

## Wife Mask 381

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Seconds later, he handed Hailee a sleek tablet. "Ms. Loftus, please review the terms. If everything's in order, you can sign right here."

Hailee stared at the screen, blinking. So this was how things worked in the upper echelons—swift, paperless, clinical in its efficiency. No hoops, no waiting. Just instant results. Still, wasn't this moving a little too fast?

Hailee accepted the tablet from Lucas, her hands heating up like she was holding something far more dangerous than a device. It felt less like a contract and more like signing her life away.

Her heart fluttered nervously as she began scrolling through the contract, scanning every clause while Merlin sat beside her in silence, eyes locked on her every move.

Inside the vehicle, the atmosphere was tense and still—not a single word was spoken.

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Unaware of the storm brewing in her mind, Merlin's voice broke the silence, laced with light amusement. "Now that the paperwork's done, you've officially become mine. From here on, make sure you follow my instructions carefully, alright?"

Hailee found herself puzzled by the way he phrased it. Become his? She could not make sense of what he was even suggesting. She looked up at him, ready to speak, but his face was calm and unreadable—no lecherous grin, no inappropriate smirk. If she made a fuss now, it would seem like she was reading too much into it. He probably just meant she was now part of his staff.

Her lips parted and then closed again. In the end, she simply nodded. "Understood, Mr. Blakely."

Merlin reached out and gently tousled her hair, his tone turning even softer as he said, "That's my girl."

The unexpected gesture sent a strange chill down Hailee's spine. All she had done was sign a job contract—so why did it feel like she had just been claimed?

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And just like that, Merlin strolled in, exuding effortless confidence, with Hailee trailing quietly behind him.

Hailee had never stepped foot inside a mansion so grand, and facing a room full of curious strangers made her feel microscopic. She instinctively shrank behind Merlin, her footsteps hushed, her shoulders tight.

Merlin, on the other hand, looked like he was walking on air. Calm, composed, and even radiant. As he crossed into the living room, he gave Ruben a respectful nod and dipped into a slight bow. "My sincerest apologies for keeping you waiting," he said smoothly. "I'm prepared to accept whatever punishment you deem necessary."

Ruben, who had always admired Merlin's poise and principles, showed not a trace of annoyance. He let out a warm chuckle. "Merlin, my boy, you look sharper every time you walk through that door."

"Your words are too kind," Merlin replied, his tone polished, his posture unshakably poised.

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Norwood and Joslyn stepped forward first, cutting through the tense silence as they approached Hailee and bowed deeply.

"Ms. Loftus," Joslyn said earnestly, "I'm truly sorry. I didn't raise my son properly, and I mishandled things afterward, causing you pain. I deeply regret it."

Norwood spoke up. "Ms. Loftus, I'm to blame for raising such a reckless son. Then, I made it worse by trying to cover up Boris's actions and slandering you. I know I deserve harsh judgment, but I ask for your forgiveness."

After their apologies, they bowed again, keen to secure her forgiveness.

Hailee, who had been reserved and timid earlier, now faced the Craigs with a cool, firm demeanor. She had no reason to feel nervous—their apologies were the least they owed her. Given the suffering they'd caused her, mere words felt like a small price for them to pay.

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Though the words came quietly, their impact cut deeper than anything she'd said before. In front of everyone, she had just reduced Trinity to something less than decency.

A sharp, wrenching pain tore through Trinity's chest. Would the Evans family still accept her after tonight's disgrace? Did she have any hope left of marrying into their family? Hailee had ripped her carefully-built image to pieces. Bitterness boiled inside her. She loathed Hailee, the woman from humble beginnings who refused to show an ounce of leniency even after crushing her.

Still, rage gave way to cold necessity. Trinity bowed her head, voice quivering. "Thank you for your advice, Ms. Loftus."

Heavy tears tracked down Trinity's face, washing away the last remnants of her pride. As she cried, she darted a covert glance at Lance. What was running through his mind now? After all, he had once adored her without question.

Lance furrowed his brows, his eyes fixed on her with a shocked, disappointed expression that twisted the knife deeper.

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Cole trailed behind at an unhurried pace.

Once outside, Merlin glared after Elliana, annoyance crackling in his voice. "Are you incapable of reining in that infuriating wife of yours? Does she need to be glued to Hailee every waking moment?"

"What exactly do you mean by my wife bothering Hailee?" Cole raised an eyebrow, his voice thick with sarcasm as he looked at Merlin. "They're best friends. Hailee's known my wife long before you even showed up. And let's be clear, Hailee never agreed to be your girlfriend. So if anyone's being bothersome, it's you."

Merlin's cheeks reddened at the remark, but before long, a confident smirk returned to his face. "Okay, maybe Hailee hasn't agreed to be my girlfriend in the usual sense. But she did sign up to be my secretary, my personal assistant around the clock."

Cole raised an eyebrow, staring at him for a moment before letting out a short laugh. "Wow. Didn't expect you to play it this smoothly. You really lured that innocent girl into your trap already?"

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Cole nodded and guided Elliana back toward the mansion.

Now that everything had been resolved, the Craig family had no reason left to stick around. After exchanging a few polite words with Ruben, they quietly took their leave.

Trinity, however, remained behind. Though thoroughly humiliated earlier, the Evans family hadn't officially cast her out-so she clung to the last shred of her dignity by staying under their roof.

When Elliana and Cole returned to the living room, they found Ruben deep in conversation with Trinity. "You were raised by the Evans family," Ruben said patiently. "So if you made mistakes, part of the blame falls on us too. No one's perfect. What matters now is that you learn from this and do better."

Trinity's eyes were red and swollen. She nodded quickly. "I understand, Ruben. I won't make the same mistake again."

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Every step seemed too loud in the hush of the night.

Grass brushed against her ankles as she made her way forward, not stopping until she finally reached the location Ruben had sent. She spotted him up ahead, sitting by himself on a broad, flat rock. His head was tilted toward the sky, letting the moonlight wash over him like a quiet blessing.

Ruben snapped his head around the instant her footsteps reached him.

"Rub—" Ruben didn't let Elliana finish. Instead, he let out a scream so sharp and terrified that it punched through the still night. "Ah!"

Before she could say a word, he toppled backward and hit the ground with a thud, completely out cold.

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"You hurried me so much that I barely had a chance to finish my makeup!" Elliana explained smoothly, her tone caught somewhere between laughter and frustration. "So, what made you call me over in such a rush?"

When Elliana asked her question, Ruben didn't answer right away. Instead, he muttered with a hint of mischief, "Help me up first."

"Oh. Right," Elliana said. She gently pulled him up and then helped him back onto the flat rock he'd been sitting on.

Ruben's moody face softened into a grin. He patted the empty space beside him. "Come sit, Elliana."

She nodded and sat beside him.

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Jeff wasn't thrilled either. He'd been watching Lance lately and detected that Lance had developed feelings toward Elliana. And he didn't want to compete against Lance for Elliana's attention.

Elliana didn't want to see Lance since Cole had warned her to keep her distance from Lance, and she didn't want trouble.

Clueless to the collective rejection, Lance walked up cheerfully. "Ruben, Elliana, Jeff!"

Jeff narrowed his eyes. "Lance, what are you doing here?"

Lance shrugged. "I saw you sneaking out and got curious. Didn't expect to find this..."