

## Chapter 834 Exclusive One Percent

Elliana fought valiantly to contain her laughter, but the effort proved monumental.

When Elliana finally regained control, both Cole's and her faces blazed crimson—hers flushed from the sheer force of her amusement, his stained with raw mortification.

A flicker of remorse stirred within Elliana for surrendering so completely to her mirth. She cleared her throat delicately. "Forgive me, I shouldn't have laughed like that. You clearly invested considerable effort into this."

Cole's jaw tightened as he nodded, his hand darting out to snatch the application from her grasp in one swift, almost violent motion. "Don't blame yourself," he ground out. "The fault lies entirely with me." He cursed himself viciously for ever listening to that imbecile Myles.

Frustration simmered in Cole's voice, each word edged with barely restrained fury. He seethed with rage at Myles for dreaming up such an absurd strategy in the first place. And naturally, he felt equally foolish for having followed through with it.

Strangers might struggle to read Elliana, but Cole had fathered two children with this woman—how had he managed to misjudge her preferences so spectacularly? Elliana possessed a formidable spirit. How could he have imagined she would melt at such trite, transparent, saccharine declarations?

Myles had insisted that laboratory testing showed those exact phrases caused ninety-nine percent of female participants' heart rates to skyrocket to one hundred and thirty beats per minute. But those women were ordinary. They paled in comparison to Elliana. She remained a rare treasure, forever belonging to that elusive one percent.

Cole dragged his fingers across his temples in mounting exasperation. Part of him yearned to disappear entirely from Elliana's presence, to

escape this humiliation. Another part burned with the desire to track down Myles and unleash his full wrath upon him. Yes—Myles desperately needed to face the consequences of his terrible advice.

With that resolve crystallizing in his mind, Cole shot to his feet and strode purposefully toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Elliana asked, genuine surprise coloring her tone.

Cole didn't spare her a backward glance. "To give someone a piece of my mind."

The declaration still lingered in the air as he wrenched the door open and stormed through it, letting it slam shut with resounding finality.

Elliana studied the closed door for a long moment before shrugging. To give someone a piece of his mind? Who was about to endure his fury? She chose not to dwell on the question, releasing a quiet sigh instead.

When she had challenged Cole to compose that application—demanding it be genuine, heartfelt, and moving enough to reduce her to tears—she had intended it primarily as a gentle provocation. A test wrapped in playfulness, really.

What she genuinely craved wasn't for Cole to grovel for her affection with elaborate prose. She wanted him to truly comprehend who she was at her core.

She wanted him to revisit the small, tender moments scattered throughout their shared history and, through examining those fragments, understand what she actually needed from him.

If they ever confronted similar hardships in the future, his instinct shouldn't be to conceal the truth and divorce her under the misguided banner of protection—it should be to reveal everything so they could shoulder the burden as equals.

He stood like a towering oak, and she had always aspired to be another tree of equal stature growing beside him. When the tempest descended, she wanted to stand shoulder to shoulder with him against the gale—not huddle beneath his branches seeking shelter, nor be cast aside in the shadows, bewildered and alone.

If he couldn't internalize that fundamental truth, then their reunion held

little purpose. As long as their hearts beat in harmony, their bond would prove unbreakable—regardless of whether a marriage certificate existed to validate it.

But if their core philosophies about partnership remained at odds, that certificate could transform back into divorce papers at the first hint of adversity, unless fate blessed them with an impossibly smooth path forward.

Elliana wondered how much time Cole would need to arrive at this understanding himself.

With that contemplation settling in her mind, Elliana shrugged, content to let him discover the truth through his own journey.

Naturally, Cole hadn't yet undergone that crucial shift in perspective. He still clung to the belief that a man should carry the family's burdens alone, serving as an impenetrable shield between his wife and children and every conceivable storm. When adversity loomed on the horizon, his priority remained unchanging—secure the safety and happiness of his wife and children before turning to face the battle in solitude.

Cole recognized that Elliana embodied the kind of partner who would gladly share his struggles without hesitation, but he couldn't stomach the thought of her enduring even the smallest measure of suffering.

After exploding from the bedroom, Cole marched directly toward the small courtyard where the Fletcher siblings had taken up residence, his expression dark as gathering thunderclouds. His second application had failed to stir Elliana's emotions in any meaningful way. Instead, it had transformed him into an object of ridicule. The memory alone sent fresh waves of humiliation coursing through him. This catastrophe rested squarely on the shoulders of that imbecile Myles.

At that precise moment, Myles's eyelid spasmed uncontrollably. A sinking feeling churned within his chest, and he couldn't dismiss the ominous premonition that catastrophe loomed dangerously close.

Paulina, Aron, and Hugh occupied seats around the table, working their way through breakfast, while Myles prowled back and forth in isolation.

"Myles, aren't you planning to eat? What's driving you to pace like a caged animal?" Hugh inquired, genuine curiosity threading through his words.

These recent days had positioned Hugh as unquestionably the most triumphant among the brothers. His relationship with Heather had been unveiled to the world, and Paulina championed it wholeheartedly—she had already begun orchestrating elaborate arrangements for their upcoming wedding.

Paulina had always harbored a particular fondness for Hugh, and now that favoritism blazed even more conspicuously due to Hugh's relationship with Heather, a remarkable woman.

Every time Paulina lavished praise upon Hugh, she inevitably launched barbed criticisms at Myles and Aron, branding them utterly useless for failing to attract even a single woman's genuine interest. Though frustration simmered hotly within them, Myles and Aron endured the verbal assault in silence, never daring to mount any defense.

Hugh had grown progressively more insufferable in his older brothers' presence, attacking his meal with robust enthusiasm and transparent satisfaction.

Myles already teetered on the edge of a foul temper. Watching Hugh shovel food into his mouth without a single worry only amplified his irritation exponentially. He finally erupted, venom lacing his words. "Mind your own damn business and focus on your food."

Hugh remained utterly unbothered by Myles's caustic attitude. He simply flashed an infuriatingly cheerful grin and countered smoothly, "Don't tell me you've bungled something again and managed to provoke Cole's wrath?"