'm wearing an authentic high-end Rosa creation. I concealed the logo because I didn't wish to overshadow you, the soon-to-be fiancée. I aimed for modesty, but after searching my entire wardrobe, I couldn't locate anything simpler than your ensemble. I had no alternative but to select this understated color and mask the logo. Who would have thought my consideration would be rewarded with your suspicion and derision!"

Paige's imagination spiraled with Elliana's words, conjuring visions of what Elliana's wardrobe must contain. It surely represented every woman's fantasy—racks upon racks of custom designer pieces, each garment more exquisite than the last. Any single item would have eclipsed her entire collection.

This nearly drove Paige to madness, jealousy corroding her from within. ALL of it—all of it—should have belonged to her! Consumed by envy, her rationality disintegrated as rage blazed behind her eyes. "I refuse to believe Cole would lavish such luxury on you!" she spat. "That dress must be stolen! If Cole truly valued you enough to spend so extravagantly, where is your jewelry?"

To the onlookers, her argument carried a veneer of plausibility. The Evans family vault must overflow with designer creations. How simple it would be for Elliana to pilfer a piece or two for public flaunting.

Elliana's smile remained innocently serene. "My husband did gift me jewelry, but I deemed it too ostentatious, so I concealed that as well."

Paige's gaze darted instinctively to Elliana's neck. Indeed, through the delicate lace shawl, the outline of a necklace was faintly visible. Yet, she dismissed the possibility that any ornament Elliana possessed could outshine her own collection. Elliana appeared almost unadorned from head to toe, save for that single necklace. How could that possibly compare to her dazzling array? Her hair accessories, earrings, necklace, and ring collectively surpassed thirty million. Elliana couldn't possibly compete with such opulence! She would use her jewels to crush Elliana's pride once and for all!

With this vindictive thought blazing in her mind, Paige lunged forward and violently yanked away Elliana's lace shawl...

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When Paige challenged Elliana's jewelry, the audience leaned forward in collective anticipation. The moment the lace shawl was torn away, every eye locked onto Elliana's neck.

"Wow!" The crowd's reaction erupted instantly—a symphony of gasps and whispers. The Endless Love necklace blazed with such extraordinary brilliance that it hypnotized everyone at first glance.

Endless Love married diamonds, jade, and citrine in perfect harmony, employing mathematical precision and revolutionary cutting techniques to create an illusion where reality melted into fantasy and fantasy crystallized into reality—an artistic dialogue that transcended both time and space.

Though Rosa had emerged on the scene merely years ago, the design and craftsmanship of Endless Love stood unrivaled, impossible to duplicate. Only one existed in the entire world.

The Endless Love adorning Elliana's throat was unquestionably authentic—this fact brooked no debate.

Such a masterpiece rarely graced mortal eyes. Most could only dream of glimpsing it through photographs or whispered legends. Today, Elliana had brought this singular treasure into their midst, casting an almost ethereal spell over the banquet hall.

"Heaven help me, its radiance is blinding! Is this truly the legendary Endless Love crafted by Rosa's master artisan?"

"Without doubt! I've studied images online. It's Endless Love incarnate! Word has it a mysterious tycoon claimed it at auction for ten billion. Mystery solved—that tycoon is Cole!"

"Who dares suggest Cole doesn't cherish Elliana? He entrusts her with a ten-billion-dollar masterpiece."

"I finally understand why Elliana wears no other adornments. Beside Endless Love, any other jewel would be mere trinkets -distracting clutter."

"Precisely! Once Endless Love enters the room, what ornament could possibly compete?"

"Paige's earlier jewelry parade suddenly seems laughably provincial. Her entire collection totals a paltry thirty million—not even a whisper compared to Endless Love. Now we see who truly lacks refinement."

"Elliana's sincerity is beyond question. She genuinely wished not to eclipse the soon-to-be fiancée. She deliberately concealed Endless Love. Anyone else would have flaunted such a treasure to the heavens."

"How tragic. Despite Elliana's purest intentions, the Jones and Hudson families misjudged her terribly. Now they face the bitter fruit of their own suspicions."

