

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

Chapter: 81

Luciano, accustomed to reverence bordering on worship, typically heard nothing but honeyed praise. Today's double offense—first Elliana's cutting retort, now this questioning of his artistic credentials—transformed his face into a thundercloud.

Luciano scowled. "Elliana, since you claim I _ lack understanding of oil painting, you must consider yourself quite the virtuoso. Why not enlighten millions of viewers with your critique of Spring Goddess? Let's witness your supposed expertise!"

Rage had stripped away Luciano's carefully cultivated veneer, leaving his true nature exposed.

Elliana savored the effect of her calculated barb. Rather than retreating, she poured gasoline on the flames. "You're not qualified to request my commentary!"

"You!" Luciano's face contorted with fury as his hand lashed out toward Elliana.

Paige, maintaining a thread of strategic awareness, swiftly intercepted his strike. Elliana's status as a plain Jane married into the Evans family—long dismissed as impulsive and foolish—afforded her the luxury of arrogance without significant repercussions. But Luciano striking Elliana on camera would ignite a firestorm of controversy.

News of such an assault would consume social media, derailing here carefully orchestrated plans.

Paige hastily said, "Please compose yourself, Mr. Scott. Our parents have indulged Elliana since infancy, and I've continued this pattern of leniency. Her behavior stems from lifelong spoiling. I offer my deepest apologies on her behalf."

Paige's intervention pierced Luciano's rage-filled haze. Recognizing his near-catastrophic mistake, he released a contemptuous snort before sweeping away with a theatrical flick of his sleeve.

Paige shot Elliana a venomous glare before hurrying after Luciano.

Haley barked orders at the camera crew to follow, the entire entourage abandoning Elliana like debris in their wake.

Though Elliana vanished from the frame after this confrontation, the live stream's comment section continued dissecting her behavior with savage enthusiasm.

"Did you see how Elliana provoked Mr. Scott? The once- dignified maestro nearly shattered his composure!"

"Elliana truly embodies her reputation for reckless idiocy—speaking without a thought for consequences."

"I've heard she abandoned education before completing elementary school. This behavior confirms her profound ignorance. Thank heavens Paige stepped in to salvage the Situation, or the entire broadcast would have crumbled."

Elliana glanced at her phone, scanning the vitriolic comments flooding the stream. A smile of satisfaction curved her lips. Perfect. Public sentiment continued fermenting exactly as planned. The higher they elevated Paige now, the more spectacular her fall would be tonight.

In the subsequent segment, Luciano guided the audience through a series of masterpieces, waxing poetic about artistic nuance while subtly promoting the Ublento Art Museum. Paige orbited him like a dutiful satellite, seizing every opportunity to showcase her rehearsed lines.

Throughout this carefully choreographed performance, several traps had been set specifically for Elliana, but her ability to derail the program with mere words—pushing each scene toward chaos—had made Paige too cautious to risk implementing the remaining snares.

Elliana luxuriated in her earned freedom, observing Paige and Luciano's performance from beyond the camera's predatory eye.

The broadcast continued uninterrupted, flowing into midday.

After the morning exploration of the Ublento Art Museum, the program shifted to an elaborate Luncheon with Luciano.

Throughout the meal, conversation remained anchored to artistic theory, with Paige's status now inflated to nearly mythic proportions.

The comment section unanimously crowned Paige the program's radiant star—the perfect amalgamation of beauty and artistic brilliance.

Following lunch came the moment for participants to demonstrate their creative abilities. Luciano would provide instruction while everyone attempted to create paintings under his guidance. He would then critique the final works, with exceptional performers potentially earning his mentorship.

Chapter: 82

To Elliana, this segment represented the most transparent Manipulation yet. Oil painting required years of disciplined study, not a single televised lesson. True mastery demanded foundation building and relentless practice. Those without previous training would inevitably produce childish scrawls within the program's compressed timeframe. The conclusion had been scripted from the start: Paige would dazzle, ascending to become Luciano's protégé amid celestial fanfare, while everyone else faded into insignificant background noise.

But contract-bound participants had surrendered their autonomy the moment they signed. They were nothing but corporate chess pieces, moved according to invisible profit calculations.

Entering the classroom, Elliana deliberately selected her painting materials, casting a loaded glance toward Luciano and Paige. Today, she would dismantle the financial empire supporting Paige's charade...

In the opulent, brightly lit CEO's office, the air was thick with tension.

Myles approached the massive desk cautiously, placing a folder down with reverent care. "Mr. Evans, this document needs your signature."

