

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

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The moment Cole stepped inside, he was greeted by Ruben's thundercloud expression. Flashing a breezy smile, Cole asked, "Grandpa, did Elliana do something to upset you?"

"Elliana? That sweet girl? How could she upset me?" Ruben's voice sharpened. "You're the one who's got me fuming!"

Cole blinked, startled. "Me? What did I do?"

Ruben let out a sharp, disdainful huff. "Care to explain why you haven't consummated your marriage with Elliana?"

Cole's jaw tightened as he fell silent. The pieces clicked— this turned out to be what Ruben had grilled Elliana about. But admitting she'd turned him down was out of the question. The humiliation was too much. So he kept his mouth shut.

To Ruben, though, Cole's silence reeked of deception, and it only fueled his rage. "You're the head of the Evans family, and this is how you act? You think responsibility's optional now? Do you know how heartbroken Elliana looked, crying to me that you pushed her away, insulted her looks, and treated her like a stranger? How can you stand there and act like it's nothing, after humiliating a girl with such a spotless reputation?"

Cole dragged a hand down his face, his frustration mounting. If he hadn't spent time with Elliana himself, he might've bought it. There was no way she would say any of that—Ruben was chewing him out over pure assumptions.

Just as Cole started to find the whole thing funny, a cane smacked against his shin, and Ruben's sharp voice rang out again. "Why am I talking to you and you're staring into space—are you ignoring me now?"

Cole nearly burst out laughing. "Ignore you? I wouldn't dream of it."

"Oh, I think you would!" Ruben shot him a blistering glare. "You'll promise me right now—you're going to consummate the marriage with Elliana tonight!"

Cole gave a quick nod. "Fine. It's happening."

Ruben's scowl finally eased. "Good. I'll have the kitchen prepare a special soup for you to drink later."

A special soup? Cole didn't need to ask what kind. It was obvious Ruben wanted to make sure he didn't just pay lip service and then wriggle out of it. To keep the Ruben off his back, he gave another nod. "Alright, alright."

That was enough to leave Ruben completely satisfied.

At dinner, the room stayed quiet as everyone focused on their food. Out of nowhere, the butler walked in carrying a steaming bowl and set it beside Cole.

Jeff squinted at it in surprise. "What's that soup? Why's Cole the only one getting some?"

Today, dinner had an oddly tense undercurrent that no one could quite name.

Everyone had expected Elliana to come down looking rattled after Ruben's scolding, but she appeared calm, almost serene -and Cole, for his part, acted no different than usual.

The contrast between expectation and reality left everyone baffled, each wondering what exactly Ruben had said to the couple behind closed doors. Was Elliana now permitted to join the entertainment industry or not?

As that silent question hung in the air, the butler arrived with a steaming bowl of soup, which he set down beside Cole with careful precision.

Jeff, still too young to grasp the full meaning, simply glanced at it, but the older family members exchanged knowing looks.

Years ago, when Bertram had been a college student, he'd fallen for someone else. But his family arranged for him to marry Irene instead. After the wedding, he'd refused to touch her, prompting Ruben to resort to a drastic measure: a bowl of spiked soup and a locked room.

The aphrodisiac's effects had peaked around midnight. Overcome by its influence, Bertram had finally fulfilled his marital duty with Irene.

Now, the same kind of soup sat in front of Cole, and its message couldn't have been clearer. Cole hadn't laid a hand on Elliana on their wedding night, and all his recent

tenderness had been nothing more than an act—an attempt to fool Ruben. But Ruben had seen through the performance.

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After dragging the couple in for a stern warning, Ruben had chosen to resolve things the old-fashioned way: with that fateful bowl of soup.

Realizing the implication, everyone cast sympathetic glances at Cole. How could any man willingly be tied to someone the world saw as ugly as Elliana? If the aphrodisiac had forced him into it, wouldn't waking up be a nightmare? Cole's predicament struck them all as painfully unfair.

Completely unaware of the tension, Jeff blurted, "That soup smells amazing, Cole! I want some too!"

Trinity, seated next to him, gave his sleeve a discreet tug and murmured, "Jeff, don't say things like that."

But Jeff, driven by his bottomless appetite, flared up at the rebuke. "What did I say? We can't even split a bowl of soup? I'm still growing, and I can't even get a spoonful?"

Bertram, suddenly hit by bitter memories the soup stirred up, snapped. He crammed a chicken leg into Jeff's mouth and barked, "Shut up and eat what's on your plate! Cole's out there breaking his back for this family—he needs the nourishment. You, on the other hand, do nothing but eat and fool around. What the hell do you need supplements for? Just look at you—chubby enough as it is. You take any more, and your nose'll start bleeding again!"

