

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

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"And Miss Jones, what an opportunity! With a master Like Mr. Scott, you're destined for greatness."

Some color returned to Luciano's face. Once he declared Paige his official protégé, he turned to her and said, "Now, Paige, show your respect to Rosa."

"Of course," Paige said, nodding with poise.

Elliana's brows lifted in surprise. Wait—was Paige actually about to bow to her statue?

No one caught Elliana's reaction. The spotlight was fixed squarely on Paige as she glided toward the wax statue, lowered her head, and bowed with exaggerated grace.

Haley, always alert, signaled for a close-up. The cameras zoomed in, catching every angle of Paige's performance. Her face took on an exaggerated seriousness—more grave than even Luciano's—clearly meant to impress the audience watching from their screens.

Across the room, Elliana bit the inside of her cheek, doing everything she could not to burst out laughing. She'd promised herself she wouldn't stir the pot again—but the moment Paige bowed to the statue, that promise flew out the window. A sharp, irrepressible laugh escaped her lips. "Ha- ha!"

Elliana's laughter thundered through the quiet room, sending ripples of tension across the gathering.

Paige froze mid-bow, while Luciano's smile vanished instantly. All eyes in the room swiveled toward Elliana in perfect unison. Why did she laugh just now out of all times again?

Paige's enthusiasm in keeping up her charade evaporated like morning dew under harsh sun. Her elegant demeanor crumbled as she jerked upright, eyes hardening to ice as she glared at Elliana. "Elliana, what are you laughing at this time?"

Paige was genuinely pissed. Why couldn't Elliana simply allow her to complete the ceremony without disruption? How infuriating! Absolutely maddening! This wretched

Elliana must be consumed with jealousy—that explained all her troublemaking!

Luciano's features contorted with anger, his piercing gaze drilling into Elliana. "Elliana, how much further will you push your appalling lack of manners?"

Fury boiled through his veins! To so brazenly disregard his esteemed position in the art world—he would certainly teach her a lesson!

Elliana's eyes still danced with amusement as she replied with unsettling calm, "Chill down. I'm merely curious. You all worship Rosa so devoutly, but has anyone bothered to ask Rosa herself how she feels about it? What if she disagrees with this whole ceremony? Wouldn't that place you all in an awkward position?"

Her question struck Luciano and Paige speechless. Naturally, they had never consulted Rosa—they hadn't even met her. They merely exploited her name for publicity.

Luciano's expression darkened further as he glowered at Elliana. "What right do you have to speak here? Merely witnessing Rosa's wax statue at today's ceremony should be considered a tremendous honor for someone like you!"

Paige chimed in, "Elliana, disrespecting me or Mr. Scott is one thing, but how dare you disrespect Rosa? She's a legendary figure in the art world!"

Elliana chuckled, "Forgive me, I'm simply so familiar with Rosa that such words came naturally."

Her remark triggered waves of laughter from the audience, while the Live chat erupted with mockery and disbelief.

"Has this Elliana lost her mind? Claiming intimacy with Rosa? Preposterous!"

"Rosa stands as a legend in the art world. How could she possibly associate with someone like Elliana? Pure fabrication!"

"Elliana is attempting to elevate herself using Rosa's name, just like Mr. Scott does."

"People exploiting Rosa's name for publicity isn't uncommon, but Elliana's excuse is laughable. Of all possible lies, she claims friendship with Rosa. How utterly ridiculous!"

Elliana's casual demeanor inflamed both Luciano and Paige, yet despite their simmering rage, they dared not act against her before millions of viewers watching the livestream.

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Paige, having lost all desire to carry on the performance, signaled Haley to pause the broadcast, fearing she might fumble before the massive audience.

Haley grasped the situation immediately and announced to the camera that the Livestream would pause for an hour, allowing guests to dine and rest. The grand finale of the Starry Oil Painting Competition would commence afterward, with broadcasting resuming at seven o'clock sharp.

With the livestream terminated, everyone exhaled in collective relief.

Luciano's face darkened like gathering thunderclouds. No longer concerned with maintaining his facade as a distinguished master, he unleashed a torrent of abuse at Elliana. "You shameless woman! Do you believe your prestigious title as Mrs. Evans shields you' from consequences?"

Paige glared venomously at Elliana, eagerly awaiting Luciano's harsh retribution that would satisfy her own thirst for vengeance.

Everyone expected Elliana to cower before Luciano's wrath. Hailee, trembling with anxiety, tugged at Elliana's sleeve, whispering urgently, "Elliana, Luciano's bodyguards surround us. Don't challenge him directly, or you'll suffer terribly."

Elliana gently patted Hailee's hand before facing Luciano with a subtle smile. "Oh? I'm quite curious to see how you plan to deal with me."

"You..." Malice flooded Luciano's eyes, his carefully cultivated artistic persona completely shattered by naked hostility. He smirked, gesturing sharply to the bodyguards looming behind him, "Teach this insolent woman a proper lesson!"

