

Wife Mask 371

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However, thirty long minutes crawled past, and Merlin still hadn't appeared on the stairs.

Lucas found himself checking his watch repeatedly, genuinely puzzled about what could possibly be requiring so much time for a simple clothing change.

Just as his bewilderment reached its peak, his phone burst to life—Merlin was calling.

Lucas answered with practiced speed, his voice maintaining its respectful tone. "Mr. Blakely, do you have specific instructions for me?"

"Lucas, I need you to come upstairs immediately." Merlin's voice carried an unusual edge of frustration.

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"Absolutely!" Lucas nodded with theatrical conviction. "Have you forgotten how women used to flock to you, drawn like moths to flame? Especially Vivien—she practically worshipped at your feet!"

Yet, doubt still clouded Merlin's features. "Then why does Hailee look at me as if I'm invisible?"

Lucas chose his words like a chess player selecting moves. "Ms. Loftus was still under Boris's shadow before. Now that his influence has lifted, she'll recognize your worth soon enough."

This answer struck gold with Merlin. The man who had been cold and stern moments before now had a smile tugging at his lips.

"Ahem!" Merlin cleared his throat softly and then pointed toward the door. "Wait outside. I will get changed."

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"Sweet mercy, we hit the jackpot again! Time to cash in on another VIP visit!"

"I'm calling my wife before this guy clears us out. More bodies means more money!"

The restaurant hummed with anticipation as people positioned themselves for Merlin's generosity.

Steam rose from the kitchen where Hailee was perfecting a batch of spaghetti. When the commotion reached her ears, she bolted from her station, and upon learning about the VIP's arrival, she rushed out of the restaurant to investigate.

The human wall around Merlin's Bentley parted like the Red Sea as Hailee approached.

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Each person received a crisp bundle of cash—ten thousand dollars—and the distribution flowed like water.

Over a hundred people had gathered outside the restaurant, and within minutes, more than a million dollars had changed hands with breathtaking efficiency.

Hailee watched the display with her mouth slightly open, unable to process the casual distribution of wealth happening before her eyes. Before she could gather her thoughts, the street had emptied as completely as if a Magician had waved a wand.

Lucas shook his head in amazement at the locals' refreshing honesty—they'd taken their money and vanished without drama or demands for more. He led his team through the restaurant's front door to finish the job.

Inside, a mix of regular customers and opportunists waited with barely contained excitement.

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Hailee maintained her careful distance, trailing behind him like a reluctant shadow.

Once they stepped inside, Briggs appeared from the kitchen's steamy depths. The sight of Merlin in his impeccable attire prompted an immediate bow of respect. "Sir, have you come for our spaghetti?"

Merlin had arrived with plans to whisk Hailee away, but stepping into the cozy restaurant awakened an unexpected hunger that made his stomach contract with longing. He offered Briggs a polite nod. "I have."

Briggs puffed up with pride, convinced by neighborhood chatter that his culinary reputation had reached the city's elite circles, drawing powerful men to sample his humble creations at this modest establishment.

"Hailee, get these tables and chairs sorted immediately!" Briggs commanded with newfound authority.

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She then disappeared into the kitchen's organized chaos.

Briggs found himself displaced, relegated to hovering behind the counter like furniture. Frustration gnawed at his chest with sharp teeth. Hadn't the neighbors proclaimed his cooking skills legendary among the city's power brokers? Then why did every wealthy patron who graced his establishment specifically request someone else handle their meal? Cole had insisted Elliana work the stove, and now Merlin demanded Hailee's touch. What did that make him decoration?

No one noticed the quiet storm brewing in Briggs' chest.

While Hailee disappeared into the kitchen to prepare the spaghetti, Merlin found himself trapped in an impossible situation. He desperately wanted to connect with Briggs—after all, winning over the father was crucial if he hoped to pursue the daughter. But the problem was that Merlin possessed all the social grace of a brick wall.

Years of avoiding meaningless chatter had left Merlin's conversational muscles severely atrophied. He searched frantically for common ground with Briggs, but their worlds couldn't have been more different. What could a wealthy man possibly discuss with a humble restaurant owner? Minutes crawled by as Merlin's mind remained frustratingly blank.

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The damage was irreversible—this culinary disaster couldn't possibly be served to anyone, let alone her benefactor. Merlin had honored her humble establishment with his presence, and she had repaid him with what amounted to edible cement. But preparing a fresh batch would require significant time. Would his patience extend that far?

While she wrestled with this dilemma, Briggs materialized in the kitchen doorway. "Hailee, what's the holdup? Why hasn't the spaghetti made its appearance yet?"

Heat flooded Hailee's cheeks as embarrassment consumed her. "I'm so sorry, Dad. My mind wandered, and I forgot to monitor the pot. The spaghetti is overcooked."

Briggs clicked his tongue in disapproval. "Good heavens, child! How does one become distracted during such a simple task? That important gentleman is still waiting out there. You're damaging our family's business's reputation!"

With practiced efficiency, Briggs gently moved his daughter aside. "Go offer our apologies to the gentleman. I'll handle preparing a fresh batch."

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Briggs let out a deep sigh of relief, a flicker of admiration now lighting up his face as he looked at Merlin. Just moments ago, he'd been grumbling about how this guy must've been out of his mind- but now, all those doubts were gone. This big-shot boss was surprisingly humble and down-to - earth. Honestly, he seemed like a genuinely good person!

Merlin easily picked up on the change in Briggs' demeanor, and it amused him. He gave Briggs a friendly smile before turning toward Hailee, eyes twinkling with humor. "Let's call this one a practice round," he said playfully. "But next time I come by, I expect the real deal-got it?"

Hailee gave a sheepish nod, flustered and apologetic. "I'm really sorry, Mr. Blakely. After everything you've done for me, I couldn't even manage a proper plate of spaghetti. I-"

Finally, it clicked for Briggs. His eyes widened as he looked at Hailee. "Wait-you know this gentleman?"

Hailee nodded. "This is Mr. Blakely. He's a friend of Elliana's and has helped me out a lot lately."

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The first time they met, when she'd bitten his wrist, the overwhelming sensation had caught him off guard.

The second time, just standing close as they spoke, he had felt dizziness all over him like he had the flu.

Now, with her beside him and only inches of air between them, he felt all that again-plus a deep, aching thirst. The kind even water couldn't fix. It was strange. It was maddening. And he was quietly falling apart.

After watching her for a long second, he licked his dry lips. His voice came out rough. "You seem scared of me."

Hailee had been sitting like a rabbit caught in headlights. She felt his stare but kept her head low, determined to stay quiet. But then he spoke. His voice hit her like a jolt. She flinched. "I-" She wanted to lie. She really did. But honesty beat her to it. "I'm a little scared of you."

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Another way? Hailee stared at him, caught completely off guard. "'I-what exactly could I do for you?'"

He didn't skip a beat. "I've reviewed your credentials. Ublento University, Secretarial Studies, top of your class. Not exactly common. I must say, I'm impressed. And coincidentally, I happen to be in need of a secretary."

Hailee blinked, unsure if she'd heard him right. "You.. You want me to work for you? As your secretary?"

"Is that an issue?" Merlin asked coolly, already moving forward as if her answer never mattered in the first place. "Sure, you did well in the Starry Oil Painting Competition, but painting's just a side hobby for you. That illustrator gig at the publishing house fell into your lap by chance. If I had to guess, what you really want is a job that actually lines up with your major, right?"

Hailee clamped her lips shut, saying nothing. But silence was admission enough-he'd read her like an open page. Back in high school, she'd aced her SATs and filled out her applications on her own, choosing Ublento University's Secretarial Studies program as her top pick.