Jeff shut his mouth at once, cowed by the reprimand and too shaken to argue.

Irene, who'd been eagerly waiting for Elliana to lose face, now ducked her head, cheeks burning with embarrassment, wishing she could vanish into the floor. The steaming bowl sat there like a silent reminder—she was an unloved wife.

The grand dining hall fell into a heavy hush, all eyes flicking to Cole, waiting for his response.

Back then, Bertram had no choice—defying the Evans family would've left him destitute. But Cole wasn't like Bertram. The family's success revolved around him now. Even if he walked away, he'd still rise as a business titan. So if he flatly refused, Ruben couldn't do anything about it.

Across the table, Trinity bit her lip, dread curling in her gut. She was terrified Cole might actually drink the soup.

And then Cole did—once he'd cleared his plate, he lifted the bowl with steady hands and drained every last drop without flinching.

Shock painted every face in the room. Cole had proven himself worthy of Ruben's deliberate choice, showing unwavering loyalty to the family's legacy. To uphold their traditions, he was even prepared to give up his own desires and bind himself to someone the world dismissed as plain.

Everyone's mood shifted in an instant—admiring silence replaced idle chatter, and their expressions grew reverent. In Cole, they saw a determination and unwavering loyalty that they lacked.

Trinity nearly bit through her lip. Watching Cole drink the soup was like watching him swallow his fate—an unspoken vow to accept Elliana and keep Elliana by his side in the Evans household. What was left for her now?

But Ruben sat with an air of quiet triumph, entirely satisfied with how things had played out. To him, Cole marrying Elliana was a tradeoff—but a smart one, and the best possible resolution. After all, it was because of Cole that he found himself indebted to Hilliard—a debt that, in Ruben's mind, ought to be settled by Cole himself.

When Cole was a child, he'd teetered on the edge of death from a vicious illness. His life had only been spared thanks to a miraculous pill Hilliard had delivered at the last moment.

Much later, Ruben discovered that the pill had actually been formulated by Rita-Elliana's mother and the Jones family's reclusive daughter-in-law, who never showed her face in public. In the end, it was Elliana's mother to whom the Evans family owed their gratitude. Letting Elliana marry into their family wasn't just fate—it was how Cole was meant to repay that life-saving debt.

Cole paid no attention to the sidelong glances around him. After setting his bowl down on the table, he turned and made his way upstairs without a word.

At first, Elliana hadn't grasped the meaning behind the soup. But as she caught the furtive looks being exchanged, something clicked. That was what Ruben had meant

when he'd said everything would be handled tonight. Wait a second... What was going to happen to Cole now that he'd drunk the soup? She'd been planning to confront him tonight— straightforward, no holding back...

The Evans family kept a rigid routine, down to the minute. Once the clock struck eight, the house fell into near silence—no loud voices, no thudding footsteps. Over time, the rule became second nature, and by nine, the entire household typically vanished behind closed doors.

But tonight broke the pattern.

Everyone headed to their rooms as usual, yet no one truly settled in. Each person lingered in hushed anticipation, ears straining for the faintest noise beyond their walls, wondering what might unfold after Cole finished that bowl of soup.

Cole, for his part, had an urgent video conference and headed straight to the study after dinner. The meeting dragged on for nearly an hour. By the end of it, a strange heat had crept through his body. He slipped off his suit jacket and tugged at his collar, but the stifling warmth only worsened, making his skin itch with restlessness.

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He knew exactly what this was. Rising from his chair, he stepped into a cold shower, letting the icy water anchor his senses. Afterward, he changed into a fresh set of pajamas and returned to his bedroom.

Tonight, Elliana was supposed to give him an answer. He didn't want to rush her—he wanted something gentler, more deliberate, something threaded with charm. So despite the fire in his blood, he reined himself in and forced his desires back into silence.

By the time he stepped back into the bedroom, Elliana had already showered and slipped into her pajamas. She sat cross -legged on the bed, idly scrolling through her phone.

She wore a modest nightgown, her long, damp hair spilling over her shoulders and trailing past her waist. The golden glow of the overhead light softened her silhouette, casting a gentle radiance over her features.

The moment she heard him approach, she glanced up.

That one look shattered his composure. He closed the distance in two quick strides, snatched the phone from her hands, and flung it aside. Then, he leaned down, bracing

his arms on either side of her, caging her against the headboard.

Their faces hovered close enough for their air to intertwine.

Elliana felt the heat rolling off him in waves, and the raw hunger behind his eyes sent a shiver down her spine. Something about this version of Cole made her instinctively recoil. She inched back and turned her face away. "Mr. Evans, maybe you need a cold shower."