But Cole didn't respond. He sat motionless behind his sleek computer, his chiseled features frozen in an expression of iciness.

Myles stood awkwardly, not daring to speak again. He simply waited, heart pounding.

Just outside the door, Aron and Hugh stood with their ears practically pressed to the wood, barely breathing. Minutes passed. Or was it longer?

At last, Cole reached for the pen and signed the document with brisk, practiced strokes.

Myles exhaled, quietly relieved. Perhaps—just perhaps—this time would go smoothly.

Then, with a sudden snarl, Cole grabbed the paper he'd just signed and flung it straight into the trash. "Cruel woman!"

Myles flinched. Outside, Aron and Hugh instinctively jumped back. Here it went again.

Last night, Cole had spent hours in a cold shower, trying to cool off the effects of the aphrodisiac. He hadn't said a word in the car this morning. But once he arrived at the office, the roller coaster began-rage, silence, brooding, snapping. At any given moment, Cole could shift from glacial calm to stormy outburst. It was hard to say when he'd suddenly scream out loud. "Cruel woman!"

The entire staff tiptoed through the halls, hoping to avoid Cole's wrath. If anyone was unlucky enough to be called into his office, they would have to cross themselves first.

The secretarial department had resorted to desperate measures. Myles had already been begged by every secretary on the floor to deliver their documents for them. He'd been back and forth to the CEO's office so many times that he'd stopped checking his step count.

And Cole hadn't even touched lunch. Now, as the sun dipped lower in the sky, his mood had turned even darker.

Outside the office, Hugh held up three fingers, whispering to Aron, "That makes three hundred 'cruel womans' today."

Aron shot Hugh a scowl. "And whose fault is that?"

Hugh let out a sheepish sigh, his shoulders drooping with the weight of regret. How he wished he hadn't said those flippant words to Elliana. He never meant for things to go this far. Sure, he'd teased Elliana a little. Maybe even exaggerated a few things. But Elliana's rejection of Cole's desire for intimacy? Cole's full-blown heartbreak? The CEO of the Evans Group turned into a brooding, love-scorned wreck? That hadn't been part of the plan.

With a groan, Hugh ruffled his own hair and whispered a prayer to every deity he could remember, hoping Cole would miraculously recover before he ended up demoted to parking lot supervisor-or worse.

Inside the office, Myles kept his head down. He moved quietly to the trash can, retrieved

the crumpled document, and flattened it with slow, reverent care. He didn't dare speak. Not after the last time he'd tried to offer Cole advice and had nearly been turned to stone by a single glare. Today, Cole was a live wire-volatile, unpredictable, and emotionally radioactive. The best move? Complete silence.

With the paper in hand, Myles cast a glance at Cole, who sat staring at his computer screen, unmoved, unspeaking. Myles gave a subtle bow and turned to leave.

Myles had barely pivoted when Cole's voice cut through the silence. "What is she doing?"

There was no need to ask who "she" was. A shiver crawled down Myles' spine.

Chapter: 83

ALL morning, Elliana's name had been a forbidden word. Anyone reckless enough to mention her in Cole's presence had paid dearly. Her name was a spark near dry kindling-dangerous and unpredictable. And yet now, Cole was the one asking about her.

"Mrs. Evans joined a reality show called 'The Heiress' Graduation Trip, Myles replied dutifully, turning back toward Cole. "She left early this morning to begin filming. It's being streamed live as we speak."

Cole's fingers froze over the keyboard. He looked up, a shadow of disbelief flickering in his eyes as he stared at Myles.

Wordlessly, Myles pulled out his phone, launched the livestream, and placed it on the desk in front of Cole.

Cole glanced down. His expression darkened. "Cruel woman," he grumbled.

Cole was genuinely pissed. So, Elliana had really done it- stepped into the entertainment world without so much as a backward glance. She had once expressed interest in him, watched him drink that spiked soup, and led him on, only to rip the ground from under him with a simple confession: she didn't like him and had no intention of being his wife. Cruel. Heartless. Utterly cold.

Last night, he'd stormed out of their room in fury, resorting to drenching himself in icy water through the night to deal with the burning sensation the aphrodisiac caused. And where was she now? On camera, smiling, as though none of it mattered. As though he had never mattered. So be it. If she wanted to brave the world alone, let her. He was curious to see how far she could go without his protection.

Myles watched silently, his eyes on Cole's' shifting expressions—rage, disbelief, wounded pride. It was like watching time rewind. The seventeen-year-old version of Cole was volatile, entitled, and emotionally raw.