Hearing this, Paige clenched her fists tightly, eyes gleaming with vicious anticipation. If Luciano administered severe punishment to Elliana, it would mark a tremendous victory for her today.

Meanwhile, in the Evans Group CEO's office, the abrupt termination of the livestream left Cole unable to monitor Elliana's situation at the museum. His expression hardened ominously.

Myles, standing nearby, felt inexplicable dread crawling up his spine. Was Cole about to unleash his temper again?

Having weathered Cole's foul mood throughout the entire day, Myles flinched like a nervous sparrow at the slightest movement.

As anxiety gnawed at Myles, he watched Cole manipulate his phone, expertly hacking directly into the museum's surveillance system.

When the surveillance footage materialized on the screen, it revealed Luciano commanding his bodyguards to teach Elliana a lesson...

The moment Myles saw what was happening, he immediately stood up straighter. "Mr. Evans, would you like me to send someone to the museum to protect Mrs. Evans?"

"Leave her be!" Cole let out a cold scoff. "She could use a taste of struggle. I'm the one to blame for pampering her too much, making her think she's owed everything. A bit of hardship might finally make her realize the value of what she's been given."

Despite Cole's words, Myles wasn't entirely convinced. He kept quiet, doubting Cole truly meant his own words. After all, Cole hadn't looked away from the screen. His eyes remained locked on Luciano's image, burning with quiet fury -as if sheer focus might be enough to erase Luciano.

That intensity hadn't faded when Cole abruptly reached for his phone and began dialing without a word.

Out of the corner of his eye, Myles caught the name on the screen—Cole was calling the director of the museum.

The line connected almost immediately. A voice came through, cautious but polite. "Yes? Who is this?"

Calm and calculated, Cole replied with a chill that didn't match his casual tone, "Clement, it's Cole Evans."

"Mr. Evans?" Suddenly, Clement Morgan's voice shifted into anxious enthusiasm. "Mr. Evans! What an honor! How can I assist you today?"

With the Evans family owning a substantial share of the Ublento Art Museum, and Cole

poised as the next in Line, Clement had every reason to tread carefully.

"Things are heating up over there," Cole said, his voice like ice breaking over still water. "Might be a good time to tighten security. Just in case something unfortunate happens."

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And just like that, Cole ended the call without waiting for a response.

Those few cryptic words alone were enough to make a chill crawl down Clement's spine. The moment the line disconnected, he sprang into action, calling for his assistant. "Find out right now who stepped into the museum today and exactly what went down!"

He hesitated for a moment and then added, "Pay special attention to anything or anyone connected to Mr. Evans."

"Understood." Wasting no time, the assistant immediately got to work, fingers already moving across the keyboard.

Barely thirty seconds later, the assistant turned back with a sharp update. "Mr. Morgan, Elliana-Mr. Evans' wife—is currently on-site, filming at our museum. She's already clashed with Mr. Scott multiple times and is now being publicly scolded."

There was a brief pause. Then came the assistant's hesitant follow-up, Laced with doubt. "From what I've heard, though, she's known for being useless and plain-Looking. Word is, Mr. Evans doesn't think much of her. Surely, she wouldn't be the reason behind Mr. Evans' call?"

Clement's brow twitched in annoyance. "Anything else connected to Mr. Evans? Anyone else involved?"

The assistant gave a firm shake of his head. "That's everything we've got so far."

Without another word, Clement spun on his heel and strode toward the exit, his assistant hustling to keep up.

The moment Clement stormed into the museum's exhibition hall, he caught sight of Luciano's bodyguards closing in on Elliana like wolves.

Before they could reach her, Hailee stepped between them with both arms spread wide. Her voice was earnest and strained as she said, "Mr. Scott, please let this go. I know Elliana upset you, but I'm asking for your forgiveness. She's delicate and can't withstand

your bodyguards' assault."

Unfortunately, Hailee's voice didn't carry much influence or sway. Nobody in the room took her seriously. She was just another face in the crowd, and her defense of Elliana came off as naive.

Luciano let out an icy laugh. "Young people these days have no sense of respect. Even those with no name or status think they can speak to me. Like my time means nothing."

With that, Luciano's face clouded over. "Put this girl in her place—and don't forget the one standing with her!"

The bodyguards lunged without hesitation, aggression radiating from every step.

Without blinking, Elliana stepped in front of Hailee and threw out an arm to shield her, bracing herself for the incoming threat.

Just then, a voice cut through the tension like a whip. "Stand down! ALL of you, stop right now!"

Clement barreled into the room, his shirt clinging to his back from the sprint, forehead glistening with sweat. Luciano immediately straightened, setting aside his hostility to greet Clement.

Despite his title and fame, Luciano knew how the hierarchy worked. Clement represented the financial backbone of the art world, and deference to that kind of power wasn't optional—it was survival.