"I already did—and it didn't do a damn thing." The moment he began talking, Cole angled her chin up to face him squarely. "Honey, where's that answer you promised me?"

He might've been asking a question, but his body betrayed his real intent—edging in closer until his feverish lips hovered a breath from hers. It was as if he expected her to say exactly what he needed to hear, and once she did, he'd claim the kiss waiting between them.

Elliana couldn't take the blistering heat rolling off him. She pressed her palms lightly against his chest, urging him back. "Please sit down properly."

To her, pushing him away felt like drawing a boundary in the sand before she talked things through with him. After tonight, whatever existed between them needed to be kept clean—no mixed signals, no gray areas. Serious matters called for a serious approach. But with him so near, her resolve threatened to dissolve, the tension gnawing at her composure.

Cole's grip on control was slipping fast. Her delicate fragrance curled around him like a whisper, coaxing him closer, urging him to close the last bit of space between them, to fuse together and never pull away.

He had started out with both feet on the floor, bent at the waist, palms braced flat against the headboard. But the second she gave him a shove, he shifted without warning.

One long leg hooked over hers as he climbed onto the bed, dropping to one knee. He bent his arms and pressed his elbows to the headboard instead, drawing their bodies flush—nearly indistinguishable in the dim light.

The air between them pulsed with rising heat. Cole's gaze darkened, a red gleam

flickering at the edges, and his voice came low and ragged. "Honey, this is killing me. Please— don't push me like this."

Then, he dipped his head and buried his chiseled face in her hair, his lips ghosting across the curve of her neck.

Elliana's pulse stuttered, and she instinctively edged away from the heat of him. The building tension pressed in now— palpable, inescapable—and this wasn't the time to worry about a serious approach. If she didn't speak now, he might never give her another opening. She drew a shaky breath, forced the words past her tight throat, and said, "I refuse."

Cole stiffened, caught off guard, his eyes narrowing slightly in disbelief. "What did you just say?"

Her fists curled tight at her sides as she summoned every last ounce of nerve. "I'm rejecting your proposal. I don't have feelings for you, and I don't want to be your wife. Once the issue with the marriage certificate is cleared up, I'll walk away on my own. I won't get in the way of your future."

Cole held her gaze, unmoving. "You're sure about this?" "I am." Her nod was firm, her voice steady.

"Even now? You see the agony I'm enduring, and that doesn't change your answer?"

"If it's really that unbearable, you have two options." Her tone cooled as she locked eyes with him. "First, I know some treatments that could ease the symptoms—discreetly. No one else needs to know, and we can keep up the act tomorrow."

As she finished, her face lost all softness. Her eyes turned icy and unflinching, cutting through the Lingering warmth in the room. "Or, you can step out that door and find someone else to take care of your needs..."

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Heat raced through Cole's veins, but a cold pressure crushed his chest, snuffing out every spark of warmth. His stance stiffened, shoulders squared like stone, and his eyes locked on Elliana's, expression unreadable. Bit by bit, his face iced over, freezing into a mask of detachment.

He had completely misinterpreted the situation. She had previously acknowledged her attraction to him, which he had interpreted as a positive indication. However, now she

was merely responding with a firm, unapologetic rejection. And the way she held her ground—calm, poised, unshaken—unsettled him more than any outburst ever could. Whatever fleeting spark had existed between them clearly hadn't reached her heart. If she'd felt anything real, she wouldn't have told him to go find someone else. How could she say that! How could she suggest he find someone else?

A flicker of rage darkened Cole's eyes before he straightened abruptly, spine rigid with tension. Without a word, he rose, turned on his heel, and slammed the door behind him with enough force to rattle the walls.

The sharp crack echoed through the mansion, making heads snap up. Whispers stilled. A few curious younger relatives crept toward the hallway, nudging the door open to catch a glimpse.

Cole was halfway down the stairs already, fury radiating off him in waves. His expression was carved from stone, his jaw clenched, eyes glinting with warning. Each step he took reverberated through the floor like a thunderclap.

Those who saw him pass recoiled instinctively, chilled by the storm barely held in check.

Everyone jumped to the same conclusion—Cole had snapped at last. After drinking down that spiked soup and facing Elliana, the ugly one, he couldn't take it anymore.

Ruben had been pacing in the study, tension building with every minute. The moment the butler delivered the news, his fury exploded. "Go get Cole. Drag him back if you have to!"

Bertram stepped in, his voice urgent but restrained. "Dad, yelling won't fix this. Cole's not some tool we can just order around. He's his own man. Keep pushing like this, and what if he really walks away from the Evans family and builds something of his own?"