Elliana hadn't just broken Cole's heart. She had unmade him. She wasn't an ordinary woman. She was an enchantress—one who could unravel years of maturity with a single choice.

Then, suddenly, a scream rang out from the livestream.

A theatrical gasp tore through the broadcast room. It came from one of the staff stationed near Luciano, seemingly overwhelmed by the sight of Paige's painting on display. "My goodness! Miss Jones, your painting is absolutely stunning. You're an extraordinary talent!"

As per the plan and previous rehearsal, one compliment led to another, and soon the room rippled with enthusiastic voices, each more eager than the last to sing Paige's praises.

Haley gave a subtle nod, prompting the crew to zoom in, capturing every elegant detail of Paige's artwork.

As the camera panned back, Paige stood surrounded by admirers, her smile radiant and warm. "Everyone here holds deep experience in art. I'd be grateful for any advice you might share."

One chimed in, reciting the given lines, "Miss Jones, someone with your talent hardly needs pointers from the rest of us. Only Mr. Scott could take you to the next level."

Luciano's face lit up with satisfaction at the praise, his eyes fixed on Paige's artwork while he nodded in approval. "Your technique shows a strong foundation. With a little direction, you'll be able to make a real breakthrough and rise to an entirely new level."

Right on cue with the show's planned segment, Paige stepped forward and smiled. "Ever since I first picked up a paintbrush, my greatest dream has been to become your protégé, Mr. Scott. Do you think I might be Lucky enough to earn your favor today?"

"Ha-ha..." Adopting a masterly composed facade, Luciano gave her a wide, approving grin. "Paige, I've appreciated your work for a while now, and I've been meaning to take

you under my wing. I just wasn't sure you'd say yes."

"Thank you so much for the chance, Mr. Scott!" Paige said as she gave a deep, grateful bow. "I'm honestly over the moon. You're a legend, and getting the opportunity to learn from you is more than I ever imagined."

The crowd erupted into applause, repeating the lines written in the planned script.

"Big congratulations to Mr. Scott! With a protégé like Miss Jones, you two are bound to make waves in the art world!"

"This is a huge moment for Ublento's art scene! Mr. Scott taking on another prodigy definitely calls for a proper mentorship ceremony."

"I've got it covered. I'll handle the setup right away so everything wraps up before the Starry Oil Painting Competition tonight."

Luciano had always been fond of praise and spectacle. Over time, he'd surrounded himself with people who knew just how to stroke his ego, and their over-the-top compliments only made him more full of himself.

Chapter: 84

In truth, the mentorship ceremony was a_ carefully choreographed segment prepared by the program team. The fawning crowd was just part of the performance, staged for the benefit of the live viewers. None of the viewers watching from home had any idea they were being strung along by a chorus of well-rehearsed fakes.

"Can you believe it? Mr. Scott actually took Paige as his protégé. She's set for life in the art world now!"

"No matter where Paige goes, she always stands out. She's just got that spark!"

"I can't wait for the mentorship ceremony. I've heard Mr. Scott holds a deep respect for traditional rituals, so I'm sure the entire event will be full of surprises—and maybe even a few jaw-dropping moments."

At this point, Paige looked like a rising star. The comments were full of praise, and even the guests in the room—who didn't know any better—couldn't help but feel a bit jealous.

From his painting station, Raylan watched her bask in applause. A soft, proud grin tugged at his lips, as though her triumph were his own.

But off to the side, Elliana's lips twisted into a smirk. She wasn't buying any of it. To her, the entire show put on by Luciano and Paige was nothing short of cheap. Earlier, when the class began, she had actually assumed Luciano would give a live demonstration. Instead, he just gave speeches full of flair while using his students' work as props. Not once did he pick up a brush.

No one at the scene had the nerve to speak up, while the live chat buzzed with curiosity, wondering why Luciano wasn't stepping up to paint something himself. For a long while, no one offered an answer to the question, until someone eventually interjected with an explanation—Luciano held such a prestigious position in the art world that his paintings were considered rare treasures, not something he could simply create or reveal without careful consideration. As a true master, he was expected to uphold his own standards and artistic principles.

Eventually, that opinion caught on. The more people repeated it, the more it started to sound reasonable. No one questioned it again.

Others might have bought into Luciano's performance—both the viewers online and the guests standing nearby—but Elliana wasn't one of them. She could see straight through the act. Luciano hadn't painted a thing, and every word he taught in class was just a script he'd memorized. It was almost too absurd to believe. The highly regarded president of the Ublento Calligraphers and Painters Association—a so-called master whose pieces had earned accolades at home and abroad —was, in the end, someone who couldn't even produce a proper painting.

