



Only Ever Mine

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: He's a billionaire who gets what he wants. She's a chef with everything to lose. Neither is prepared for what comes next.

Christian Valen doesn't do love—too messy, too distracting. But when fiery chef Scarlett Lane crosses his path, he's hungry for more than just her world-class cuisine.

Scarlett has worked too hard to let a smooth-talking billionaire derail her success. Yet Christian is relentless, devastatingly charming, and dangerously close to breaking down her walls.

Just as passion ignites, a ruthless rival threatens to destroy Scarlett's career. Christian vows to protect her, but can she trust a man who's always kept emotions at bay?

When love and ambition collide, will they fight for each other—or lose everything?

Total Pages (Source): 74

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:12 am

1

CHRISTIAN

The ballroom sparkled with that cold, over-the-top elegance I'd seen at a million events like this.

Everything shined—polished marble floors, crystal chandeliers dripping from the ceiling, and a sea of people wrapped in designer labels.

It was meant to be impressive, but all I could feel was how lifeless it was.

I adjusted the cuffs of my tuxedo, scanning the room for something—anything—to hold my interest.

The event, a charity gala for some cause I couldn't quite recall, was the sort of obligation my family insisted I attend.

I usually showed up, made a few connections, and slipped out early. Tonight was going to be one of those nights. Or so I thought.

And then I saw her. She wasn't part of the crowd. She was apart from it.

Near the far end of the room, standing with a group of staff, her auburn hair caught the soft light, drawing my attention like a flame in the dark.

Her face was stunning—sharp cheekbones, delicate features, and full lips that looked

like they'd curve into a smirk at the slightest provocation.

But it wasn't just her face that held me captive. It was the way she moved—unhurried, yet purposeful.

She exuded confidence, the kind that wasn't performative but rooted in something real.

The crisp white chef's jacket she wore, paired with sleek black pants, should have made her blend in with the staff, but on her, it looked like a statement.

She wasn't here to impress anyone. That fact only made her more magnetic.

I'd never been the type to believe in being struck by someone at first sight. Attraction? Sure. Lust? Absolutely. But this was something else.

This was a pull I couldn't explain, one that had me adjusting my tie and crossing the room before I even realized what I was doing.

I approached slowly, giving myself time to take her in. She was speaking with a waiter, her voice low and authoritative.

Her tone wasn't harsh, though—it was calm, steady, the kind of voice that demanded attention without raising its volume.

I liked that. Too many people in my world felt the need to shout to be heard.

Her lips quirked into a small smile as the waiter nodded and scurried off, leaving her alone for the moment. It was my opening.

"Excuse me," I said, stepping closer.

She turned to face me, and for a second, I forgot how to breathe.

Her eyes were a piercing green, sharp and intelligent, like they could see straight through me.

“Yes?” she said, her tone polite but guarded.

I offered her a smile. “I wanted to compliment the food. It’s... exceptional.”

Her eyebrow arched slightly, her expression skeptical. “Exceptional? That’s a bold word. Are you just being polite?”

“Not at all.” My voice came out lower than I intended, but I didn’t bother correcting it.

Her presence seemed to do something to me, something I wasn’t used to.

“Polite isn’t really my style. I say what I mean,” I told her.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:12 am

Her lips twitched, and I got the sense she was fighting back a smile.

“Well, in that case, thank you. I’ll take that as high praise,” she replied.

“It is.”

The way her eyes met mine, unflinching and full of challenge, sent a jolt through me.

Most people looked at me with some combination of awe, envy, or barely disguised greed. This woman didn’t.

She looked at me like I was just a man standing in her way, and for some reason, that only made me want her more.

“Scarlett Lane,” she said, extending her hand.

“Christian Valen.”

Her hand was small but firm in mine, her grip self-assured. I held on a beat longer than necessary, just to feel the heat of her skin against mine.

“Valen, huh?” she said, pulling her hand back. “I think I’ve heard of you.”

“Good things, I hope,” I told her with a smile.

“Let’s just say the Valen name tends to come up in certain circles.”

“And what do you think of what you’ve heard?” I asked.

Her eyes narrowed slightly, the barest hint of a smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth. “I try not to judge people based on rumors.”

I laughed softly, intrigued by her boldness. Most people in her position—working at an event for people like me—wouldn’t dare speak so candidly.

But Scarlett didn’t seem to care about the dynamics of wealth or status.

“So, Scarlett,” I said, leaning in slightly, lowering my voice just enough to make it feel intimate, “how does someone as talented as you end up catering an event like this?”

She crossed her arms, and the movement pulled my attention to the curve of her waist, the subtle way the tailored jacket hugged her figure.

“I own a restaurant,” she said simply. “Amélie. Have you heard of it?”

I nodded. “I’ve been there. The lamb shank? One of the best I’ve ever had.”

Her expression softened, her eyes warming slightly. “Good to know you have taste.”

“I like to think so.” My gaze dropped briefly to her lips before snapping back to her eyes. If she noticed, she didn’t show it.

“And you?” she asked, tilting her head. “What’s your excuse for being here?”