"Mr. Morgan, I wasn't expecting you today," Luciano said, flashing a well-practiced smile as he welcomed Clement.

Clement's eyes swept across the room, taking in the chaotic scene. Relief washed over his features when he saw that Elliana remained untouched. Once he steadied his breath, he turned toward Luciano with a calm but firm warning. "This is my museum, Mr. Scott. I can't allow violence under this roof. If something happens here, it falls on me."

Luciano chuckled, though his laughter felt forced around the edges. "Of course, Mr. Morgan. My apologies. I let my temper get the best of me. These kids are frustrating, but I won't stir up any more trouble for you."

"Glad to hear it. That's all I ask."

After trading a few polite formalities, Clement let his gaze linger on Elliana-subtle, but unmistakable—before pivoting to leave.

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Now that Clement had stepped in, Luciano knew better than to press his luck. He shot one final venomous glare in Elliana's direction and exited without another word.

Paige and the others followed suit, leaving Elliana and Hailee alone in the room.

Back in the CEO's office at the Evans Group headquarters, the tension was rising fast. Everyone who had watched the events unfold on-screen could feel it-something had shifted.

Right after stepping in to protect Elliana, Cole suddenly became aware of how absurd he might appear to those around him. The contrast between his actions and words struck him, and his gaze snapped toward Myles.

Sure enough, Myles wasn't even trying to hide it. His eyes carried that familiar, knowing gleam.

Even though Myles was technically Cole's subordinate, they had grown up together. Cole could read that look a mile away -it was silent teasing, plain and simple.

A flush of irritation flared beneath Cole's skin. His voice dropped to a frigid tone. "Why are you still standing there?"

The intensity of that glare made Myles shift uncomfortably. He hadn't stayed out of choice-he simply hadn't been dismissed.

Clearing his throat, Myles stammered, "If there's nothing else, Mr. Evans, I... I'll take my leave."

Without waiting for a reply, Myles made a swift exit.

Cole kept his eyes trained on the door until it clicked shut. Only then did he shift his attention back to the monitor, his gaze drawn once more to Elliana. He muttered to himself, "Heartless woman."

Just outside the office, Myles let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. He

wiped the sweat from his brow, feeling like he'd barely dodged a bullet.

Aron and Hugh approached with hushed voices. "How's Mr. Evans doing?"

"He's dealing with a brutal case of heartbreak," Myles said flatly, his face expressionless.

Loosening his tie, Myles gave Aron a quick order. "Send a few bodyguards to protect Mrs. Evans discreetly at the museum. Make sure she doesn't notice them."

"Wait, that's from Mr. Evans?" Hugh blinked, clearly confused.

ALL day, Cole had been fuming, tossing out bitter remarks about Elliana like confetti. It didn't make sense for him to turn around and send protection.

Myles gave Hugh a quick flick on the forehead. "If your brain's not firing right, then just zip it. Don't stress over things that are above your pay grade."

With a sheepish grin, Hugh rubbed the back of his head and wisely kept his mouth shut.

Without hesitation, Aron made arrangements and sent several bodyguards to the museum.

Elliana was unaware that Cole had been watching her from afar. Ever since his abrupt exit the night before, he hadn't reached out, leading her to believe he wouldn't deal with her anytime soon. In her mind, some distance between them would do them both good.

After getting under Luciano's skin again, Elliana felt quite pleased. What lingered even more, though, was the memory of Hailee stepping in to defend her.

Among the crew, Hailee was practically the doormat. She barely spoke unless spoken to and often folded herself into the background just to make it through the day. But the moment Luciano came at her, Hailee had jumped to her defense without hesitation-bravely, instinctively, and without worrying about the fallout.

Elliana had made up her mind-she wasn't letting this friendship slip away.

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"Hailee, I really appreciate you speaking up for me back there. Come on, dinner's on me," Elliana said with warmth in her voice.

"Elliana, please don't mention it. I didn't really do much for you. You stood up for me when Vivien picked on me, and that was quite something." Hailee paused, worry etched across her face. "But Luciano seems to have it out for you now. It's a good thing the museum director stepped in earlier, or Luciano might've lashed out at you. But once you're outside the museum, things could get dangerous."

Elliana let out a light chuckle. "I already told you—Luciano is going to be too busy tonight dodging fallout to come after me. Trust me, he won't have time for revenge."

Then, taking Hailee's hand, she added warmly, "Let's go. I'm treating you, no arguments."

Hailee didn't resist. There was something about Elliana—her calm assurance, the way she carried herself—that made trusting her feel effortless.

From behind the screen, Cole kept his eyes glued to the surveillance feed. The moment he spotted Elliana walking hand-in-hand with Hailee, laughing without a care in the world, a dark shadow flickered across his expression. Not once had she reached for his hand like that. She could offer warmth so freely to others, yet with him, it was always frost and distance. She had no heart. An unspoken bitterness filled the room like smoke clinging to the walls.