That raised the obvious question—where did all those winning works come from? And how did someone like him con his way into the top seat of the Calligraphers and Painters Association? Since Luciano had been a fraud, there was no way the painting he gave Paige for the competition was actually his creation. That raised the real question—who was the true artist working in the shadows?

When it came to devious tricks, Paige could hold her own right alongside Luciano.

The cameras zoomed in to capture every detail of Paige's so -called masterpiece, and the audience didn't hold back their praise. What they didn't know was that Paige hadn't laid a finger on that canvas. Not once did the camera catch her brush in action, and her easel was angled just enough to keep things hidden. Still, Elliana watched closely—Paige's every move gave her away. She was putting on a show, not painting a picture.

The artwork Paige unveiled had been created in advance by an anonymous artist. Whoever painted it had undeniable talent- the technique alone spoke volumes.

Elliana didn't need long to connect the dots. The strokes, the style-it matched the piece Luciano had provided for Paige to enter the competition.

What baffled Elliana most was why someone so gifted would bury themselves in anonymity, letting Luciano take credit instead of stepping into the spotlight and earning recognition of their own.

From the next station over, Hailee noticed the distant Look in Elliana's eyes. She leaned in, her voice gentle and curious as she asked, "What's on your mind, Elliana?"

After sharing the morning side by side, the two had warmed to each other, discovering a natural ease in their personalities, and had started calling each other by their first names.

Hailee knew full well that Elliana was in the producers crosshairs, yet she never backed away. While the rest kept their distance, she stayed close—and that simple kindness meant more to Elliana than she could express.

Ever since her mother left, the world had treated Elliana like an outcast. Genuine people were rare, and Hailee was one of the few who came without an agenda.

"Just thinking," Elliana replied, keeping it vague.

Hailee saw the world with a clear heart, always assuming the best in others, blind to the twisted and messy games people played. Elliana couldn't bring herself to ruin that innocence by revealing a darker world to Hailee. Very few people still carried the kind of quiet sincerity that Hailee did.

Hailee didn't give it another thought. Her eyes landed on Elliana's painting, and with genuine admiration, she said, "Elliana, your work is incredible. Honestly, I think it's even more impressive than Paige's."

With a soft smile, Elliana looked over at Hailee's piece. "Yours turned out wonderfully as well."

Chapter: 85

That wasn't just a polite reply-it was genuine. Elliana wasn't the type to hand out compliments without meaning every word.

Hailee chuckled and gave a shy scratch to the back of her head. "I really just doodled. My family couldn't afford art lessons, so I picked up whatever I could from online tutorials."

The artists behind the online tutorials weren't especially remarkable in their craft. They were everyday painters, and their videos offered only a foundation, nothing beyond the basics.

Still, there was no denying that Hailee's artwork was truly impressive. It was clear she hadn't stopped at the basics. She'd gone beyond, experimenting, interpreting, and gradually crafting a voice of her own.

That kind of instinct-raw, unpolished, but undeniably present-was what people call talent. Hailee had it, just like Elliana did.

"I'm kind of nervous about what Mr. Scott will say, though. What if he laughs at it?" Hailee said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Elliana didn't hesitate. "It's honestly excellent. You should consider entering it in the Starry Oil Painting Competition tonight. I wouldn't be surprised if it turned a few heads."

In Elliana's opinion, Hailee still had room to grow with her raw skill. She needed proper training to refine her technique. Right now, Hailee couldn't quite match the finesse of the mysterious painter behind the work Paige claimed as her own creation-but she had the potential.

Elliana had a strong feeling that Hailee's piece could earn her a solid spot in the rankings of the Starry Oil Painting Competition—and maybe even some prize money to go with it. She understood that Hailee was in a tough spot financially and desperately needed the money.

But Hailee shook her head, her voice laced with hesitation. "I don't belong in a competition like that. I'm just a hobbyist. If I submit anything, I'll embarrass myself."

"You won't know unless you try," Elliana responded, her tone light but firm. "And if you do place, the prize money's no joke."

The mention of prize money lit a spark in Hailee's eyes.

Elliana smiled and added, "I heard there's prize money for the top ten. First place gets three million, and even tenth place earns a hundred thousand. If you land in the top ten, you're guaranteed at least that much."

Excitement crept into Hailee's voice. "But this is the final round. Isn't it too late to enter?"