“Obligation,” I admitted. “My family’s heavily involved in this charity.”

“And you’re not?” Scarlett asked.

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

She smiled faintly, shaking her head. “That’s not what I asked.”

“Fair enough.” I chuckled, taking a sip of the champagne I’d barely touched. “Let’s just say I prefer being behind the scenes.”

“Funny,” she said. “You don’t strike me as someone who stays in the background.”

“Why’s that?”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

Scarlett shrugged, her eyes flicking over my face, like she was trying to figure me out.

“You’ve got that... presence,” she said, her tone casual, but there was something sharp underneath. “People like you—big personalities, big money—you just naturally take up space. Even when you’re not trying to.”

I couldn’t tell if she was complimenting me or calling me out, but the way she said it hit me in a way I wasn’t prepared for. No one had ever made me feel this... seen.

“And you?” I asked, leaning in slightly, my voice dropping lower. “Do you take up space?”

Her lips curved into a slow, teasing smile, equal parts invitation and challenge. “Only when it’s worth it,” she said, her voice like a dare.

The air between us shifted, thickened. For a moment, I forgot we were surrounded by hundreds of people.

All I could focus on was the way her green eyes seemed to pull me in, the way her scent—something soft and clean, with a hint of vanilla—wrapped around me like a tether.

“You’re interesting,” I said, my voice rougher than I intended.

Scarlett blinked, clearly caught off guard. “Interesting?”

“Most people here are predictable. You’re not.”

She looked at me for a long moment, her gaze unyielding. “Careful, Christian. I’m not sure you’d know what to do with someone who isn’t predictable.”

I leaned in just slightly, the corner of my mouth lifting in a smirk. “Try me.”

Her breath hitched, so softly I almost missed it. But I didn’t miss the way her pupils dilated or the way her lips parted, just barely.

She was affected, no matter how hard she tried to hide it.

But before I could press further, she straightened, glancing at her watch.

“I should get back to work,” she said, her voice steady, but her cheeks were a touch pinker than before.

“Let me take you to dinner,” I said, surprising even myself.

Scarlett froze for a second, her expression unreadable. “Dinner?”

“Yes. You know, two people sitting across from each other, sharing good food, good wine...” I let the implication hang in the air.

She studied me like she was trying to decide whether I was serious or just playing a game. “I’ll think about it,” she said finally.

It wasn’t the answer I wanted, but it wasn’t a no. As she walked away with effortless confidence, I realized I couldn’t look away.

The night wore on. I stood there with a champagne flute in hand, scanning the crowd

for any sign of Scarlett.

She'd retreated to the kitchen after our conversation, vanishing into the background like she was part of the staff, not the mastermind behind the evening's extraordinary menu.

I found myself leaning subtly toward the ballroom doors, as if by sheer will I could catch another glimpse of her through the chaos. It was maddening.

"Christian Valen," a familiar voice purred.

I turned to see a tall brunette in a slinky dress that probably cost more than most people's mortgages.

She was a model—I vaguely recalled seeing her in an ad campaign for some luxury brand, though her name escaped me.

"You've been avoiding me all night," she teased, her hand lightly brushing my arm. "What's the matter? Am I losing my touch?"

On any other night, I might've smiled, leaned into the flirtation, and let it carry me wherever the evening took us.

But tonight was different. My head was somewhere else—no, with someone else.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

“I’ve been distracted,” I admitted, my tone more clipped than I intended.

She arched a perfect brow, her red lips curling into a playful smirk. “Well, maybe I can help with that.”

Her words were suggestive, her intent clear, but all I could think about was Scarlett.

The way she’d looked at me—direct but unguarded, like she wasn’t impressed by my name or my money.

That kind of honesty was rare, and it lingered in my mind like a melody I couldn’t shake.

“Not tonight,” I said, stepping back slightly, creating the space I needed. “I have a lot on my mind.”

The brunette’s smile faltered for just a moment before she regained her composure. “Suit yourself, Christian. But don’t keep me waiting forever.”

She walked away, her confidence unwavering, but I barely noticed. My thoughts were back in the kitchen, where Scarlett had disappeared.

The sounds of the gala seemed to blur into the background as I replayed our conversation.

I wasn’t used to this—feeling so unsteady, so out of control.

I could handle boardrooms and billion-dollar deals without breaking a sweat, but this woman had knocked me off balance with a few sentences and a killer smile.

Unable to focus on anything else, I finally gave up on small talk and called my driver. The penthouse was waiting, and maybe a change of scenery would help clear my head.

The ride back to my place was a blur. I stared out the window, the city lights streaking past like ghosts, but all I saw was her. Scarlett.

Her name echoed in my mind, soft but insistent, as if it had carved out a space for itself there.

By the time I stepped into the quiet luxury of my penthouse, I felt restless, the kind of restlessness that couldn't be soothed by a drink or a distraction.

I poured myself a whiskey anyway, the amber liquid swirling in the glass as I tried to shake off the feeling.

I'd come to the gala expecting another forgettable night, but now, I felt the sharp sting of something I hadn't felt in years: hunger.

After finishing my drink, I made my way to the bedroom, hoping sleep would come quickly.