Since there was just an hour left before the show resumed filming, Elliana and Hailee didn't stray far. They picked a modest restaurant directly across from the museum.

It wasn't the fanciest spot around, but for Hailee, it felt like stepping into a different world. The prices alone would've kept her out on a normal day.

"Elliana, eating at this place must be expensive. How about I treat you instead?" Hailee suggested.

Without hesitation, Elliana flashed a grin and opened the menu. "I already said dinner's on me, so just let it happen. Unless, of course, you're worried someone might tease you for eating with a so-called plain Jane."

"Don't be ridiculous." Hailee chuckled. "Actually, I've looked at you closely. You're not plain at all. I think the heavy makeup throws people off. You should try something softer."

"I'm already used to it," Elliana replied with a faint, dismissive smile.

Wanting to spare Hailee the awkwardness of scanning an unfamiliar menu, Elliana took charge and placed their order.

Once the server stepped away, Elliana propped her chin on her palm and turned to Hailee. "So tell me, what's your dream?"

Beneath the question was a quiet offer—Elliana was gauging whether Hailee had ambitions in the art world. If Hailee did, there was a path she could help pave.

But Hailee's eyes lit up with a different kind of excitement. "Right now, all I want is to meet Milena..."

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The moment Hailee's words sank in, Elliana found herself caught between a smile and a sigh. She had originally planned to step in as Rosa to offer help, but fate had played a strange trick—Hailee's wish was tied to her other identity.

Hailee explained, "My boyfriend was born with a _ heart condition. Treating it is extremely challenging, and the doctors say only a major surgery could give him a real shot at getting better. It's a highly complicated procedure, and aside from Dr. Atkinson, the odds of success with anyone else are very low."

Hailee's sentence faded into a breath as she exhaled quietly, the weight of her reality settling in her features. "But they told me Dr. Atkinson doesn't see ordinary people. She's too hard to reach, and even if I could find her, I'd never be able to pay what she charges. Her consultation fees start in the millions. For a surgery like his, the bill would be in the tens of millions."

With a faint, bitter curve of her lips, Hailee pushed through the next part. "Every day, I spend over two thousand dollars just on his medicine. I've drained everything I have just trying to keep up. How could I ever afford a surgery like that?"

Emotion choked off Hailee's voice, catching her mid-sentence. "These days, I'm juggling several jobs, barely affording cheap meals for myself. The little I save goes straight to his prescriptions. I'm terrified every moment that I'll lose one of my jobs, that I'll fall short

and fail him. Therefore, no matter how hard it gets, I can't stop. I can't rest. I have to keep working and somehow find a way to earn more. It's just that I'm exhausted... I'm drowning."

Tears spilled freely now, her shoulders trembling with quiet desperation.

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Across the table, Elliana said nothing. Her silence wasn't indifference—it was the stillness of someone listening deeply. Her gaze reflected Hailee's pain like a mirror. "Doesn't your boyfriend have family? Someone who could step in?"

"He's an orphan. He grew up in an orphanage, Hailee answered softly, shaking her head.

This simple reply brought understanding. Elliana didn't press further. She felt conflicted, uncertain if helping Hailee was the right move. Her identity as Milena was constantly watched by powerful figures and global elites. Some truly needed her skills, but others had darker motives, aiming to exploit her for their own gain. Because of that, exposing herself as Milena wasn't a choice she could make on a whim. As much as she had the heart of a healer, she had to protect herself first.

As if realizing she'd said too much, Hailee quickly dabbed her eyes and gave a sheepish smile. "I'm so sorry, Elliana. You invited me out for a nice meal, and here I am, dumping my problems on you. I promise I won't bring it up again."

Before either of them could say more, the waiter arrived with their food.

While arranging the plates, Hailee mustered a smile and gently ladled a portion onto Elliana's plate. "Let's just eat, okay? Forget all that."

With an understanding nod, Elliana picked up her fork and sliced into the steak. Juices spilled across her plate with every cut, the first bite melting tenderly on her tongue—but despite the flavor, her chest felt heavy. Hailee had a genuinely kind soul. Even with such a heavy weight on her shoulders, she always kept a smile on her face around others, not wanting to be a burden or make anyone worry. Moreover, the moment someone threatened her friend, she stood without hesitation. Someone like her deserved more than silent sympathy.

After finishing her first bite, Elliana met Hailee's eyes. "What about your family? Do they know what you've been doing for your boyfriend?"

In response, Hailee gave a subtle shake of her head. "My family is simple, just me and

my dad. He raised me by running a tiny diner. Paid for everything—school, rent, food. After all that, I feel like I'm failing him now."

Tears were beginning to well again, her voice growing thinner with each word. "I can't let him find out. He'll just worry, and I've already put enough on his shoulders. But I can't abandon my boyfriend either. He's got no one else. I'm all he has. If I let go, he's alone in the world."