As murmurs rippled through the gathering, Vivien—who had earlier mocked Elliana so ruthlessly—slunk away in mortification, retreating to a shadowed corner to hide her burning shame.

Paige withered beneath Elliana's inadvertent triumph, staring at Endless Love with visceral hatred, her body trembling uncontrollably. How could this nightmare be reality? How could fate be so cruel? Elliana had no right to such opulence—these treasures should adorn her neck. This should have been her moment!

Savage jealousy twisted Paige's meticulously painted features. Minutes earlier, she had basked in Raylan's devotion, but compared to Elliana, she now felt like a child playing dress-up. What move remained? Madness clawed at the edges of her sanity!

Raylan hovered at Paige's side, witnessing the naked envy and desperation contorting her face. His own expression hardened into grim lines. He had lavished two hundred million on this engagement celebration to elevate Paige's status, ensuring she could shine among the elite. Instead, all his elaborate preparations had crumbled beneath Elliana's unintended brilliance.

Though the Hudson family commanded respect in Ublento, their wealth paled against Cole's empire. In this ruthless game of affluence, they couldn't possibly compete. What Cole bestowed upon Elliana, Raylan could never offer Paige!

Kiara and Darin stood paralyzed, their minds struggling to process this catastrophic reversal.

Amidst the cruel symphony of whispers, Paige forced her lips into a brittle smile, desperation fueling her words. "Elliana, you stole Endless Love as well, didn't you? To humiliate me at my engagement party, you'd risk Cole's wrath and severe consequences. Your audacity knows no bounds!"

Elliana couldn't suppress an eye roll, concluding Paige was beyond salvation. "Paige, I had Endless Love carefully concealed. You exposed it yourself in your attempt to shame me. Haven't you engineered your own humiliation?"

Paige floundered, blurting without thought, "You could have chosen not to wear Endless Love at all!"

Elliana merely shrugged, her gesture eloquent in its simplicity. "My husband insisted I wear it. How could I refuse?"

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Hearing Elliana invoke Cole as her husband yet again, jealousy threatened to consume Paige entirely. "Elliana, drop this charade! If Cole truly treasures you so dearly, why isn't he at your side today? Wouldn't his presence as your husband grant you far more prestige than any necklace?"

Elliana prepared to explain Cole's business trip when a commanding voice resonated from the entrance. "Honey, I'm here."

Elliana's head snapped up as that towering, magnetic figure materialized before her.

The crowd pivoted as one, the air filling with astonished intakes of breath. Cole had

arrived...

Cole, with his striking good looks and commanding presence, instantly eclipsed Raylan, who until moments ago had been the center of attention at his own engagement party.

The grand banquet hall plunged into silence as all eyes fixed on Cole, curiosity palpable in the air.

When Cole appeared, Raylan dared not show even a hint of disrespect. He hastily descended from the stage, his voice barely concealing his anxiety. "Mr. Evans, what an unexpected honor to have you grace my engagement celebration!" Paige hesitated briefly before hurrying after Raylan, her steps uncertain.

Cole regarded Raylan with cold indifference, his words cutting through the tension. "Mr. Hudson, save your pleasantries. I haven't come for the engagement festivities.

I'm here for my wife." Raylan's expression froze into a mask of shock.

At that moment, Elliana remained standing alone on the stage, and every eye in the room instinctively darted toward her.

"Is Cole upset with Elliana?"

"Perhaps Paige was right all along. The gown and jewelry were stolen, and now Cole has come to expose Elliana's deception."

The whispers fueled Paige's confidence. Excitement bubbled within her as she anticipated Cole publicly humiliating Elliana—or better yet, punishing her severely. Determined to inflame Cole's anger further, she seized her opportunity. "Cole, you see, Elliana stole such exquisite finery and caused this spectacle at my engagement because she's desperately in love with Raylan. She simply couldn't bear watching the man she adores engaged to someone else. Her actions, while inappropriate, stem from heartbreak—so perhaps don't be too harsh with her."