But when I closed my eyes, she was there, vivid and impossible to ignore.

In the dream, we were in a kitchen—not the one at the gala, but one that felt warmer, more personal. The kitchen at the lake house our family owned.

Scarlett moved with ease, her hands deftly working over a cutting board. She looked

up at me, her eyes sparkling with something unspoken, and smiled.

It wasn't the polite smile she'd given me earlier in the evening; it was something real, something meant just for me.

I reached out to touch her, to tell her—what? I wasn't even sure. But the dream slipped through my fingers, the image fading as quickly as it had come.

I woke with a start. My chest felt tight, my mind racing. I ran a hand through my hair and stared at the ceiling, the weight of the dream pressing down on me.

This wasn't like me. Women didn't haunt my thoughts like this—not even close. But Scarlett Lane wasn't like anyone I'd ever met.

And I wasn't sure I'd ever be the same again.

2

SCARLETT

The last champagne flute was gone, the final canapé devoured, and the ballroom stood empty, stripped of all its earlier sparkle.

Where laughter and clinking glasses had filled the space, now there was just silence, broken only by the faint hum of the cleaning staff wiping down the polished marble floors.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

The night's exhaustion hit me hard, a heavy weight settling in as I packed up my knives.

One by one, I slid them into their spots in my worn leather roll, the motions familiar and grounding after such a long evening.

My feet ached in my black flats, and my hands felt raw from hours of constant work. But it wasn't the physical exhaustion that stayed with me.

No, it was the memory of him.

Christian Valen.

I'd known men like him—or at least, I thought I had. Wealthy, powerful, impossibly attractive, and fully aware of it.

Men who thought their charm and money could make the world bow at their feet. Men who barely saw the people who worked behind the scenes, who only cared about appearances.

But Christian had been different.

I shook my head as I tied the roll of knives with a practiced flick of my wrist. What was it about him that had thrown me off balance?

It wasn't just his looks—although I'd have to be blind not to notice how devastatingly handsome he was, with that strong jawline and piercing blue eyes that seemed to see

more than they should.

It wasn't even his polished charm, the kind that could probably melt anyone he set his sights on.

No, it was something deeper. Something I couldn't quite put into words.

The way he'd approached me, not with arrogance, but with genuine curiosity. The way he'd looked at me—really looked, like he was trying to figure me out.

And then there were his words, his tone, the low, intimate cadence of his voice when he'd called me interesting.

I hated how that word had lingered, wrapping itself around my thoughts like a vine. Interesting. Was I? To someone like him?

I let out a soft laugh, more self-deprecating than anything, as I slung my bag over my shoulder and surveyed the empty kitchen one last time.

The staff I'd hired had long since packed up and left, leaving me alone with my thoughts and the faint scent of truffle oil lingering in the air.

This was ridiculous. I'd met him for all of ten minutes, exchanged a few words, and yet here I was, replaying the encounter like it was something meaningful.

Like it was something that might lead somewhere.

But it wouldn't.

People like Christian Valen didn't date people like me. He was a billionaire from a family of untouchable wealth. And me?

I was a chef who barely managed to scrape by, running a restaurant that could close any day if the next quarter didn't pick up.

I lived in a tiny, drafty apartment with a stray cat who hated me half the time, and my idea of luxury was splurging on a decent bottle of wine after a successful dinner service.

We weren't just from different worlds; we were from different universes.

Still, as I locked up the kitchen and stepped out into the cool night air, I couldn't help but let my mind wander back to the way he'd smiled at me.

The way his eyes had lingered a fraction too long.

Did he really mean it when he asked me to dinner? Or was it just a throwaway line, something he'd forget by the time he got into his chauffeur-driven car?

I tightened my coat around me as I walked the few blocks to the subway, my breath visible in the chill.

The city buzzed around me, its lights and sounds a constant reminder of how alive it was, even at this hour. But for once, I felt out of step with its rhythm.

I couldn't shake the feeling that Christian had seen something in me—something I wasn't even sure I saw in myself. And that scared me.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

Because what if he hadn't? What if I'd just imagined the whole thing?

What if I was nothing more than a fleeting curiosity for him, someone he'd remember only as the woman who catered an event he'd barely wanted to attend?

By the time I reached my apartment, a three-story walk-up with peeling paint and a perpetually broken front light, I was ready to collapse.

My cat, Milo, greeted me with his usual indifference, flicking his tail before leaping onto the couch to curl up in his favorite spot.

"Nice to see you, too," I muttered, setting my bag down and kicking off my shoes.

The relief was instant, but it did little to quell the restless energy still buzzing under my skin.

I poured myself a glass of wine—not the good kind, but it would do—and sank onto the couch next to Milo, who let out a disgruntled meow before shifting slightly.

I tried to focus on anything other than Christian. I thought about the gala, the food, the minor crisis with the oven that I'd managed to fix just in time.

But no matter where my mind wandered, it always circled back to him.

What was he doing right now?

Probably sipping whiskey in some penthouse suite, surrounded by luxury I couldn't

even fathom.

Maybe he was already moving on to the next thing, the next person, the next fleeting interest.