Elliana wanted to ask what made this man worth such a sacrifice—what kind of love could drive someone to give so much—but the time wasn't right. A love strong enough to make a woman give up everything had to be a story with many layers. If she had asked Hailee about it, they'd be talking for hours, and that would have pushed back the evening's recording session.

Rather than press further, Elliana tucked her curiosity away. A quiet gesture followed as she gently scooped a bit of food onto Hailee's plate. "Come on, eat something. Things won't stay like this forever. Who knows—maybe that unreachable Dr. Atkinson will appear one day and grant every single wish you've been holding onto."

Tears still clung to Hailee's lashes, but a smile managed to break through. "You don't know how much that means. I know it sounds impossible, but your words make it feel a little less hopeless. Thank you."

No more words passed between them after that. Their meal continued in calm silence, a comforting pause in the chaos of their lives.

By the time they stepped outside, the sky had darkened into a velvet curtain. Across the road, the museum glowed beneath golden lights, its entrance flanked by polished luxury cars.

Guests in tailored suits and floor-length gowns filed inside, laughter and murmurs drifting on the breeze.

Anticipation buzzed in the air—the grand finale of the Starry Oil Painting Competition was about to begin, drawing eyes from every corner of the art world.

With a look that carried more than confidence, Elliana tilted her chin slightly and crossed the street with steady steps. She wasn't here just to compete. Tonight, someone was going to regret crossing her.

The Starry Oil Painting Competition was a big deal, the kind of event that sent shockwaves through the art world. The pieces that made it to the finals were top-notch, and the guest list was a who's-who of heavy hitters.

When Elliana and Hailee rolled up to the museum's entrance, a long red carpet was already rolled out, screaming glitz and glamour. Big shots stepped out of their cars, strutting down the carpet into the museum.

Security was hustling to keep things orderly, while a swarm of media had set up a fortress of cameras and mics, tripping over themselves to snag interviews with any celeb who passed by. The vibe was electric, buzzing with excitement.

Nobody gave Elliana and Hailee a second glance as they were just two regular folks in a sea of stars.

Among the media's darlings were Luciano and Paige, stepping out as the official mentor-disciple duo, soaking up the spotlight.

Luciano had swapped his usual getup for a robe, looking every bit the art guru.

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Paige, clinging to his arm, rocked a sleek gown, her pricey jewelry sparkling like fire under the camera flashes.

The two made sure to park themselves right in the reporters sights, lapping up interviews to boost their fame.

"Miss Jones, you're absolutely glowing tonight," a reporter gushed. "Word is your painting made the finals. You feeling good about snagging the top spot?"

Paige flashed a demure smile. "I'm just a hobbyist. Getting to the finals is already a dream come true. I wouldn't dare hope for more." She glanced at Luciano with a coy grin.

"Going forward, I'll keep learning from my mentor, Mr. Scott, and aim to bring everyone even better work."

While Paige played humble, Luciano piled on the praise. "Paige is selling herself short. Her skills are already top -tier, and I'm betting big on her taking the crown."

"Whoa!" The reporters ate it up.

"Mr. Scott's the head of the Calligraphers and Painters Association. Since he says Miss Jones is the real deal, it's gotta be true. Miss Jones, if you win, don't dodge our follow-up interviews!"

"Miss Jones, we caught your live show, 'The Heiress' Graduation Trip.' Looked like Elliana was just green with envy, stirring up all kinds of trouble."

Paige's sweet smile widened, basking in her moment of glory. Spotting Elliana and Hailee walking together, ignored by the press, her ego swelled even more. She was shining brighter than a supernova, while Elliana was left in the dust. It felt good! If she could clinch the Starry Oil Painting Competition tonight, her star would burn even brighter, and she would surely catch Cole's attention.

That day at the Royal Club, being humiliated by Elliana while Cole just stood by, Paige had given up on winning his heart. But now, hearing he'd stormed out of the Evans estate, rumoredly fed up with Ruben pushing him to consummate the Marriage with Elliana, hope flickered again. She was convinced Cole only kept his distance because of Ruben's pressure. Deep down, he must have a thing for her. Now that he'd broken ranks with Ruben, he wouldn't hold back his feelings anymore. Raylan was decent, sure, but he couldn't hold a candle to Cole. If she could win Cole's affection, that'd be the ultimate victory.

As Paige's mind crafted her prospective union with Cole, her eyes gleamed with imaginary triumph, and she shot Elliana a look dripping with challenge.

Elliana brushed off the silent challenge and strolled into the museum with Hailee. No reporters swarmed them. No celebs tried to chat them up. They walked in without a hitch.

Inside the competition hall, they spotted Haley barking orders at the camera crew to set up their shots, while the other guests were nowhere in sight.

When the two walked in, Haley threw them a cold glance. "Find a seat anywhere. You're not needed on camera tonight."

The whole point of the live broadcast was to showcase Paige's big win on tonight's competition. Everyone else could take a backseat.

Elliana and Hailee didn't care about being off-screen and headed to the spot Haley

pointed out.