"There's still a way," Elliana said. "They reserve slots for special entries. If a piece is strong enough, it can bypass the earlier rounds and go straight into the finals."

"You really think I should submit it?"

"Absolutely." Elliana nodded. "Worst case, you don't place. But what do you have to lose?"

"You're right, Elianna. If there's even a chance at that prize, I've got to at least try."

While the two of them talked, Luciano had already started giving feedback on the others' paintings.

None of the other works even came close to Paige's supposed one in terms of presentation. Luciano barely tried to hide his disinterest, tossing out shallow praise like he was checking off a list.

When it came time to critique Elliana's piece, Luciano didn't bother hiding his disdain. His eyes flicked to her and then settled on her canvas with a cold stare.

The others clustered around Elliana as they followed Luciano's lead, but the camera crew completely overlooked her painting, skipping any close-up shots...

A heavy silence swept across the room the moment eyes landed on Elliana's painting.

Beside Luciano, Paige's smile wavered. She pressed her lips tightly, barely holding the expression together.

Chapter: 86

Paige and Luciano had been faking their expertise from the start, but even they couldn't deny the obvious—Elliana's painting was stunning.

Paige could feel jealousy creep in, tangled with disbelief. How could someone like Elliana—tucked away in a forgotten warehouse—paint this remarkably? She pushed these thoughts aside—there were more pressing matters. The last thing she needed was

Elliana stealing the scene. When she spotted the photographer about to zoom in, she discreetly gestured toward Haley.

Haley picked up the cue right away, waving the photographer off. As a result, Elliana's work appeared in nothing more than a distant, unfocused frame.

The people standing beside Luciano wore mixed expressions. Some of them clearly had a grasp of oil painting and could see that Elliana had real skill. But with Luciano's clear disdain for her hanging in the air, none of them risked speaking up. Instead, they kept their thoughts to themselves, choosing silence over trouble.

Bitterness crept across Luciano's face, weighed down by irritation. He had planned to tear Elliana down in front of everyone by picking apart her work, but her technique left him speechless. Cornered by the audience's expectant silence, he found himself with nothing convincing to say.

Leaning in slightly, Paige lowered her voice and offered a way out. "Mr. Scott, go ahead and criticize her. I already told the crew to avoid zooming in on Elliana's painting. The viewers won't catch the details."

People in the room had their careers tied to Luciano's reputation. Even if he blundered, none of them would dare call him out. So long as the livestream audience remained blind to the truth, he had room to maneuver.

That reassurance settled Luciano's nerves. He tilted his head, eyes cold as they rested on Elliana. "You sounded so confident earlier. I half expected to see brilliance. But after all that talk, this is what you came up with?"

Predictably, no one stepped up to question Luciano. The silence in the studio grew thick, almost stifling.

A flicker of smugness crossed Paige's face. Talent meant nothing if she kept Elliana locked in the shadows. Without her approval, Elliana was going nowhere.

The camera lingered on Elliana, catching every shift in her expression. Tension spilled into the comment section like a wave.

"Wait, is Elliana really that bad?"

"Mr. Scott wouldn't say that unless her work was terrible, right?"

"She acted all high and mighty before. Honestly, it's good someone finally humbled her!"

People waited for Elliana to crumble under the pressure, but she didn't flinch. Instead, she stayed composed, meeting Luciano's glare with a look that bordered on smug.

That expression struck a nerve. Luciano snapped, his voice rising, "Who do you think you are, acting like you're better than everyone else?"

The deeper his scowl etched into his face, the heavier the air grew. Tension tightened like a noose.

Hailee, standing close to Elliana, couldn't stay quiet any longer. "Mr. Scott, Elliana's painting really isn't bad. Honestly, I think it looks pretty good.."

Murmurs rippled through the crowd. Who did this girl think she was, speaking out like that? Was she insane?

Judgment fell on Hailee like a wave, eyes narrowing with disdain.

Though the attention made her shrink inward, Hailee stood her ground, lip trembling but firm beside Elliana.

"Hailee, is it?" Luciano's voice turned cold as he glanced at her name tag. "Since you're such a connoisseur, why don't we take a look at your masterpiece?"

With hesitation, Hailee slowly turned her painting around for him to see.

Luciano gave it the briefest look before exclaiming with clear irritation, "It's complete trash!"

Chapter: 87

Color rushed to Hailee's cheeks as she looked down, shrinking under the weight of humiliation.

Not done yet, Luciano sneered, "You can't even paint properly, and you think you're qualified to judge someone else? You're just fishing for attention."