And yet...

I couldn't shake the way he'd looked at me, like I was the only person in that crowded room. Like he was genuinely curious, genuinely intrigued.

I sighed, leaning my head back against the couch. This was ridiculous. I didn't have time for distractions like this.

I had a restaurant to run, bills to pay, and a team that depended on me.

My life was a carefully balanced set of spinning plates, and if I stopped moving, even for a moment, everything could come crashing down.

There wasn't much room for distractions—not even ones that wore tailored suits and smoldered like Christian Valen.

Besides, I'd been down the relationship road before, and it hadn't exactly ended in fireworks.

The memory of my last relationship was like an old scar—faded but still there if I pressed on it too hard.

Aaron had been...well, at first, he'd been everything I thought I wanted.

Charming, supportive, someone who didn't mind that I spent my days in a hot kitchen and my nights buried in invoices.

For a while, he'd seemed proud of me, even impressed by my ambition.

But then the cracks started to show.

It started small, with comments that felt like jokes but weren't.

"You know, not everything has to revolve around Amélie," he'd say with a lopsided grin, leaning against the doorway of our shared apartment. "You could take a night off, Scarlett. The restaurant won't fall apart without you."

At first, I brushed it off.

He didn't understand what it took to build something from the ground up, the blood, sweat, and tears that went into creating a dream and keeping it alive.

And maybe that was my fault—I didn't make enough time to explain it to him.

But over time, his jokes turned into something sharper.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

“It’s like you’re married to that damn restaurant,”he snapped one night when I came home late after a health inspection ran over.“I don’t even know why I bother making plans anymore. You’re just going to cancel.”

I’d stood there in the kitchen, exhausted and still smelling faintly of garlic, staring at the man I thought I’d spend my life with and realizing that he resented me.

Things didn’t improve after that. We tried, or at least I did.

I took the occasional night off, tried to focus more on our relationship, but it was never enough for him.

The problem wasn’t just that I was busy—it was that he needed to be the center of my world, and I couldn’t give him that.

Eventually, the distance between us grew too wide to bridge.

He started staying out later, making excuses for why he couldn’t come to my events or support me when I needed him most.

And then came the night I found out why.

I’ll never forget the moment I walked into that bar and saw him, arms wrapped around someone else like I hadn’t even existed.

She was younger, carefree, probably someone who didn’t have a thousand responsibilities weighing her down.

He didn't even try to deny it when I confronted him. "Maybe if you'd paid more attention to me, I wouldn't have had to look somewhere else," he said, his voice cold and cutting.

It was like a punch to the gut.

I'd built my life on the idea that hard work and passion could overcome anything, but in that moment, I realized that love wasn't immune to resentment and neglect.

After that, I swore I'd never let someone make me feel small again. I threw myself into my work with a vengeance, pouring every ounce of my energy into Amélie.

If I was going to be alone, at least I'd have something to show for it.

And that's why I couldn't let myself get distracted by someone like Christian.

Sure, he was gorgeous, and there was something undeniably magnetic about him. But I knew how these things went.

Men like him—rich, powerful, used to getting what they wanted—didn't stick around for women like me.

They wanted someone who could drop everything for them, someone who didn't have a life of her own. And I wasn't that woman. I couldn't be.

The memory of Aaron still lingered, a quiet reminder of what could happen when I let myself get too close to someone.

I couldn't afford to make the same mistake twice.

So, no matter how tempting Christian Valen was, I had to keep my focus.

My restaurant needed me, my staff counted on me, and I wasn't about to let anyone—not even him—derail the life I'd built.

When I finally dragged myself to bed, exhausted and hoping for the kind of deep, dreamless sleep that only came after days like today, Christian invaded my thoughts one last time.

The dream was vivid, almost painfully so.

I was back at the gala, but it was different. The room was empty, the lights dim, the air heavy with anticipation.

Christian stood across from me, his eyes locked on mine, his expression unreadable.

“You're not like anyone I've ever met,” he said, his voice low, almost a whisper.

I wanted to respond, to say something clever or dismissive, but the words caught in my throat.

He took a step closer, then another, until the space between us was almost nonexistent.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

I could feel the heat of him, the way his presence seemed to fill the air around me.

“I don’t think you realize how rare you are, Scarlett,” he murmured, his hand brushing against mine.

My heart raced, a mix of desire and disbelief. This wasn’t real. It couldn’t be. And yet, it felt more real than anything I’d ever experienced.

When his lips finally met mine, it wasn’t tentative. It was consuming, like he’d been holding back all night and couldn’t anymore.

His hands slid to my waist, pulling me closer, and I melted into him, every rational thought slipping away.

But just as quickly as it started, it ended. The room dissolved, fading into darkness, and I woke with a start, my heart pounding.

The faint light of dawn crept through the curtains, and Milo was curled at my feet, oblivious to my restless night.

I let out a shaky breath, running a hand through my hair. It was just a dream. Just a stupid, ridiculous dream.

But as I lay there, staring at the ceiling, I couldn’t help but wonder: what if it wasn’t? What if Christian Valen was more than just a fleeting encounter?