Soon after, Paige walked in, arm-in-arm with Luciano.

The closer to the front, the bigger the deal you were. Elliana and Hailee didn't even get proper seats—just a corner in the left corridor. Paige, riding Luciano's clout as head of the Calligraphers and Painters Association, scored a prime spot in the front row.

As Paige passed Elliana, she couldn't hide her smug grin and put on a fake-sweet act. "Elliana, want me to pull some strings for you to secure a front-row seat?"

Elliana gave a faint smile. "No need to fuss over me. You might wanna worry about how long you'll be sitting pretty up there. Don't be shocked if you end up not even fit to sweep the floor here later."

Paige's face froze, her comeback silenced as she walked off.

At 7 p.m. sharp, the Starry Oil Painting Competition finals kicked off.

After the opening remarks, the host ran through the rules and introduced the judges. Everything was locked in, and they started announcing the top ten finalists..

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As president of the Calligraphers and Painters Association, Luciano held deep influence across the art world. With his access to insider information, it was no surprise that Paige had secured an early peek at the finalist list for the Starry Oil Painting Competition. Among the ten works selected for the final round, none came close to matching Paige's submission. Victory wasn't a matter of chance—it was already a quiet certainty.

Meanwhile, the host stood center stage, introducing each piece with practiced flair. A massive screen behind him showcased the artwork one by one, while assistants carefully brought the original canvases into the spotlight for the audience to view.

For nearly ten minutes, this rhythm continued. Lights dimmed across the audience, drawing every eye to the brilliance of the stage, while the host's voice reverberated through the otherwise silent venue.

From her seat near the front, Paige sat with her chin lifted, basking in the anticipation. Her expression radiated pride. She could already envision the moment her name would be announced as the winner. After tonight, her life would change forever. She would rise as the newest darling of the art scene—endorsements lining up, invitations flooding in,

fame chasing her like a shadow.

In the back rows, Kiara and Darin watched with equal excitement. Though their seats lacked prestige, that didn't dampen their enthusiasm.

Kiara's phone buzzed nonstop with messages-offers from fashion houses, cosmetics empires, and brands they never imagined would come calling. Everyone wanted Paige.

Kiara held her head high, beaming with satisfaction as her daughter had brought her such immense pride. The stain of the past scandal had vanished without a trace. She showed every message to Darin, her voice brimming with pride. "Darin, just look at how extraordinary Paige is. The future honor of the Jones family lies completely in her hands."

A wide grin spread across Darin's face. He nodded like a bobblehead. "She really is. Absolutely brilliant."

Tilting her chin, Kiara allowed herself a hint of arrogance. "And she was raised by me. That kind of excellence doesn't appear out of nowhere."

With Merritt as a powerful ally and Paige shining so brightly, Kiara no longer felt the need to bow to Darin's authority. For the first time in years, she had subtly held herself above him.

Rather than argue, Darin welcomed the change. The past—the scandals, the disgrace—no longer held weight in the face of Paige's rising fame and the profits it brought. He softened toward Kiara, more indulgent than before. "You're right. You've brought honor to the Jones family."

He moved closer to Kiara's ear, his voice low and suggestive as he said, "Get ready for something special tonight."

A spark lit up in Kiara's eyes as a rosy flush crept across her cheeks. Since the incident, Darin had avoided her room altogether. But now, things seemed to be shifting in her favor once again.

Without hesitation, Kiara tapped her screen and sent the avalanche of brand offers straight to Paige. "Paige, you've got a flood of endorsements coming in. Any idea which one we should go with?"

Rather than accept them immediately, Paige messaged back confidently, saying, "Mom, there's no need to rush. Once I walk away with the championship tonight, even bigger names will be lining up. These early offers won't even matter."

A proud grin tugged at Kiara's lips. "Your vision is always ahead of the curve, Paige. Alright then, I'll wait for your cue." Conversation ended, Paige shifted her focus back to the stage.

Seated to her left, Luciano kept smiling-his expression brimming with the same anticipation she felt.

Victory for Paige wouldn't just be her moment. It would mark a substantial rise for Luciano. With Paige as Merritt's goddaughter, he could leverage Merritt's influence for more benefits in the future.

Together, the two of them-mentor and disciple—sat poised and composed under the spotlight of the art world, dreaming not of beauty, but of recognition, of status, of wealth. The smugness they wore matched in both polish and pride.

But that confidence cracked the moment applause echoed across the auditorium, just as the final two artworks appeared on the massive screen. A shared look of alarm flickered between them. To their disbelief, the expected list had changed. Two of the previously settled top ten entries had been replaced by submissions they had seen earlier in the day during the live-stream broadcast. These artworks belonged to none other than Elliana and Hailee.

Shock rippled across Luciano's face, contorting his features in disbelief. The artworks he had openly ridiculed before millions of viewers had advanced to the finals of the Starry Oil Painting Competition, leaving him deeply embarrassed.