The words struck like a slap. Ruben stiffened. "Then what do you suggest we do? He's got a wife, yet he won't even share a bed with her. What do you think that says?"

Bertram hesitated, his thoughts drifting to his own experience. With a heavy sigh, he remarked, "Try to see it from his perspective. When you were younger, would you have wanted to spend the night with someone you didn't find the least bit attractive?"

Ruben faltered, clearing his throat with an awkward grunt. The answer was obvious—he wouldn't have. The real reason he'd agreed to marry Diane was her beauty. If she hadn't

had a face that turned heads, he wouldn't have agreed to that deal for anything. Still, pride made his voice ring with false righteousness. "So what if she's not attractive? Once the lights are out, who even notices?"

Bertram's lips quirked into a faint, knowing smirk, but he said nothing.

Ruben's earlier bluster began to wane. Though his words had been forceful, a current of unease ran beneath them. The thought of pushing Cole so far that he might walk away from the Evans family entirely gnawed at him. After a moment of brooding silence, he turned back to Bertram. "Where's Jarrett?"

"He's at the villa again. Still recovering," Bertram quickly answered.

"Then call him back. Tell him to deal with his son!" Ruben commanded firmly.

Bertram huffed out a dry laugh. "So you don't want to upset your grandson, and now you're hoping Jarrett will play the villain?" He leaned against the desk with casual ease. "Jarrett doesn't want Cole to suffer, you know. The only reason he's been keeping quiet is out of respect for you. And now you want him to strong-arm Cole? What if this makes things worse—for both of them? Aren't you at all concerned about Jarrett's health?"

Ruben pressed his lips into a tight line, the sharp retort dying in his throat.

Jarrett's health had been steadily declining ever since his wife disappeared. The stress had taken a permanent toll, leaving him gaunt and exhausted. Truth be told, he wasn't as strong as Ruben anymore. Calling him back now, just to enforce discipline, seemed cruel. With a grudging sigh, Ruben waved the idea off.

Without warning, Ruben slammed his cane against Emmanuel's arm. "You're Cole's uncle-how can you just sit there like none of this matters?"

Emmanuel jolted, yanked out of his thoughts. He'd been fully immersed in a piece of code, lost in the quiet rhythm of problem-solving, oblivious to the storm around him. He blinked at Ruben and then gave a dry smile. "Dad, let's be honest. Even my brothers can't fix this. What can I do?"

Back when Jarrett was at the helm, holding the family business together, Bertram had the freedom to chase rare antiques while Emmanuel buried himself in backend systems and machine logic, far from family drama. After Jarrett stepped down and Cole picked up the reins, neither Bertram nor Emmanuel spent a moment worrying over family

affairs. When it came to Cole's marriage? They'd always kept their distance. That mess was never theirs to touch.

Ruben knew Emmanuel couldn't offer any real solutions. He just needed someone to unload on. Once he was done ranting, he huffed his way back to his room, leaving Bertram and Emmanuel exchanging a silent, weary glance.

Meanwhile, Cole was seething. Blinded by fury, he charged down the stairs and stormed out of the mansion without a backward glance.

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Not missing a beat, Jeff spun up a group chat with the younger cousins, his fingers flying over the screen. "Told you! No way Cole would ever accept Elliana. This just proves it! How's Elliana supposed to show her face tomorrow?"

Snarky replies flooded in.

"Cole resisted Elliana even while drugged. That's next-level disgust."

"Forget Elliana-what I want to know is, which girl's about to get the full force of that drug?"

Alone in her room, Trinity scrolled through the messages, her expression unreadable. A moment later, she stood, changed into fresh clothes, and slipped out into the night.

Cole had downed the spiked soup Ruben prepared, gearing up to consummate his marriage with Elliana. The whole Evans family was buzzing about it.

Paulina, Cole's ever-diligent steward, had everything locked down, posting Aron and Hugh downstairs to stand guard, ready to jump at a moment's notice.

Cole had been pretty sweet on Elliana lately, so Aron and Hugh figured the two would smoothly formalize their union, dismissing Paulina's concerns as unnecessary.

Hugh, who'd always turned his nose up at Elliana's plain looks, couldn't stop griping. "How's someone as ordinary as Elliana good enough for Mr. Evans? The guy stuck with her must feel Like he's drawn the short straw. I feel bad for Mr. Evans just thinking about it.. Ugh!"

Aron, cooler-headed than Hugh, shut him down flat. "You forgetting Paulina's orders? Our job's to keep Mr. Evans safe, not to stick our noses in his business."

As they bickered, Cole strode out of the villa, and they snapped to attention.