Tears welled up in Hailee's eyes as she stood there, humiliated and heartbroken under the weight of his words.

Elliana stepped forward, voice steady and sharp. "Mr. Scott, I'll ask again-do you actually understand oil painting, or are you just pretending to?"

The question hit its mark. Deep down, it always made Luciano's pulse falter. But after years of wearing the mask of a master, he had perfected the art of appearing unfazed, unease buried beneath layers of practiced arrogance.

Keeping his posture firm, Luciano let his gaze drift back to Elliana, sharp and calculating. "You're still young, so let me offer a bit of guidance. Focus on growing your skills and building real talent. Chasing shortcuts, like marrying into money to get ahead, is a cheap tactic-and frankly, it's disgraceful!"

The insult was aimed straight at Elliana's marriage to Cole -and everyone knew it.

Elliana retorted instantly, "I'd also suggest, Mr. Scott, that when someone piles up too many shady deeds, the truth tends to surface—and when it does, you could fall harder than someone who never had a name to begin with.."

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No one expected Elliana to confront Luciano head-on, leaving everyone a bit stunned.

Rage darkened Luciano's features as blood rushed to his face. Had they not been surrounded by cameras broadcasting to millions of viewers, his bodyguards would have swiftly taught Elliana the price of defiance. After decades of unchallenged authority in the art world, someone had actually dared to question him publicly, and his fury was palpable.

Noticing Luciano's struggle to keep his fury in check, Paige quickly stepped in. ""Elliana, Mr. Scott speaks frankly because he wishes to guide you. You ought to receive his wisdom with gratitude. How dare you respond with such disrespect? With such impulsive behavior, your artistic growth remains impossible."

Paige acted like Elliana did something outrageous instead of asking a few questions. She pressed further. "Apologize to Mr. Scott immediately!"

Elliana's lips curled into a dismissive smile. "A self- proclaimed master whose reputation

exceeds his talent has no business offering advice to anyone."

"You!" Luciano sputtered. Elliana's words stung.

Humiliated and seething, Luciano stormed out, his entourage scrambling to follow in his wake.

Since the upcoming ceremony of officially becoming Luciano's disciple demanded her presence, Paige cast Elliana a venomous glance before hurrying after Luciano.

The camera crew trailed behind, leaving Elliana and Hailee alone in the sudden quiet.

Without the oppressive scrutiny of cameras, Hailee's shoulders relaxed as tension drained from her posture. "Elliana," she whispered anxiously, "we've completely alienated Mr. Scott. Do you think he'll retaliate? He strikes me not as a magnanimous master but as someone who nurses grudges."

Elliana's soft laughter surprised her friend. "Don't fret. His moment in the spotlight is fleeting. By tomorrow, he'll be ostracized, powerless to harm either of us."

Confusion flickered across Hailee's face, questions forming on her lips when sudden movements caught her attention.

A middle-aged man had entered silently, wearing a black jacket and cap that shadowed his melancholy eyes and drawn features.

Both Elliana and Hailee recognized him as one of Luciano's silent followers, though his exact role remained mysterious.

Chapter: 88

Elliana was bewildered. Why had this man returned after departing with Luciano's group?

The man locked eyes with Elliana, parted his lips as if to speak, then hesitated and closed them again. With a heavy sigh, he turned to leave.

"Elliana," Hailee murmured, "he seemed desperate to tell you something but held back, as though afraid."

Elliana lowered her gaze without comment, checking her phone to monitor the livestream.

The broadcast now showed Paige and Luciano proceeding down a corridor, surrounded by admirers, heading toward the ceremony venue. Yet, the chat overlay buzzed with discussions about Elliana instead.

Comments about the confrontation completely overshadowed Paige's supposedly impressive artwork.

"Has Elliana lost her mind? This is the second time she's driven Mr. Scott to storm off."

"She might lack conventional talent or beauty, but her courage is admirable."

"They never showed a close-up of her artwork, but from a distance, it looks remarkable."

"True, it appears impressive from afar. Perhaps the details don't meet professional standards."

"I'm no expert, but Hailee's painting looks extraordinary too."

Elliana tucked away her phone and turned to Hailee. "Time to submit our paintings for the competition."

"Are we really going through with this?" Uncertainty lingered in Hailee's voice. "I still don't understand how we'll advance directly to the finals..."

"Everything's arranged. Just complete the entry form."

As though summoned by Elliana's words, two black-clad attendants entered, bowing respectfully as they presented documents to her. "Ms. Marsh, here are the competition entry forms for your completion."

Elliana accepted both, keeping one and passing the other to Hailee.