A nervous jolt ran through Paige, her breath hitched. Elliana had humiliated her before, always at the worst possible moments. Now, that same dread crept back in, making her fingers tremble against her gown. "Mr. Scott, what is going on?" she whispered shakily, turning toward Luciano.

Luciano was just as flustered, though he managed to keep his calm facade. "Don't worry. Even though they've reached the finals, they don't have what it takes to challenge you for the championship. You're still well ahead of them."

Paige felt a bit more at ease after hearing Luciano's words of reassurance. She turned to

steal a glance at Elliana standing off in the corner, wishing she could call Elliana out right then and there. In her eyes, Elliana should be worthless!

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At that moment, chaos broke out across both the live stream and the competition venue as Elliana's and Hailee's artworks made their appearance...

Online discussions erupted. "Didn't Luciano call Elliana's Lonely Sunset and Hailee's Sunward Bloom complete failures? How did these two paintings end up in the Starry Competition finals? Don't tell me they rigged the results?"

"My friend works in the art scene, and according to him, the Starry Oil Painting Competition's judging is brutal. It's a panel packed with seasoned pros—no way anyone can sneak in a subpar painting. Only the best of the best stand a chance."

"Then that means Luciano knew those works had merit—and still tore them down in front of everyone during the live stream earlier!"

"He couldn't handle Elliana challenging him or Hailee standing up for Elliana, so he twisted the truth and pushed them down. That kind of petty behavior doesn't belong to someone who calls himself a master-or a leader in the Calligraphers and Painters Association!"

Though Luciano tried to soothe Paige with gentle words, he was falling apart inside. His nerves were stretched thin.

The news that Elliana's and Hailee's paintings had reached the finals struck Luciano like a blow to the ego. Fearing for his public image, he immediately pulled out his phone to monitor the live stream. With the stream flooded by criticism and the nearby chatter turning venomous, he could feel the sweat soaking through his shirt.

In that moment, he cursed his decision to join "The Heiress ' Graduation Trip." He had accepted Merritt's money to film the show, using his pull to help launch Paige's career. While he did want to stay in Merritt's good graces, what mattered more was building up his own name, not watching it take a hit. But now that he'd made such a fool of himself, how was he supposed to walk back into the art world? And what if this mess blew up into a scandal? What if he lost his spot as president of the Calligraphers and Painters Association? His entire legacy was hanging by a thread.

Haley kept darting glances at the live stream chat, her stomach tightening with every new comment. As soon as the feed was overrun with doubts about Luciano, her nerves

began to panic. Because of how tightly Paige's name was now tied to Luciano, any damage to his image would reflect directly on her. If he went down, so would Paige's credibility as a streaming mentor. Everything they'd built could turn into a running joke.

Feeling overwhelmed, Haley stopped pretending she could handle this alone. She quickly took a series of screenshots and messaged Paige. "Miss Jones, it's getting bad out there. Should we shut down the live stream?"

Paige didn't answer right away. Her brows pinched together as she stared at the screen, unsure whether they were already past the point of saving it. Calling it quits now felt like giving up everything she had clawed her way toward. The championship was right there, practically in her hands. Pulling the plug now would feel like throwing it away. And even if she shut off the cameras, she couldn't erase the murmurs rising from the crowd just a few feet away. She didn't have the luxury of time. After a quick breath and a sharp decision, she responded, "Not yet. Hold off for now. Get some paid commenters to stir the chat and bury the negative stuff."

"Got it," Haley replied without hesitation.

Without wasting a second, Haley deployed a wave of burner accounts to stir the comment section and guide the conversation.

For now, the audience was only questioning Luciano's narrow -mindedness. Luckily, no one had dragged his name through the mud when it came to his reputation in the art world. His credibility and standing remained untouched.

Off to the side, Hailee stood frozen. Wide-eyed, she grabbed Elliana's sleeve and leaned in close. "Elliana, did I really make it? I mean, to the actual finals? This feels unreal!"

A grin tugged at the corners of Elliana's lips as she nodded. "You did it. You're officially a finalist in the Starry Oil Painting Competition."

"But how could that even happen?" Hailee asked, a little unsure. "I'm nothing more than an artist who taught herself everything!"

"You thought you didn't belong. Turns out, you were wrong." With a warm smile, Elliana gave her hand a reassuring pat. "I've always believed in your talent. Your work speaks for itself. Now, just wait for a bit. The final rankings will be out soon, and you're about to walk away with more than just praise."

Hailee's eyes sparkled as she remembered the cash prize. The thought of walking away with at least a hundred thousand made her cheeks glow with excitement.

Behind the scenes, the judges—seasoned artists who had spent their lives surrounded by oil and canvas—had wrapped up their deliberation. Their process was methodical, their standards high. After a careful evaluation, the top three were finalized.

This round hadn't sparked any disagreement. The distinction in skill was evident, and the remaining seven submissions couldn't quite measure up to the chosen few.