Her words dripped with hypocrisy. What husband would tolerate hearing his wife profess undying love for another man? This wasn't consolation but calculated provocation.

The crowd inwardly scoffed at Paige's transparent scheme while their eyes gleamed with anticipation for the unfolding drama.

Paige gazed up at Cole with practiced charm, her eyes betraying unmistakable longing. Despite choosing to marry Raylan, she couldn't help but succumb to Cole's magnetism.

Everyone awaited Cole's rebuke of Elliana, but instead, he turned his cutting sarcasm toward Paige. "Miss Jones, your accusation is absurd. My wife wears her own gown and jewelry. How could that possibly constitute theft?"

With that statement, he confirmed that Elliana's magnificent attire had indeed been provided by him.

Cole's voice hardened. "And Miss Jones, let me assure you- with me by her side, my wife wouldn't lower her standards to desire your boyfriend. She possesses excellent taste!"

Paige felt as though she'd been slapped across the face, the sting of humiliation burning her cheeks.

The crowd's whispers grew bolder.

"So Elliana's finery was truly a gift from Cole himself. She must hold considerable favor in the Evans household!"

"For a woman many consider plain to receive such preferential treatment, she must possess extraordinary qualities. I wonder how she secured her position in the Evans family."

Humiliation dragged Paige into an emotional abyss, her heart churning with resentment, jealousy, and rage.

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But Cole hadn't finished with Paige. His voice rang out again, commanding attention. "I must publicly clarify matters today. My grandfather owed Mr. Hilliard Jones a debt of gratitude, hence the promise of a marriage alliance. However, the agreement never specified which daughter of the Jones family would become an Evans bride. The Evans family chose Elliana—a decision both appropriate and justified. The claim that Elliana 'stole' Paige's marriage is patently false. Should I hear anyone spreading rumors that tarnish either the Evans family name or Elliana's reputation, I will pursue legal action without hesitation!"

His words carried unmistakable authority, sending a chill through the assembly and silencing every whisper. The Evans family commanded the most formidable legal team in the country. Anyone dragged to court by them faced inevitable destruction. Who would dare utter another syllable?

Paige's nails carved crescents into her palms. She had meticulously crafted rumors painting Elliana as a Manipulative thief who had stolen her marriage, making Elliana a target for public scorn while garnering sympathy for herself. Cole had demolished this narrative in seconds. Indeed, the Evans family had never announced her engagement to Cole. Those online claims had been her own fabrications, now thoroughly debunked by Cole himself, transforming her into an object of ridicule.

Standing beneath countless judgmental stares, drowning in mockery, Paige wished the floor would open and swallow her whole. With tears welling in her eyes, she looked imploringly at Cole, silently begging to know why he treated her with such cruelty.

But Cole turned away with complete indifference, addressing Elliana on the stage, "Are you planning to remain there all day?"

Elliana blinked in surprise, never having expected Cole to defend her so publicly. Hearing his impatient prompt, she snapped back to reality, gathered her gown, and hurried down from the stage to join him.

As Elliana passed Paige, she offered a bright smile. "Paige, congratulations on your engagement!"

Her words pierced Paige's heart like a dagger. The engagement celebration lay in ruins, the soon-to-be fiancé reduced to insignificance, and the soon-to-be fiancée transformed into the evening's Laughingstock.

Everything had unraveled so swiftly that Paige couldn't process the reversal. Something inside her snapped...

As Elliana glided away with her hand firmly in Cole's, humiliation crashed over Paige like a tidal wave. Her once- prized dress and jewelry suddenly felt cheap and garish. With a primal cry of rage, she tore the hair accessories from her head and hurled them to the floor, where they shattered with a satisfying crack.

The sound echoed through the silent hall, destroying the last vestiges of Raylan's dignity.

Blinded by fury, Paige gave no thought to Raylan's reputation. After demolishing the hair accessories, her trembling fingers clawed at the necklace adorning her throat, desperate to rid herself of another symbol of her shattered pride.