And what if, just maybe, he’d been dreaming of me, too?

CHRISTIAN/ V

CHRISTIAN

I stepped into Amélie and paused, letting the atmosphere wash over me.

The low murmur of conversations mixed with the gentle clink of silverware, creating a cozy kind of buzz.

Warm, golden light bathed the polished wooden tables, and the air carried the faint, mouthwatering scent of rosemary and garlic.

It was exactly what I'd pictured—inviting, elegant, and undeniably Scarlett.

I'd replayed my brief encounter with Scarlett at the gala more times than I cared to admit.

Her quick wit and sharp tongue had stayed with me.

Not to mention the way her eyes sparked with passion every time she spoke about her restaurant.

I'd told myself I was here to discuss business, to make an offer she wouldn't refuse, but I knew better. I'd come for her.

She stood near the kitchen pass, her sleeves rolled up and her hair pinned back in a way that was effortlessly sexy.

Her focus was split between plating a dish and directing her staff, her hands moving

with precision.

She hadn't seen me yet, and I took a moment to watch her.

"Table for one?" A hostess greeted me, her voice professional but tinged with surprise.

"No table, thank you. I'm here to see Scarlett."

The hostess glanced toward Scarlett, hesitating. "She's busy?—"

"She won't mind," I said, my tone leaving no room for argument.

The woman nodded reluctantly, leading me toward the kitchen.

When Scarlett finally noticed me, her brows lifted in surprise, but there was something else too—curiosity, maybe even a hint of pleasure.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

“Mr. Valen,” she said, her voice steady but cool. She wiped her hands on a towel and stepped closer. “To what do I owe the honor? I wasn’t expecting you.”

“That’s the point of a surprise,” I said, a slow smile tugging at my lips.

Her eyes narrowed slightly, though I caught the corner of her mouth twitch. “If you’ve come for dinner, I’m afraid we’re fully booked.”

“Actually, I came for an answer.”

“An answer?” Her brow furrowed, and she tilted her head.

I leaned against the counter, keeping my gaze locked on hers. “At the gala, I asked you to dinner. You never gave me an answer.”

Her cheeks flushed, but she held my stare. “That’s because I had no way to contact you.”

“That’s fair,” I admitted. “Though I doubt it would’ve been hard to find me.”

“I figured you’d forgotten,” she said, her tone casual, but there was a flicker of vulnerability in her eyes.

“Forgotten?” I echoed, stepping closer. “Why would I forget?”

She shrugged, feigning indifference. “Because someone else might’ve caught your attention.”

I chuckled softly, lowering my voice. “No one else has caught my attention, Scarlett. Trust me, I haven’t stopped thinking about you.”

Her breath hitched—just barely—but she recovered quickly. “Is that so?”

“It is.” I let the words linger, watching her process them.

Her walls were up, that much was clear, but I wasn’t about to back down.

“I’ve also done a little research,” I said.

“Research?”

I nodded, straightening. “On your restaurant. I hear Amélie is doing well, but you’ve been looking for an investor to expand. Am I right?”

Her eyes widened, and for a moment, she looked caught off guard. “You’ve done your homework,” she said carefully.

“I like to be prepared.”

Her lips pressed into a thin line, her expression guarded. “And what are you offering, Mr. Valen?”

“Christian,” I corrected. “And what I’m offering is a partnership. I have the resources to help you take Amélie to the next level—multiple locations, international growth, the works.”

She crossed her arms, skeptical. “Why would a man like you want to invest in a small restaurant like mine?”

“Because it’s not just any restaurant,” I said, stepping closer. “It’s yours.”

Her breath caught, and I didn’t miss the way her eyes flickered down to my mouth before snapping back up.

The chemistry crackled between us, undeniable and electric.

“Christian...” She trailed off, searching for the right words.

“You don’t have to decide now,” I said, keeping my tone even. “Think about it. We can discuss the details later. But there’s one condition.”

Her brows lifted. “Condition?”

“That dinner you owe me.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

She blinked, then let out a soft laugh. “You’re persistent, I’ll give you that.”

“I’m used to getting what I want,” I said, letting a smirk tug at my lips.

“And what happens if I say no?”

“You won’t,” I said confidently. “Because you’re curious. About the partnership... and about me.”

Her gaze locked on mine, and for a moment, the world seemed to shrink around us.

She hesitated, her guard still firmly in place, but I could see the cracks.

“Fine,” she said finally, her voice soft but resolute. “One dinner. But don’t expect any promises.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I said, though we both knew I wasn’t just talking about business anymore.

She turned back toward the kitchen, signaling the conversation was over for now, but I didn’t miss the faint smile tugging at her lips.

“Scarlett,” I called after her.

She paused, glancing over her shoulder.

“Wear something that’ll make it hard for me to focus on dinner.”

Her laugh was soft and low, and the sound of it followed me out of the restaurant, echoing in my mind long after I left.

Much later, I stared out the floor-to-ceiling windows of my penthouse.

Scarlett was like no one I'd ever met—brilliant, beautiful, maddeningly guarded. And for the first time in years, I felt... uncertain.