Hailee landed in sixth place. Even though she didn't claim one of the podium spots, she could barely contain her joy. This outcome had already gone beyond what she ever imagined. Turning eagerly to Elliana, she asked, "What's the prize for sixth place?"

"Two hundred thousand," Elliana replied.

Two hundred thousand! Hailee felt like her heart might burst right through her ribs...

Chapter: 100

The competition had entered its final stretch—only the champion, runner-up, and third place remained to be named from the top three entries: Elliana's *Lonely Sunset*, Paige's *Riding the Waves*, and Bentlee Potter's *Brick Bridge*.

Tension crackled in the air as the judges deliberated. Both Luciano and Paige sat stone-faced, their expressions tight with unease.

For Paige, it was bitterness. The thought of Elliana—her longtime punching bag—rising to stand shoulder—to-shoulder with her at the summit was intolerable. Elliana was supposed to grovel at her feet, not rival her on center stage. The bile of envy burned in her throat.

Meanwhile, Luciano was being skewered in real time. The crowd at the venue and online viewers alike were tearing into him.

"Luciano's a petty man abusing his title to go after personal enemies. He trashed Elliana's painting live on air, but now she's a finalist! Even if she ends up third, that's still leagues ahead of the garbage he spewed."

"Anyone surprised? This is textbook Luciano. As president of the Calligraphers and Painters Association, how many brilliant artists has he quietly shut out just for not kissing up to him?"

"He struts around pretending to be some enlightened master, preaching about art and life, but deep down he's a bitter, petty fraud. Absolutely revolting."

Haley had tried to smother the backlash by flooding the livestream with paid bots, but with millions watching, her efforts were a drop in the ocean. The comments roasting Luciano just kept coming, brutal and relentless. The real-time outrage swelled, impossible to contain.

Beneath the storm of public scorn, Luciano was unraveling. His grip on composure slipped by the second. Would Elliana be the one to destroy everything he'd built? No. He refused to let that happen. He'd clawed his way to the top, forged his name through sheer will. He couldn't let it all burn now.

Panic tightening his throat, he leaned toward Paige. "Paige, call Mr. Carman-see if he can get a handle on this. I can't let my name get dragged through the mud like this!"

But Paige barely heard him. She was too wrapped up in her own unraveling disaster. Merritt had poured money into the show to boost her stardom, betting on her rise. Too confident in her plan, she had dragged Elliana into it without even giving Merritt a heads-up, intending to use the show as a weapon to wipe Elliana out for good. But the plan had backfired-Elliana wasn't just surviving. Elliana was stealing the spotlight.

What kept Paige up at night was the thought of Elliana ranking higher. If that happened, she wouldn't just lose face-she'd be the punchline of every gossip reel. And worse, Merritt might pin the failure squarely on her.

"Merritt's tied up with bigger things. He can't waste time on this," Paige remarked smoothly, dismissing Luciano without a second glance.

Luciano swallowed his fury. He didn't dare go head-to-head with Paige, not with her ties to Merritt. Still, his stomach churned. If anyone had dragged him into this mess, it was her.

The moment Paige turned away from Luciano, she fired off a message to Haley. "Shut down the live stream. Now."

She could no longer risk everything on chance. If the audience caught even a glimpse of Elliana outshining her, she'd be the butt of every joke on the internet by tomorrow.

Haley didn't hesitate. The stream went dark within seconds.

Across the country, millions of viewers who'd been glued to the broadcast were suddenly met with a blank screen. At first, they thought it was a short-lived malfunction, and the crew were already huddled by the cameras, primed to restart the live feed any moment now. But more than ten minutes ticked away and still no stream. Frustration boiled over. Discussions exploded across social media, forums, and live comment sections. Conspiracy theories took off, accusations flew, and hashtags surged until the topic rocketed to the top of the trending charts.

Meanwhile, outside the Evans Group's conference room, Myles, Aron, and Hugh gathered together, sneakily watching the stream on Aron's phone. When Elliana's painting was announced as a top-three finalist in the Starry Oil Painting Competition, all three froze in disbelief.

Hugh, who had always mocked her behind her back, looked like he'd been punched in the gut. "Hold on—wasn't Elliana just some talentless eyesore? How the hell did she pull that off?"

Myles and Aron gave him matching side-eyes.

"I think I finally get why Mr. Evans found Elliana so fascinating," Myles said, rubbing his jaw. "He must've seen her potential from the start. He's got an eye for talent—he doesn't judge by surface-level stuff."

Aron gave a quick, affirmative nod. "She's full of surprises. Word is, she used to live all by herself in some rundown warehouse in the Jones estate. She was completely ignored for years. When the hell did she even learn to paint?"

Their questions were piling up just as the screen in front of them glitched and went dark. All three froze, eyes wide, stunned into silence. What on earth was that? They'd been seconds away from finding out whether Elliana had clinched the championship.