Scanning the form's contents, Hailee's heart quickened with excitement. "Elliana, you're entering too? That's fantastic! Your painting has a genuine chance of winning!"

Elliana responded with a cryptic smile, "Let's fill them out." Hailee nodded eagerly. She and Elliana completed their forms.

The attendants collected both forms and paintings before departing silently.

Task completed, Hailee and Elliana left the room.

Upon entering the chamber designated for Paige to become Luciano's disciple, Hailee and Elliana encountered Haley's off-camera wrath. Her face contorted with displeasure as she hissed, "Do you have any sense of responsibility as show guests? The ceremony begins momentarily, and you're tardy. Are you deliberately trying to void your contracts?"

Since the entire production revolved around Paige, with everyone else serving merely as supporting characters, Elliana remained indifferent to threats of contract termination.

Hailee, however, trembled with concern. She participated in the show for financial necessity, and premature dismissal would devastate her finances. "I apologize profusely, Ms. Faulkner. It won't happen again."

Haley snorted derisively. "Enough excuses. Take your positions."

Chapter: 89

Hailee hurried to her designated spot, terrified of causing further delays.

As Elliana moved to join her, something unexpected caught her eye...

The ceremony venue had been crafted with painstaking precision.

True to the whispers circulating in art circles, Luciano insisted on ceremonial grandeur for such occasions, and Paige's induction reflected his exacting standards in every detail.

Given that millions would witness the event via livestream, no expense had been spared. Each element of the setting exuded opulence and meticulous attention to aesthetic harmony.

The ceremony would unfold with practiced formality—opening remarks from the host, introduction of distinguished witnesses and speakers, followed by the formal presentation of master and protégé.

Then would come the pivotal moment: the initiation ritual itself. The master would publicly articulate his reasons for accepting this particular protégé, share wisdom gleaned through decades of artistic exploration, and demonstrate techniques for the novice to emulate.

What should have been a profound artistic exchange struck Elliana as absurdly theatrical, particularly because Luciano had commissioned a wax figure of Rosa for the occasion.

Paige was becoming Luciano's protégé, yet he venerated Rosa above all others. Elliana suppressed a bubbling laugh at the irony.

Rosa's true identity remained one of the art world's most closely guarded secrets, never revealed publicly. Only a trusted inner circle knew who truly wielded the brushes behind that name.

The sole image circulating online captured a blurred profile, confirming only that Rosa was female. In that enigmatic photograph, she wore a tailored black suit with heels, her long hair swept into an elegant high ponytail. Her slender, statuesque silhouette suggested a polished professional rather than the disheveled artist stereotype many expected.

The mysterious Rosa brand held such cultural sway that this single, indistinct image had proliferated across social media platforms. Various prestigious art institutions included her works in their curriculum, displaying this very photograph when introducing her revolutionary contributions.

Though aware of this phenomenon, Elliana had dismissed it as trivial until witnessing Luciano's audacity in creating a wax effigy based on that single, ambiguous image.

Since facial features remained indiscernible in the photograph, the wax figure stood faceless—an artistic compromise disguised as reverence. To maintain the illusion of respect, Luciano had crowned the figure with a dramatic black round-brimmed hat.

As Elliana savored the absurdity unfolding before her, the ceremony commenced.

The host began by introducing the assembled witnesses with practiced gravitas.

To artificially elevate Paige's perceived importance, the production team had recruited several aging luminaries from the art establishment. Their significance was emphasized through elaborate introductions recited by the host with theatrical solemnity.

These Luminaries had clearly been well-compensated for their participation, as their speeches overflowed with extravagant praise for both Luciano and Paige.

Elliana observed silently, her lips curved in a subtle, knowing smile. So many reputations entangled in this charade -would they regret their complicity when the truth emerged later?

After the witnesses' exhaustive testimonials, Luciano finally rose to speak. He stood from his chair—positioned to emphasize his authority—adjusted his sleeves with practiced nonchalance, accepted the microphone, and began speaking in deliberately affected tones. "As my esteemed colleagues know, I never walked the conventional path of artistic instruction. My distinctive style emerged through personal innovation, yet throughout my creative journey, one mentor has guided my spirit unfailingly—the incomparable Rosa!"

With dramatic flourish, Luciano gestured toward the faceless wax figure. "Though fate has denied me the honor of meeting Rosa in person, her works have been my most profound teachers. I can state unequivocally that no influence has shaped my artistic vision more powerfully."