Kiara lunged forward, capturing Paige's wrist in a viselike grip. "Paige, control yourself!" she hissed through clenched teeth.

Fearing her daughter beyond reason, Kiara pinched the delicate skin of Paige's wrist until it blanched white. "I understand your rage, but Raylan's reputation hangs in the balance."

The sharp pain jolted Paige back to reality. Her eyes instinctively sought out Raylan's face. His complexion had turned thunderous.

"Raylan, I—" Paige's explanation died on her lips, words failing her completely.

The room buzzed with vicious whispers.

"Paige has truly lost her mind. The Evans and Jones families arranged a marriage without specifying the bride, yet she flaunted her supposed engagement to Cole everywhere. She's crafted her own humiliation with meticulous care."

"Did you witness how she pushed Elliana earlier? Pure, undiluted jealousy. Her claims about familial love are nothing but elaborate lies. One can only imagine the cruelty Elliana has endured behind closed doors."

"The apple never falls far from the tree. Paige mirrors Kiara perfectly. Their professed love for Elliana masks their wicked hearts. Both women are woven from the same deceitful cloth."

The cutting remarks sliced through Paige and Kiara, leaving them adrift in their own scheme's wreckage. What they had orchestrated as Elliana's downfall had metamorphosed into their own public disgrace.

Darin observed the engagement celebration crumbling around him, a dark desire to punish Kiara festering in his chest. Yet, salvaging the engagement remained paramount—preventing Raylan from abandoning Paige in disgust took precedence. Though the Hudson family couldn't rival the Evans empire, they still wielded enough power to crush the Jones family if provoked.

Forcing his features into a placating smile, Darin addressed Raylan with practiced deference, "Raylan, this engagement celebration must continue..."

Paige, now fully lucid, latched onto Raylan's arm with desperate fingers. "Raylan, darling, Elliana's behavior pushed me beyond reason. This outburst doesn't reflect my true heart. Please, don't hold this against me."

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Kiara chimed in smoothly, "Raylan, you've known Paige intimately for years—her character speaks for itself. She's a simple, good-hearted girl at her core. Elliana deliberately orchestrated this chaos today. Don't allow her Manipulation to succeed."

A suffocating silence stretched between them before Raylan manufactured a smile that never reached his eyes. To claim he remained unbothered would be a blatant lie, but after pursuing Paige relentlessly and finally securing her hand, abandoning his prize proved unthinkable. With reluctance shadowing his every move, he agreed to continue the farce.

Just as he prepared to announce the engagement's next ritual, the Ublento Hotel manager swept in, flanked by a phalanx of black-suited security personnel. Without preamble, they began clearing the room with military precision.

"Miss Paige Jones," the manager announced, voice sharp as a blade, "you have been permanently blacklisted from Ublento Hotel. Your presence is no longer welcome at any of our establishments worldwide. Vacate the premises immediately."

"What?" The collective gasp rippled through the assembled guests.

Paige stood paralyzed, her mind refusing to process this final humiliation. "On what grounds?"

The manager's expression remained glacial. "This comes directly from Lexi herself. Depart now, or security will assist your exit."

Paige ransacked her memory but found nothing to justify such treatment. The enigmatic owner of Ublento Hotel—known only as Lexi Hanson—was rumored to wield terrifying influence. Paige had always maintained impeccable behavior during her visits here—how could she have incurred Lexi's wrath? The fleeting superiority she'd derived from

securing the prestigious venue—her last remaining source of pride after Elliana had obliterated everything else—now crumbled to dust. Being physically ejected would cement her total destruction.

Desperate panic seized Paige as she clutched Raylan's sleeve. "Raylan, please intervene!"

Equally bewildered, Raylan straightened his spine. "My fiancée conducts herself with unflinching grace. She could never have offended Lexi. This must be a grievous error. I demand clarification!"

Evicting the soon-to-be fiancée from her own engagement celebration warranted explanation at minimum, but the manager merely offered a dismissive, "No comment."

With an imperious flick of his wrist, the black-suited guards advanced toward Paige.