Was I out of my league?

The question hung in the air like a fog I couldn't shake. Women usually came with no strings, no complications, no real depth.

Not to say they weren't interesting in their own ways, but most of them saw the Valen name and the life it promised long before they ever saw me.

And I liked it that way—clean, detached, easy.

But Scarlett? She was different. She looked right through the polished armor I wore and saw me, the real me, in ways that felt unnervingly raw.

That woman had a way of making me feel like I was both ten feet tall and completely vulnerable, all at the same time.

I ran a hand through my hair, frustration gnawing at me. I needed advice.

Someone who'd been there—someone who had the guts to dive into uncharted territory and come out on the other side.

Cole.

I sighed and grabbed my phone, scrolling through my contacts until I hit his name.

My older brother had always been the steady one, the one who balanced our family's chaos without letting it break him.

If anyone knew how to handle this mess of emotions, it was him.

The line rang twice before Cole picked up. "Christian. Late-night call. What's wrong?"

I leaned against the window, tapping my fingers against the glass. "Who says something's wrong?"

"You don't call me unless you need something," he said, his voice laced with amusement. "It's either business or you've gotten yourself into trouble. Which is it this time?"

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

I chuckled. “A little of both, maybe.”

“Alright, let’s hear it.”

I hesitated, the words sticking in my throat.

Cole was the one who’d always known what he wanted—Tori, their life together, the whole damn package.

Meanwhile, I was the guy who dodged commitment like it was a terminal disease.

“There’s this woman,” I started, immediately cringing at how cliché it sounded.

Cole laughed outright. “Of course there is. Go on.”

“She’s... different.”

“Different how?” Cole asked.

“She’s not like the others, Cole. She’s smart, driven, sharp as hell. And she’s not impressed by me—not the name, not the money, none of it.”

“Huh,” he said thoughtfully. “That explains the late-night existential crisis.”

I ignored the jab. “I can’t stop thinking about her. But the thing is, I don’t know how to approach this. She’s cautious, independent. And I don’t want to screw it up.”

Cole let out a low whistle. “Wow. You’re serious about her, aren’t you?”

I didn’t answer right away. The truth was, I didn’t know what I was.

All I knew was that Scarlett Lane had turned my world upside down, and I wasn’t ready to let her go.

“I think I could be,” I admitted finally.

“Well, first of all, stop overthinking it. Women like honesty, Christian. You don’t have to have all the answers right away—just be real with her.”

“She doesn’t trust easily,” I said, my tone grim. “She’s been burned before.”

Cole’s voice softened. “Then show her she can trust you. You’re not the guy who gives up when something’s hard—don’t start now.”

It was solid advice, as usual. But one thing still nagged at me. “You really think I’m cut out for this? For something... serious?”

There was a beat of silence, and then Cole spoke, his voice steady.

“Look, I know you’ve always thought of yourself as the guy who keeps things casual. But that’s just because you’ve never found the right person. Maybe she’s it. Maybe she’s the reason you’re asking yourself these questions. Don’t let your own doubts ruin this before it starts.”

I exhaled slowly, feeling the weight of his words settle over me.

“Thanks, Cole,” I said quietly.

“Anytime,” he replied. Then, with a teasing edge, he added, “Now, if you need more advice, Tori’s way better at this stuff than I am. She’s the expert on taming stubborn Valen men.”

I laughed despite myself. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

We said our goodbyes, and I hung up, staring down at the glowing city again.

Cole’s words echoed in my mind: Show her she can trust you.

It wouldn’t be easy. Scarlett wasn’t the type to fall for smooth talk or grand gestures.

But if there was one thing I knew, it was that I wasn’t about to give up.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

Scarlett Lane was worth the risk. And for the first time in my life, I wanted to take it.

V

V had never been the type to seethe in silence. No, she preferred action—calculated, ruthless action.

But as she stood in the dimly lit hallway just outside Amélie's kitchen, listening to Scarlett Lane's effortless flirtation with Christian Valen, something hot and bitter curled in her stomach.

Scarlett Lane. The golden girl.

The one everyone adored, the one critics raved about, the one who, despite starting with nothing, had somehow built a name for herself in the culinary world.

And now, apparently, she'd caught the attention of Christian Valen.

V clenched her jaw, her manicured nails digging into her palm.

She'd come here tonight under the pretense of dining, a silent reconnaissance mission to observe her competition firsthand.

But she hadn't expected to stumble upon this.

Christian Valen wasn't just some billionaire looking to play restaurant investor for fun.

He was the name. A Valen partnership meant expansion, prestige, and power—things Scarlett Lane did not deserve.

V had worked twice as hard for half as much.

She had trained under the best, clawed her way up, and yet, she was still constantly overlooked.

Scarlett?

She waltzed onto the scene with her perfect smiles and down-to-earth charm, and people ate it up like one of her overpriced entrées.

And now Christian was offering her the kind of deal that could turn a boutique restaurant into a global empire.

A slow burn of fury pulsed beneath V's cool exterior.

Scarlett's voice carried down the hallway, light and teasing.

"Fine. One dinner. But don't expect any promises."