"To the Royal Club!" Cole barked.

Aron and Hugh didn't dare ask questions. They swung the car door open and tailed him.

After Cole left, Trinity glided downstairs and gave the butler a heads-up. "Barney, the Craig family's throwing a bash to celebrate me finishing exams, so I won't be back tonight. Can you let the elders know?"

"Of course, Miss Craig," Barney Chavez said with a respectful nod. "Need me to arrange a ride?" "Nah, the Craigs sent a car for me." "Have a great time, then."

Trinity flashed a smile, said goodbye to Barney, and left the Evans estate. But she didn't head to the Craig residence -she tailed Cole's car straight to the Royal Club.

At the Royal Club, Cole stormed into a private room and flopped onto the sofa, brooding. His whole vibe was off, a feverish heat coursing through him, his cheeks flushed an unnatural red.

Aron and Hugh stood watch at the door, sneaking glances through the cracked-open door, their nerves on edge.

Hugh leaned in, whispering to Aron, "Look at Mr. Evans—he's in bad shape. Should we, you know, find someone to help him out?"

Aron shot him a cool look. "You know how Mr. Evans is. He's got principles. Grabbing some random woman for him? That's a one-way ticket to trouble."

Hugh let out a defeated sigh.

Just then, Trinity walked over, rocking a white chiffon dress, a soft smile on her face. "Is Cole in there?"

Aron and Hugh blinked at her, confused. "Miss Craig, what're you doing here?"

Trinity held up a box. "Ruben sent me to drop off some food for Cole."

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Since she name-dropped Ruben, Aron and Hugh had no grounds to stop her. They opened the door to the private room, let her in, and shut it behind her. They figured Ruben had sent Trinity with some kind of remedy for Cole. Still, it struck them as odd. Why Trinity, out of everyone in the Evans family? Especially with Cole in this state, it wasn't exactly the best time for him to be around women.

Inside the private room, Trinity tugged her chiffon dress down, baring half her shoulder, and gazed at the man sprawled on the sofa with starry eyes.

Cole, eyes shut, was breathing heavy and rough. At the sound of her steps, his brow creased. "Didn't I say no interruptions unless I call for it?"

Trinity's heart raced, torn between thrill and fear. Biting her lip, she tiptoed closer and murmured, "Cole, it's me."

Cole froze and then cracked his eyes open, his cold eyes landing on her face. "What're you doing here?"

Before stepping into the room, Trinity had spun fantasies— Cole seeing her, pulling her into his arms, kissing her senseless, claiming her right there. She'd read enough steamy novels to know guys in his state were supposed to lose all control. But Cole's voice and gaze were so cold that they sent chills down her spine. "Ruben sent me with some food for you."

Cole shut his eyes again, his face blank. "Drop the food and get out."

He saw through her lie in a heartbeat but didn't call her out. Ripping off the mask would just stir up drama under the same roof.

Trinity's fingers clenched, but she didn't dare linger. She set the food down and scurried out. She was head-over-heels for Cole's sharp looks and charm but terrified of his frosty, commanding presence. Defying him? Not a chance!

Getting brushed off like that stung, her face burning with shame. She planned to slip away quietly, but as she stepped out of the room, she ran smack into Manley. "Manley!"

"Trinity? What are you doing here?"

Trinity's cheeks flushed with embarrassment. She forced an awkward smile and bolted.

Manley raised an eyebrow, then turned and strolled into the private room.

At the sound, Cole shot upright, locking eyes with Manley. "Fine me a woman..."

A single phone call from Cole was all it took to summon Manley here.

In the phone call, Cole hadn't wasted time on pleasantries. "Get to the Royal Club. Now."

Manley hadn't even get a chance to reply—the line went dead. Assuming it was an emergency, he had raced to the Royal Club. The moment he arrived, Cole'd hit him with something completely unexpected: he wanted a woman. Wait-what? Cole asking for a woman? That didn't line up at all. Cole was practically a monk when it came to women—distant, cold, and always above temptation. And wasn't he married to Elliana anyway?

The whole thing threw Manley off. He couldn't make sense of any of it.

Cole's eyes burned with urgency. "She needs to be clean. Legal age. Gorgeous," he said through clenched teeth.

To Aron and Hugh, it made perfect sense. If anyone could handle this kind of bizarre request, it was Manley. He had connections in every corner of the city, and more importantly, he knew how to get things done fast.

Manley narrowed his eyes, something finally clicking. "Wait... Did someone spike your drink?"

Cole said nothing, just tugged at his collar with a grimace -answer enough.

Manley practically erupted. "Who the hell messed with your drink? Point me to them and I'll handle them myself!"