On cue, assistants wheeled in several canvases—Luciano's award-winning pieces, the foundation of his reputation and credibility. Precisely speaking, those were the pieces he claimed as his own creation, while they were actually drawn by painters remained in the shadow.

Luciano described each painting with passionate intensity, repeatedly invoking Rosa's name as though it were a sacred incantation. "Observe the distinctive techniques in my work that echo Rosa's influence. This harmony of elements reflects my profound reverence for her genius!"

Every word dripped with manufactured emotion, his eyes glistening with staged devotion, as though Rosa's essence had permanently transformed his artistic soul.

Chapter: 90

Having completed his performance, he returned the microphone to the host and bowed deeply before the faceless wax figure. His expression conveyed absolute solemnity, creating a hushed reverence throughout the room.

Elliana felt revulsion prickling across her skin. Watching this fraudulent "master" perform such elaborate veneration was simultaneously revolting and darkly comical. A spontaneous laugh escaped her lips before she could contain it.

The disruptive sound shattered the ceremonial atmosphere, causing every head in the room to swivel toward her...

Laughter spilled from Elliana's lips the moment Luciano straightened from his theatrical bow.

The sound hit Luciano like a slap. His solemn mask shattered, and fury contorted his face. His eyes darkened, turning red at the edges, rage swelling with every breath. He spun toward Elliana and growled through clenched teeth, "What's so funny to you?"

A wave of heads turned with Luciano. Eyes widened, unsure whether to be offended or simply baffled. What was Elliana thinking, laughing now of all times?

Paige's blood boiled beneath her composed exterior. She'd been waiting for Elliana to slip up—but not like this, not now, not in the middle of the most carefully planned event of her life. This extravagant ceremony had been carefully designed to boost her social standing and attract prestigious endorsements. But if Elliana stirred up trouble, the whole event would fall flat and lose its intended impact.

Still, with cameras everywhere and eyes locked on her, Paige forced her features into something soft and collected. "Elliana, this is an important moment. How could you treat it with so little respect?"

Elliana hadn't planned to laugh. It just slipped out before she could stop it. With a casual shrug, she tapped her nose, a trace of humor still dancing in her eyes. "My bad. It got away from me."

Paige clamped her mouth shut, the tension in her chest making it hard to breathe.

Luciano looked like he was seconds from exploding. His chest heaved, his eyes wild. All the grand effort he'd put into this ceremony—meant to solidify his image as a revered master—was being undercut by Elliana's laugh. He felt his reputation as an art world master had been deeply insulted, and in a fit of fury, he snapped, "You hideous little freak —no manners, no education, no talent, and not a shred of respect! You're absolutely disgusting!"

Words like that, coming from a so-called master, carried weight—and malice. All eyes shifted to Elliana, while the live chat exploded with frantic commentary.

"What's up with Elliana? This was supposed to be a dignified event, and she's laughing?"

"Maybe she really is as uncultured as Mr. Scott says. She probably thought his

respectfulness was some kind of joke."

"Isn't it clear by now that Elliana is Mr. Scott's ultimate rival? I was genuinely swept up in the emotion of the ceremony, but the second Elliana started laughing, the whole mood shattered—and honestly, I had to stop myself from laughing too."

Inside the venue and across the screen, every pair of eyes locked onto Elliana as if a trial against her was about to begin. She, however, remained composed—almost amused by the entire ordeal. The more furious Luciano became, the more she struggled not to grin. "Truly, I'm sorry, Mr. Scott. Do carry on with your ceremony."

Elliana wanted Luciano to keep performing—she couldn't wait to see how far he'd go. The deeper he sank into the performance, the harder he'd crash when night came.

Shaking with fury, Luciano looked ready to explode—Elliana's demeanor was salt in his wounds. Before he could unleash another outburst, Paige reached out and tugged at his sleeve. "Please, Mr. Scott," she whispered urgently. "Let's not ruin the ceremony."

Though equally pissed, Paige recognized that there wasn't much time left, and any further delay threatened to unravel the whole event.

With a sharp inhale and a final, venomous glare in Elliana's direction, Luciano forced himself back into his seat.

Luciano had started off calm and content, carrying the air of a true master. But after Elliana provoked him, his face tightened with fury, and the entire mood of the apprenticeship ceremony had taken a sharp turn for the worse.

Inside, Paige seethed. But with cameras rolling and guests watching, she swallowed the humiliation and pushed through the final motions of the ceremony.

When it finally ended, polite applause filled the room, accompanied by the usual string of well-wishes.

"Congratulations, Mr. Scott, on gaining another excellent protégé."