

Chapter 838 Irony

The moment Manley wrapped up his explanation, Merlin burst into laughter. "You expect us to believe that? Come on, Manley, when have you ever been single? If I remember correctly, your dating history could cover the whole city block and then some."

"Stop pulling my leg." Manley tried to brush it off with an awkward grin. "Those were just casual flings, nothing serious. Besides, I'm not interested in settling down with just anyone. I'm waiting for someone on Elliana's level."

"Then get comfortable being alone forever," Merlin shot back, blunt as ever. "Do you really think a regular guy can handle a woman like Elliana? Look at Cole; she turned him into a full-time house husband."

Even though Merlin seemed to be talking to Manley, his jab was clearly aimed at Cole.

Manley couldn't help but laugh, trying to stir up more trouble. He grabbed Cole's sleeve and sniffed it theatrically. "You smell like baby formula! Are you on bottle duty day and night? I bet you're rubbing your wife's feet once the kids are asleep, too!"

Cole slapped Manley's hand away, not the least bit embarrassed. In fact, he looked rather pleased. "What if I do feed my kids? What if I do give my wife foot massages? You're just jealous because you wish you had what I have, but you don't."

Manley fell silent, at a loss for words. Truthfully, he did envy Cole for having such an amazing wife and those sweet kids. He often dreamed of having that same happiness.

Cole caught the look of longing in Manley's eyes and couldn't resist twisting the knife. "Honestly, there's no point arguing with lonely bachelors like you."

Lonely bachelor! Manley slapped a hand dramatically to his forehead, pretending he'd been mortally wounded. He used to be the heartthrob

everyone talked about, surrounded by admirers. Now, being single was something to joke about. That hurt more than he wanted to admit.

Having won that round, Cole's gaze shifted to Hailee, who sat beside Merlin. He turned to Merlin and said, "Would you mind asking your secretary to step out? We have things to discuss that aren't meant for her."

These days, Merlin brought Hailee everywhere, even though nothing romantic had developed between them. Still, they were hardly ever apart.

At Cole's request, Merlin pulled out his credit card and handed it to Hailee. "Go shopping. Get whatever catches your eye."

Without a single word, Hailee took the card and quietly left the private room.

As soon as the door clicked shut, Manley's curiosity went into overdrive. "Merlin, when are you finally going to make your move? You bring Hailee everywhere you go, but you never take it any further. If it were me, I would have swept her off her feet by now!"

"You really think Hailee is just another one of your flings?" Merlin shot back. He let out a sigh, his voice gentler. "She still hasn't healed from what Boris put her through. Her heart is guarded, and she's skittish. I'm terrified that if I confess how I feel, I'll just drive her away."

"Hailee? Skittish?" Manley raised an eyebrow, unconvinced. He could understand her hesitation after what happened with Boris; she nearly gave up a kidney for Boris, after all. Wariness made sense, but fearfulness didn't quite add up.

Manley remarked, "Back at the Craig family banquet, she faced off with Boris like a flame ready to burn, bold and fierce. So where was that shy side hiding then?"

"She was bold only because Elliana encouraged her," Merlin explained, shaking his head. "Without Elliana pushing her, she wouldn't have spoken up. Spending every day with me has only made her more cautious. She's constantly on edge." He paused, rubbing the back of his neck. "I try to be gentle and keep things light, but it doesn't seem to help. She still keeps her distance from me."

Turning to Cole, Merlin said, "I'm thinking of giving Hailee a break so she

can help Elliana with the kids. Do you think you could ask Elliana to keep Hailee's spirits up for me? I'd owe you."

Cole's mouth curled into a half-smirk. "Didn't you once tell me to keep Elliana away from Hailee? Now, you're basically begging for Hailee to spend time with my wife. Isn't that a bit hypocritical?"

"Ahem!" Merlin cleared his throat awkwardly, unable to come up with a comeback.

Merlin had once been adamant about keeping Elliana from influencing Hailee, but now, he was practically begging for it. The irony wasn't lost on anyone.

At that moment, Allan, who had been silently brooding, let out a sharp, dismissive snort. "This is ridiculous."

Cole, Merlin, and Manley all turned toward him at once.

Allan narrowed his eyes, irritation clear in his voice as he snapped, "If all you came to do is drink and argue like a bunch of kids, count me out. I've got better things to do than waste time on this foolishness."

Everyone knew exactly why Allan was in such a foul mood. He still couldn't get over Ava. He'd fallen hard for her from the start, and the heartbreak hadn't faded one bit.

Manley leaned toward Cole and whispered, "Ava was Elliana's housekeeper, wasn't she? Doesn't Elliana know where she is?"

Cole pressed his mouth into a firm line, clearly unwilling to speak up. Lying felt wrong—he owed Allan the truth as a friend—but telling the whole story might get him kicked out of his own bedroom by Elliana. He felt trapped between loyalty and self-preservation.

Allan locked eyes with Cole, his gaze sharp and unyielding. "Ava and Elliana were close. Even if Ava went abroad, she wouldn't cut off all contact with Elliana. So tell me, are you deliberately keeping Ava's location from me?"