Before Manley could storm off, Aron and Hugh pulled him aside and filled him in on everything that happened.

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The explanation left Manley completely baffled. So let him get this straight-Cole drank some spiked soup, fully intending to spend the night with his wife, but bailed last minute and stormed out instead? That couldn't be right. It made no sense. He'd just seen Cole wrapped around Elliana like she was the only person that mattered. Why the sudden hesitation now? There was only one thing that made sense— Elliana must've turned Cole down.

Manley, never one to miss an opportunity to needle someone, smirked and asked, "Dude, did Elliana turn you down?"

"Bang!" Cole grabbed the takeout box left by Trinity and smashed it onto the floor in frustration, food splattering across the floor.

Both Aron and Hugh flinched, stunned. The outburst sealed it —Manley had guessed right. Elliana had shut Cole down. It was hard to wrap their heads around it.

Hugh rubbed his nose awkwardly. He used to laugh at Elliana for not knowing her place, for wanting something beyond her reach, but now Cole was the one who had been rejected.

Manley couldn't hold it in and let out a loud laugh. "Alright, Aron, Hugh-out. I need a moment alone with our love-struck friend here."

Without protest, Aron and Hugh stepped out, pulling the door shut behind them.

Taking a seat beside Cole, Manley pulled out his phone and tilted it toward him. "Here-scroll through. Anyone catch your eye?"

Cole barely looked at the gallery of glamorous women before flopping back in irritation. "You pick. I don't care."

Manley blinked. "What do you mean by that?" With a chuckle, he added, "I can promise they're legal and untouched, but your preferences? That's a mystery I won't pretend to understand."

Cole shot him a look, his voice sharp. "Who said I needed a woman for that?"

Now completely thrown off, Manley stared at him. If it wasn't for that, then what the hell was the emergency?

Meanwhile, just outside the room, Paulina and Myles had shown up, their timing impeccable as always.

Once Paulina got the gist of what was going on, she didn't hesitate. Her glare at Myles sharp enough to slice glass, she snapped, "Drop to your knees. Now!"

Though utterly baffled, Myles didn't hesitate—he dropped to his knees with a sigh. "Okay, but what did I do this time, Paulina?"

Without even glancing at him, Paulina shifted her fury toward Hugh. "How many times do I have to repeat myself? We're working for Mr. Evans. That means knowing our place. Why did you run your mouth at Mrs. Evans today? You stirred up trouble between them—now what? How do you plan to fix it?"

Hugh ran a hand through his hair, trying to figure out if Elliana had truly turned Cole down because of what he mentioned before. If that was the case, then yeah—he'd definitely made a mess of things. But he still believed he had a point. "Paulina, wasn't I right? Mr. Evans ought to marry someone elegant and well-connected. What makes Elliana qualified to become Mrs. Evans?"

The pieces finally clicked for Myles. He adjusted his glasses with a sigh and said, "So Hugh runs his mouth, and I end up on my knees? Paulina, aren't you aiming at the wrong target here?"

While saying this, Myles made a cautious move to rise.

Paulina knocked him right back into place, "I'm punishing you! You're the oldest, so tell me, is this how you've been guiding your younger brother?"

Myles lifted an eyebrow, clearly fed up but not about to argue. Between chasing deadlines and managing Cole's packed schedule, disciplining Hugh hadn't exactly made it onto his to-do list. Still, Paulina outranked them all, and defying her wasn't an option he was brave enough to take.

Watching from the side, Aron broke into a grin. Hugh messed up, Myles paid for it—same script every time. Poor guy never caught a break.

Right when Aron started to feel bad for Myles, Paulina yelled at him, "You get down on your knees too!"

Aron blinked, confused, but his knees hit the floor before his brain could stop them. "Wait, Paulina—what did I even do?"

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Paulina didn't spare Aron from her wrath. "You're with Hugh more than anyone else—same with Mr. Evans. So tell me, how have you let your brother turn out like this?"

Aron's face shifted into the same fed-up look Myles was wearing.

The parents of the four Fletcher siblings had been employees of the Evans Group but sadly lost their lives in a car crash. The Evans family, moved by the plight of the four children left behind, took them in and raised them alongside Cole. Gratitude ran deep between the siblings and the Evans family, but their loyalty to Cole was something fierce.

While Paulina ruled the trio of younger brothers with an iron will, she always had a soft spot for Hugh—the youngest one when their parents died, and she had practically raised him like a son.

Myles and Aron were frequently irritated because, back when Hugh was little, Paulina always took his side. If he slipped up or ended up hurt, she would point fingers at them for failing to look after their younger brother. Even now, at twenty-three and running Cole's personal security, Hugh still managed to drag his older brothers into messes. At this rate, they'd be dealing with his screw-ups until they hit retirement.

