

Wife Mask 231

Chapter: 231

From that day forward, Merlin's name had become synonymous with danger. Women who had once entertained fanciful dreams about him now shrank from his presence, whispers of his temper trailing in his wake. Even those with no romantic designs treaded carefully around him, fearing that the slightest accidental touch might provoke another storm.

And yet-Hailee had just bitten his wrist. He should have hurled her away, just as he had Vivien. His instinct should have flared like wildfire. But instead, nothing. No, not nothing. Something stirred. Something maddeningly unfamiliar. He didn't want to strike her. He didn't even want to move. There was an odd warmth swelling in his chest-infuriatingly tender, strangely sweet.

His arm tingled where her teeth had sunk in, an electric buzz spreading under his skin. It coursed through him, numbing and paralyzing him. His Legs wouldn't obey. His body, once so quick to recoil, now refused to respond.

Even his voice-his sharp, commanding voice—failed him. He opened his mouth to lash out, to demand she stop whatever madness this was, but not a single word escaped.

And just like that, the moment hung in suspension—frozen in time.

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That outburst, though meant to intimidate, landed with all the weight of a kitten's hiss.

Looking down at her, Merlin's lips curled into a grin, amusement flickering in his eyes. This girl could barely hold herself up, yet she was still trying to bare her claws. The contradiction didn't escape him. Blood from his wrist still painted her mouth, turning her lips a striking shade of crimson. It should've looked gruesome. Instead, it had a strange allure.

"I'm not here to kill you," Merlin said calmly. "My name's Merlin Blakely. I'm a friend of Cole's, and I'm here on Elliana's behalf to pick you up."

Suspicion lingered in her eyes as she studied him. Her breathing had slowed, but her mistrust hadn't faded. After several tense seconds, her voice came quieter this time. "How do I know you're telling the truth?"

He said flatly, "Believe what you want."

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"Could you, um, let me down, Mr. Blakely?" Hailee murmured, her cheeks burning.

With a sidelong glance at Manley and Allan, who were loitering near the cabin door like curious spectators, Merlin gently lowered her.

Even though her fear had subsided, her body hadn't caught up. Her legs buckled the moment they met the floor, and the salty wind did her no favors as she tilted dangerously.

Merlin didn't hesitate—his hand darted out to catch her around the waist. The contact surprised him. Her waist felt delicate, almost silk-like, and it startled him how pleasant the touch was.

His touch only deepened Hailee's embarrassment. She immediately pulled away, summoning all her willpower to stand on her own. Once steady, she glanced up, mortified. "Thank you for helping me, Mr. Blakely," she murmured, nearly under her breath.

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As confusion clouded both their faces, Merlin stormed past them at the bottom of the gangway without so much as a glance. He disappeared into the cabin, radiating a tension that warned them to keep their mouths shut.

One look between Manley and Allan was all it took. Neither of them dared to speak. No one messed with Merlin when he was in a mood—not unless they wanted to get burned.

Just as the silence settled in, Hailee reached the gangway steps herself.

Manley's gaze shifted to her face, studying her carefully. A thought suddenly crossed his mind, piecing together something unexpected...

Cole had traveled from Ublento to Merritt's yacht, which was anchored in international waters. He'd arranged for a sizeable security detail, cleverly splitting them between two flights to keep the kidnappers off balance. His own plane arrived at the yacht first, while the other—packed with bodyguards—remained in the area, circling over the waters and awaiting his signal.

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Inside, Elliana sat on a plush sofa, curled comfortably in Cole's arms. Their closeness was clear.

Merlin Lounged on another couch while Allan and Manley took seats across from him.

Hailee lingered near the aisle, unsure of where to sit. Everything about the luxurious cabin made her uneasy. She wasn't used to this world. Private jets, designer interiors, and elite company—it all felt far from the modest life she'd known. Worse, she had just clashed with Merlin. That tension still clung to her, making her feel even more out of place.

Elliana completely understood what Hailee was feeling and had every intention of sitting with Hailee to help her feel less alone. However, Cole had latched onto her like a second skin, his arm securely fastened around her waist, leaving her with little room to move, let alone joining Hailee. Calling Cole out didn't feel right, especially since he had taken a bullet for her earlier. So, for now, she let him cling without protest.