Raylan's composure fractured. "You operate a business! How dare you display such tyranny? Does the Hudson name mean nothing to you?"

The manager's response dripped with exquisite mockery. "Mr. Hudson, you remain our honored guest. Ublento Hotel will continue providing impeccable service to you—but Miss Jones must exit these premises immediately!"

At this, the assembled crowd struggled to contain their collective amusement. How precisely was Raylan supposed to celebrate an engagement party without his girlfriend?

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Seeing Raylan couldn't turn things around, Kiara roared at the Ublento Hotel manager, "This is a textbook case of a big shot stomping on the little guy! I'm gonna blow this wide open and slap you with a complaint!"

Paige jumped in, piling on. "Ublento Hotel's always crowed about its top-notch service. Now you're tossing the soon-to-be fiancée out of her own engagement party? You're not worried about dragging your name through the mud?"

Paige and Kiara figured their words would make the manager second-guess, but instead, he let out a mocking chuckle. "Miss Jones, let's make this quick. Walk out on your own, or do I need to call security to show you the door?"

"You!" Paige was so mad that she started shaking like a leaf. Back in the day, with her self-acclaimed title of Cole's fiancée and Ublento's reigning social queen, she'd been treated like royalty everywhere she went. She'd never been humiliated like this. Today, she was being publicly shamed, and she was powerless to fight back. Biting her lip, she stormed out on her own.

Once outside the Ublento Hotel, Kiara pounced. "Paige, how'd you get on Lexi's bad side?"

Paige was already crying. "I've never even met Lexi. How could I have pissed Lexi off?"

Paige had banked on this engagement party to make a dazzling comeback, but instead, her pride was crushed, and the night turned into a total trainwreck. She wasn't about to take this lying down!

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Paige said in a choked voice, "Mom, it's gotta be Elliana pulling strings. She's throwing Cole's name around, and that's why Ublento Hotel treated me like dirt!"

Kiara's blood boiled at the thought. "Cole wouldn't fall for someone as plain as Elliana, but as long as Elliana remains his wife, he's gotta back her in public. It's all about the Evans family's image. But if she thinks she can bury us with that hollow title, she's got another thing coming! Don't worry, Paige. Elliana's days of gloating are numbered. We've still got a card to play."

Meanwhile, after Cole whisked Elliana out of the banquet hall, he didn't head home. Instead, he led her to the swanky top-floor suite for dinner.

Ublento Hotel had twenty floors, each pricier than the last. Only the crème de la crème got access to the penthouse suite.

Inside, Elliana's phone pinged with a message. "Lexi, the person you can't stand just got the boot from Ublento Hotel."

Elliana smirked and set her phone down. Cole handed her the menu. "Order whatever you're craving." Elliana took it and picked out a few of her favorite dishes.

Watching how comfortably she navigated the menu, Cole's Lips curved into a smile. She was clearly no stranger to this place. The ignored, plain-Jane daughter of the Jones

family, left to rot in a backyard shed, couldn't possibly afford to dine at Ublento Hotel. She had to be here under some other identity. But who was she, really?

As he mulled it over, Elliana passed the menu back. "I'm done. Your turn."

Cole didn't budge. "I'm good with whatever you like. Just double it for me."

Elliana caught the glint in his eye and knew he was about to turn on the charm. To dodge any flirty lines that'd make her blush, she stayed quiet, duplicated her order for him, and handed it to the waiter.

The waiter took the order, slipped out, and shut the suite door with a polite air.

Now alone in the suite, Cole's gaze sharpened, raking over Elliana from head to toe like he was peeling back her clothes with his eyes.

Feeling exposed, she coughed lightly, steering the conversation elsewhere. "Uh, this necklace is way too pricey. I should give it back now."

She reached to unclasp it.

But before she could, a large hand closed over hers, firm and unyielding. In a flash, he tugged, and she landed on his lap, his strong arms caging her in.

Her silky dress slipped slightly as she settled, pressing her closer to his chest.

The heat from his thighs and the tight grip on her waist sent warmth coursing through her, his presence overwhelming.