Once her scolding was done, Paulina spun on her heel and stomped out of the room without another word.

Myles and Aron rose slowly, their eyes locking on Hugh with the kind of look that made grown men sweat.

Just minutes earlier, Hugh had been soaking in Paulina's protection like a spoiled cat in the sun. Now, stripped of her shield, he slinked away into a corner and stared at the wall, avoiding their eyes like it might save him.

Elsewhere, tossing and turning through the night, Elliana couldn't shake the weight of her argument with Cole.

By dawn, she was already dressed and downstairs. After a quick breakfast, she informed the butler to let Ruben know she was heading out for the filming of "The Heiress ' Graduation Trip."

When the rest of the Evans household finally wandered down, Elliana had long since vanished.

The younger members of the family, secretly hoping to watch Elliana fall flat on her face, were left dumbfounded when the butler casually mentioned she'd already gone off to

shoot a television show.

Most of them had brushed off her showbiz dreams as a phase— or worse, a joke. None had expected her to move so fast. Their curiosity got the better of them, and they started to follow the show just to see her stumble.

The show wasn't pre-recorded either—it was airing live.

Eager to ruin Elliana, Paige had made sure the production team locked in a contract with Elliana right after their chat the day before. By sunrise, a teaser was already making its rounds online.

The tension between Paige and Elliana was already making waves online, and once the teaser dropped, the views exploded. By morning, the show's account had racked up millions of followers—and the numbers just kept rising.

Curious and discreet, the Evans family pulled up the promo video, only to find over a million comments flooding in. Most were there for one thing—the unfolding chaos between two women.

"Can you believe Elliana, of all people, has the nerve to appear on the same show as Paige? She must not care about being humiliated."

"Word is, she's been throwing her weight around as Mrs. Evans, picking on Paige like it's her full-time job. She's probably showing up just to take Paige down publicly."

"Elliana is seriously out of her league. Cole barely acknowledges her, and Paige has Royal Entertainment in her corner. This is a losing game for Elliana."

"You all believe Elliana joined this show just to take down Paige, but I get the feeling it's actually Paige who's using the show to tear Elliana apart. No matter how full of herself Elliana might be, there's no way she'd choose to put her worst side on display for everyone to see. She had to have been pushed into it."

"The clash between them is turning into real entertainment. I'm looking forward to watching them rip into each other on the show."

"Doesn't matter who wins. I'm tuning in purely to see if Elliana really looks as bad as people say."

As if this showdown wasn't enough, the casting of Kent Todd added a whole new layer of buzz to the show.

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Kent had built his brand as the charming rich boy—an heir who could coast on family money if acting didn't pan out. Reality, though, told a different story—while his family had wealth, he wasn't exactly in line to inherit any of it. Although he was a well-known actor, he had only taken part in a single project since his debut, and his performance on screen wasn't anything remarkable. He'd built his reputation entirely on his appearance, the very definition of a star who thrived on charm alone.

Not only did Kent bring his loyal fanbase along, but his connection to Paige added a juicy subplot—turned out, they went to high school together, and he'd nursed a crush on her back then. Naturally, fans were buzzing in the comment section.

"I'm absolutely here for Kent's first reality show! Let's go, pretty boy!"

"Wait—is Kent really on this show for Paige? And isn't Paige's fiancé Raylan coming too? This smells like a messy love triangle already."

"Okay, I know it's wrong, but part of me is rooting for Paige and Kent to have a moment. Just one!"

While heading to the shoot for episode one, Elliana scrolled through the comments and skimmed the cast list—only to find something so ridiculous that it nearly made her laugh out loud.

In Elliana's opinion, "The Heiress' Graduation Trip" might as well be renamed "The Heiress' Dramatic Show."

With Royal Entertainment backing the project to launch Paige's debut, it was no surprise that every element of the show was tailored to flatter her. Episode after episode, the chosen themes seemed curated to spotlight Paige's every skill and charm.

Then came the guests. Paige showed up with Raylan, looking every bit like a fairy tale princess with her prince charming, but out of nowhere, a well-known actor, Kent, was added to the picture.

As a beloved movie star, Kent's presence ignited a rivalry with Raylan that practically screamed scripted drama—drama that would only make Paige shine brighter in the public eye.

To be direct about it, Kent's purpose was to act as a stepping stone to elevate Paige's public image.

Aside from Raylan and Kent, the rest of the male guests left much to be desired, playing little more than background roles.

Among the female guests, besides Paige and Elliana, there were two rich girls from less-than-famous families and one random girl with no industry ties—another move that conveniently made Paige the uncontested lead.