V smirked. That was Scarlett's first mistake.

A woman like her, naïve and far too trusting, wouldn't know how to handle a man like Christian Valen.

And her second mistake? Thinking this opportunity was hers alone.

V turned on her heel, her mind already racing. If Scarlett thought she could waltz into the big leagues uncontested, she was about to get a very rude awakening.

Because V had spent too long in the shadows, waiting for her moment. And she wasn't about to let Scarlett steal it.

4

SCARLETT

I'd been on dates before. Plenty of them, in fact.

But none of them had ever left me this nervous.

As I got ready, I kept telling myself I had no reason to be this anxious. It was just dinner. Just Christian.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

But that was exactly the problem. He wasn't just anyone—he was Christian Valen. Billionaire. Enigmatic.

The kind of man women threw themselves at, the kind who could have any woman he wanted.

And yet, for some reason, he was here, taking me out on a date.

I expected him to take me somewhere extravagant—a five-star restaurant, maybe a VIP table at some exclusive lounge.

And honestly, the idea of sitting in some overpriced dining room, surrounded by people who were wealthier and far more polished than me, made my nerves even worse.

But when I met him outside Amélie, dressed in his signature tailored suit, looking as devastating as ever, he had a different plan in mind.

“I thought we'd do something a little more private,” he said, opening the passenger door of his sleek black car.

Private.

The word sent a jolt through me.

I swallowed, slipping into the car, trying to convince myself that private didn't mean what my overactive imagination wanted it to mean.

But when we pulled up to a stunning high-rise, my heart practically leaped into my throat.

I turned to him, eyes wide. “This is your place, isn’t it?”

A slow, knowing smile spread across his lips. “I figured you’d appreciate a quiet meal.”

I knew I should have played it cool, but I couldn't help but blurt out, “You invited me to your penthouse for our first date?”

His gaze darkened with amusement as he leaned in slightly, lowering his voice.

“Would you rather I take you somewhere crowded? Maybe a noisy restaurant where people stare at us and interrupt every five seconds?”

Damn him. That was exactly what I didn’t want.

Still, this was dangerous. Being alone with Christian Valen in his penthouse? In his space, where it was just the two of us?

I should have said no.

I should have told him that I preferred something more neutral, something that didn’t have a built-in temptation factor.

Instead, I said, “You are impossible, you know that?”

He grinned. “I’ve been told.”

When we stepped into his penthouse, I took in the floor-to-ceiling windows that

showcased the city skyline, the sleek yet welcoming design of his space, the faint scent of something mouthwatering in the air.

“You cooked?” I asked, blinking at the beautifully set dining table near the window.

Christian chuckled. “Not exactly. But I do know a few excellent chefs.”

Of course he did. I should’ve guessed.

The food was plated perfectly—pan-seared scallops, a bottle of red wine already uncorked, the atmosphere intimate but not overwhelming.

It should have felt intimidating. It almost did.

But then Christian pulled out my chair, an old-fashioned kind of gentlemanly move that should have made me roll my eyes.

Instead, it sent a strange warmth curling through my stomach.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

I sat down, and he settled across from me, pouring us each a glass of wine before lifting his toward me.

“To Amélie,” he said, eyes locked onto mine. “And to making sure the world knows your name.”

I hesitated for a split second before clinking my glass against his. “To Amélie,” I echoed.

The wine was rich and smooth, but the way Christian watched me over the rim of his glass was enough to make me forget the taste entirely.

For a while, I expected the conversation to be stiff, maybe even a little transactional.

After all, there was more at play here than just romance—he had made it clear he wanted to invest in my restaurant, expand my brand.

But to my surprise, it wasn’t awkward at all.

He asked about me—not just Amélie, but me. My inspirations, my dreams, how I got started in the industry.

And somewhere between the first course and the main dish, I found myself relaxing, my usual walls slipping just a little.

“You’re not how I expected,” I admitted at one point, twirling my fork between my fingers.

Christian raised an eyebrow. “What did you expect?”

“I don’t know.” I leaned back slightly. “I guess I figured you’d be...”

“Arrogant?” he supplied with a smirk.

I laughed. “A little.”

“And now?”

I studied him. “Still a little arrogant.”

Christian let out a deep chuckle, shaking his head. “I’m wounded.”

“Are you?”

“No.” His voice dropped slightly, eyes flickering over my face in a way that made my pulse jump. “But I like that you’re honest.”

His attention was intoxicating, his focus unwavering.

It wasn’t just that he was looking at me—it was that he was really seeing me. And I wasn’t used to that.

Aaron and the other men I’d dated had been intimidated by my ambition or had tried to shrink me into something more manageable.

Christian wasn’t like that. If anything, he seemed to like that I pushed back.

“Tell me something,” he said, setting his glass down. “If you could expand Amélie anywhere in the world, where would it be?”

I hesitated, caught off guard by the question.

But then I answered honestly.

“Paris,” I admitted. “It’s always been a dream of mine to have a small, intimate restaurant in the heart of the city.”

Christian nodded thoughtfully. “Paris.”