Elliana's face burned with embarrassment. She squirmed to get free, but the more she moved, the tighter Cole held her, locking her in place. He leaned close, his breath hot against her ear, his voice a low, dangerous purr. "Keep wiggling, and I can't promise we won't pick up where we left off that night I was away on business."

That night? Elliana froze, his words sinking in like a warning shot. Despite his crisp black suit and cool, detached vibe, she could sense the raw energy coiled inside him, just waiting for a spark to set it off. She wasn't about to light that fuse. Plus, he'd given her an extravagant gift and stood up for her in the banquet hall. Pushing back now would be ungrateful, so she tried reasoning instead. "Please let me up. We're in a restaurant.."

Elliana's cheeks flushed as memories rushed back—the night they parted, when Cole had caught her stepping out of the bathroom. They had been too close. To her, the closeness between them felt strange, and the whole situation seemed perplexing. They were two strangers, tied by a marriage certificate neither of them truly understood. Married for six days, and four of those spent apart. Despite their limited time together, they seemed to fall into each other's arms with surprising ease. Though today, they hadn't kissed yet.

As the thought crossed her mind, warmth suddenly brushed her lips—Cole kissed her, out of the blue.

Elliana froze. Of course. A hug was never going to be enough for him.

Before she could recover, he kissed her again. His deep voice brushed her ear. "Did you miss me?"

Half her body went numb. "Well, have you ever considered that you might not be quite normal?"

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Cole raised an amused brow. "Oh? And what makes you think that?"

Elliana hadn't meant to say so, but with him constantly teasing and getting handsy, she had to speak up. "You're a billionaire. You could have any attractive woman, be it a supermodel or an actress. But instead, you're here, flirting with me. Is that normal?"

Cole shrugged. "I don't care about looks. I go where the chemistry is."

Elliana kept her thoughts to herself—he really wasn't normal. "Whatever your 'type' is, could you at least act a little decent? We're just husband and wife in name only. Once we figure out how we were brought together, we go our separate ways... Ah!"

She yelped. He had pinched her.

Cole's face darkened. "Ungrateful woman." He hadn't rushed back just to hear talk of separation.

Just then, the suite door opened. A waiter walked in with the food.

Elliana quickly slid off his lap and returned to her seat, rubbing the sore spot in secret. He had pinched hard—what a jerk.

Once the dishes were served, the waiter left the room.

Cole reached out and served her food himself. "Eat quickly. We're meeting someone after this."

Elliana looked up. "Who?"

"You've probably heard of Lexi-the mystery owner behind Ublento Hotel. In truth, this hotel is just one part of Lexi's empire. Lexi leads the Star Society. Today, we're meeting Lexi's second-in-command, Matthew Santos."

The Star Society was a shadowy network with ties to both the legal world and the underworld. Lexi was a legend, but no one had ever seen her face. All operations were handled by her right-hand man, Matthew.

Elliana frowned. "What do you want to see Matthew for?"

Cole sighed. "The trip to Valland was a dead end. I need the Star Society's help to find the legendary healer, Milena."

Elliana said nothing. She just bit her fork and kept quiet.

After they finished eating, the hotel manager led them into another private room. Matthew was already waiting.

Seeing Cole, Matthew stood politely—but the moment he saw Elliana beside him, he stiffened.

Elliana glanced at Matthew. That was all it took. Matthew understood immediately—she wanted him to pretend he didn't know her so as to keep her discreet identities as Lexi and Milena concealed.

Matthew was quick-witted and smooth. Gathering himself swiftly, he cheerfully spoke. "Mr. Evans, pleasure to meet you. Please, have a seat."

Cole gave a courteous nod and sat with Elliana.

Matthew didn't waste time. "Mr. Evans, what can the Star Society do for you?"

Cole placed a check on the table. "I want to find Milena. Five hundred million. Just as a deposit. If you take the job, you can name your price. No limits."

The Star Society was known for handling high-risk jobs with spotless records. If they failed, they never charged a cent.