Elliana had been boxed into the "unremarkable" role, clearly positioned to serve as the show's comic relief, the one meant to falter under Paige's spotlight.

Having dissected the setup, Elliana's lips curled into a cool, amused smile. There was no doubt in her mind—Paige had micromanaged everything. Paige would trample over anyone to stay center stage, no matter how pathetic it made her look.

At exactly seven a.m., Elliana showed up at the filming site, finding the other guests already assembled.

Just then, the livestream countdown hit zero. The crew gave the cue, and cameras rolled into live mode.

Countless netizens had been standing by online, and the moment the live broadcast kicked off, viewers flooded in by the thousands, with the numbers climbing steadily. In just two minutes, the viewership had soared into the hundreds of thousands.

Haley Faulkner, the director, opened the show, her sharp voice cutting clean through the camera feed.

Haley, full of energy and seasoned with experience, presented the show's theme and purpose to the audience.

This program had been co-produced by Royal Entertainment and Ublento Cultural Tourism, aiming to entertain the audience while showcasing Ublento's scenic attractions. Once the show wrapped up, the production team planned to launch an online vote, giving netizens the chance to select one male and one female to serve as cultural tourism ambassadors.

Although it was an entertainment program, the inclusion of Ublento's Cultural Tourism promotion gave it a touch of prestige. Being selected as a cultural tourism ambassador through this show and partnering with the official team for the long haul would be a priceless boost to both reputation and popularity.

The moment the ambassador topic hit the screen, the live chat exploded with excitement.

"Ahhh, there's no doubt the final cultural tourism ambassadors will be Raylan and Paige—they're the perfect pair!"

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"Excuse me, but Kent and Paige would be iconic!"

"No matter which of the male guests ends up as the cultural tourism ambassador, the female pick is guaranteed to be Paige!"

Once Haley wrapped up her lively rundown of the show's format, the lens glided toward the guest panel, signaling the start of the much-anticipated introductions.

Opening the sequence, the spotlight landed on Raylan and Paige. They showed up hand in hand, dressed like the picture -perfect engaged pair—Raylan in a laid-back white suit and Paige glowing in a white floral dress. The warmth between them was undeniable. Flashing bright smiles, they waved to the camera and said, "Hi everyone! We're diving into this new journey with nothing but love and courage!"

Instantly, the live chat lit up like fireworks.

"This feels like a love story come to life! Raylan looks dreamy, and Paige is absolutely stunning. They're meant to be!"

"I swear, I'm shipping these two till the end of time!" Next in the Lineup was none other than Kent, the heartthrob.

There was something dangerously charming about Kent. Not rugged, but sleek, with a smirk that could slice through silence and a boyish swagger that didn't ask for attention—it took it anyway. With a twinkle in his eye, he pulled back an imaginary arrow and let it fly toward the camera. "Here's my motto—my goddess stays under my protection, always."

Then, Kent suddenly shifted his gaze to Raylan, a sly grin spreading across his face,

"Raylan, just don't let me catch an opening!"

The camera whipped back to Raylan, just as he wrapped his arm around Paige's waist and stared Kent down. "My fiancée will always be in my arms!"

And just like that, the comments came in like a tidal wave— no slowing down.

"Wow! Is the show really this intense right from the beginning? Kent's being so open about his intentions. It's honestly pretty daring!"

"A love triangle right out the gate? This show is pure adrenaline!"

"Kent's got my vote! Take the lead, king!" "Can we blame them? Paige's charm is working overtime!"

The camera circled back to Kent, who hadn't broken character for a second. Turning away from Raylan, his expression hardened as he turned to the left. "Elliana, whatever drama you had with Paige before? Don't try it now. Not while I'm watching. I won't let anyone hurt her."

His words hit like a warning shot, and the camera swung toward Elliana, catching her mid-expression, completely unprepared for the attention.

The moment Elliana appeared on screen, the once-buzzing chat room fell into a stunned silence.

But it lasted only a heartbeat-before exploding into a frenzy of ridicule.

"Wait... Is that Elliana? The infamous plain Jane?" "Her makeup's doing more harm than good—my eyes!"

"No offense, but this is nightmare fuel. Literal nightmare fuel."

"Forget the details—just looking at her, I know she's the problem in that drama with Paige."

"Does this show air past midnight? Because honestly, that face is horror-movie material."

"Who gave her the audacity to appear on a variety show next to someone as stunning as Paige?"

As if pouring oil on the fire, the production team played into the chaos—cutting to a split-screen of Elliana and Paige standing side by side. The contrast was brutal. And the comment section went wild.