Catching Hailee's uncertain glance, Elliana offered a reassuring smile and gestured to the couch across from her. "Hailee, come sit over here."

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Every pair of eyes in the room turned toward her like she was walking onto a stage.

With a small first-aid kit clutched tightly in her hands, Hailee made her way toward Merlin, her voice barely above a whisper as she asked, "Mr. Blakely, would it be okay if I treated your wound?"

Merlin, all icy detachment, cast her a sideways glance and then looked away just as fast. "Not necessary," he replied, his voice cold enough to frost glass.

The rejection hit Hailee hard. Her cheeks turned pink as silence settled between them. Merlin's indifference was like standing outside in a snowstorm with no coat. Cold. Sharp. Unwelcoming. She wanted to walk away, but the guilt gnawed at her—she'd bitten him, and now his wrist was still bleeding. Letting it go untreated didn't sit right.

"Mr. Blakely, I get that you're angry and want nothing to do with me. But please, let me wrap it up. I'll feel terrible if I walk away without helping. nearly pleading. "After that, I'll leave you alone and won't bother you again."

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He hadn't expected Hailee to be the type to give so much of herself, especially for someone she'd known for not too long. That kind of love, that level of devotion, was foreign to him. And it burned.

Jealousy reared its head, sharp and sudden. Just how deeply did she love this man to make such sacrifices?

The thought twisted inside Merlin like a blade. He yanked at his collar, the irritation evident, and muttered coolly, "Her affairs have nothing to do with me."

That was his way of saying he was giving up on Hailee.

Elliana felt an immediate rush of relief. Hailee was far too gentle, too pure, too naive for the cutthroat world of Merlin's circle. The idea of Merlin-cold, unpredictable— disrupting Hailee's life had left her uneasy. His decision to back off was the best outcome.

Just as Elliana let out a quiet breath, she noticed something—Merlin's piercing gaze had turned on her.

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Rather than answer immediately, Elliana glanced at Cole, hoping for even a flicker of reassurance. But his expression was unreadable, and the disappointment settled in her chest like a weight. She turned her attention to Merlin instead, meeting his sharp gaze. There was no mistaking the threat behind those eyes—if he believed she was endangering Cole, he'd pull the trigger without a second thought.

Everything about Merlin radiated cold precision, a man born for split-second violence.

But Elliana didn't flinch. Her voice rang out, sharper and more resolute than his. "My life isn't a courtroom, and I owe you no testimony. You don't get to demand answers."

"You!" For the first time, a crack appeared in Merlin's cold demeanor. He couldn't keep the violent urge buried any longer. He shot to his feet without warning.

His sudden movement stirred the room. Tension rolled in like a tide, and the energy turned sharp, brimming with confrontation.

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Across the room, Aron and Hugh exchanged uneasy glances. Though their time with Elliana had been limited, she hadn't struck them as dangerous—at least, not toward Cole. Yet, after what they'd seen, they couldn't ignore the possibility. For Cole's safety, they too found themselves aligning with Merlin's judgment, however reluctantly.

Manley spoke up. "Cole, I think Elliana is nice. I really do. But compared to your safety, that doesn't carry weight."

Now, every pair of eyes in the room was trained on Cole. But he remained still.

Then, without warning, Merlin reached out and slid the black handgun resting on the table toward Cole. "If you're serious about eliminating the threat," he said, "this is the time. The place. The stars have aligned."

No one spoke-but everyone knew exactly what Merlin meant. If there was ever a perfect time to end Elliana—it was now.

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The silence stretched like a blade between them. Neither moved. Neither spoke.

Then, after what felt like hours, Cole broke the stillness with a quiet laugh. He said dryly, "You still found time for a shower?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Elliana met his gaze coolly.

Once Elliana's words trailed off, Cole slowly lifted his arm and pointed the gun straight at her.

Elliana kept her gaze steady on him, her body still. But Cole, always observant, had already picked up on the coin nestled between her fingers by her side. Given her precision, throwing that coin would carry the same weight as pulling a trigger. He noticed it. Still, he acted like he hadn't seen anything. Instead, he offered her a quiet, unreadable smile. "With how clever you are, honey, I doubt you're unaware of what we were talking about just now."