“Not exactly an easy feat,” I said with a small, self-deprecating laugh.

He leaned in slightly, voice low and confident. “Nothing worth having is ever easy.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

A shiver ran down my spine.

I told myself I wouldn't get too swept up in this—that no matter how charming he was, I had to keep a level head.

But sitting there, under the soft glow of the pendant lights, his gaze locked onto mine like I was the most interesting thing in the room...

I knew I was in trouble.

Because for the first time in a long time, I wanted to take a risk.

And maybe, just maybe, Christian Valen was worth it.

Dinner had been perfect.

Too perfect.

The kind of perfect that made it feel dangerous.

As we lingered at the table, empty wine glasses between us, I could feel Christian watching me.

Not in the way most men did, all surface-level admiration and fleeting interest.

No, his gaze was intent, searching, like he was trying to figure me out, piece by piece.

And maybe that was what made him so dangerous. Because I wanted to let him.

But I couldn't. Not entirely.

Still, when he suggested driving me home, I hesitated. Part of me wanted to stay.

To let the night stretch a little longer, to see just how much self-control this impossibly composed man truly had.

But the other part—the rational, cautious part—knew better.

So I nodded, pushing back from the table with a small, polite smile. “That sounds great.”

He studied me for a second, as if debating whether to push for more.

But in the end, he just smiled, reached for his keys, and led me out of his penthouse.

The drive back to my apartment was quiet. Not uncomfortably so—just thick with something unspoken.

The tension between us simmered beneath the surface, crackling like embers waiting for the right gust of wind to set them ablaze.

Christian drove with one hand on the wheel, his other resting on his thigh.

More than once, I caught myself staring at his hands, remembering how his fingers had brushed mine when he'd refilled my wine, how effortlessly confident he was in everything he did.

I wanted to ask what he was thinking.

If he was feeling the same pull I was.

If he was just as frustrated by the fact that we had to pretend like this was just a simple, innocent dinner.

But I kept my mouth shut, focusing on the city lights flashing past the window instead.

All too soon, we arrived at my building.

Christian stepped out first, coming around to open my door before I even reached for the handle.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

It was an old-school move. Chivalrous.

And yet, all it did was make me wish he'd stop being such a gentleman.

He walked me to my door, his pace unhurried, like he wasn't quite ready for the night to end either.

I turned to face him, fingers curling around my keys as I searched for the right thing to say.

"I had a good time tonight," I admitted, keeping my voice steady despite the way my pulse had picked up.

His lips curled into a slow, devastating smile, and I hated how much it affected me. "I'm glad."

I should have left it at that. Should have thanked him again and disappeared into my apartment before I did something stupid.

But instead, I said, "I almost changed my mind, you know."

His brows lifted slightly. "To dinner?"

I nodded.

His eyes darkened, and for a moment, I thought he might step closer. Might finally close the space between us.

“What made you decide to agree eventually?” he asked, voice lower now, softer.

You.

The word almost slipped out.

But instead, I shrugged, forcing a smirk. “I figured you’d keep asking until I gave in.”

He chuckled, the sound rougher than before. “You’re probably right.”

And then, before I could second-guess myself, I added, “I’m glad I said yes.”

For the first time since I’d met him, something about him seemed to light up. Like my words mattered more than they should have.

The air between us shifted.

The unspoken thing, the tension that had been building all night, finally reached its breaking point.

And then?—

He leaned in.

At first, it was tentative. A quiet question, a test.

His lips brushed mine, warm and searching, and I had a fleeting thought that I should stop this before it went too far.

Before it became impossible to separate business from pleasure, before I lost myself in the way he made me feel.

But then Christian let out the faintest sigh against my lips, like he'd been waiting for this all damn night. And I was gone.

I leaned into him, my fingers curling into the front of his jacket as the kiss deepened.

Christian responded instantly, one hand settling at my waist, the other lifting to cradle my jaw.

His fingers were firm but careful, as if he was savoring the moment, as if he wanted to take his time unraveling me.

The heat between us flared, an undeniable, electric pull that made my entire body feel alive.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

I pressed closer, tilting my head to let him in, tasting the remnants of wine on his lips, breathing in the intoxicating scent of him.

I imagined what it would be like to belong to a man like him.

To let him strip away the carefully built walls I'd spent years hiding behind.

The thought sent a delicious shiver down my spine.

But then?—

Reality came crashing in.

Business. My career. The risk of getting involved with someone like him, someone who could so easily turn my world upside down.

This was a terrible idea.

And yet, I still didn't want to stop.

But Christian did.

He pulled away, just enough to meet my gaze, his breath warm against my skin.

His thumb traced along my jawline, and for a second, I thought he might change his mind.

That he might push open the door behind me and take this even further.

But instead, he smiled—a slow, knowing, devastating smile—and murmured, “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Then, just like that, he took a step back.

I swallowed, my mind struggling to catch up with what had just happened.

Part of me was relieved that he had the self-control I clearly lacked.

The other part?

The other part was downright frustrated.

I watched as he turned, heading back toward his car without another word.

I exhaled sharply, forcing myself to unlock my door and step inside before I did something reckless.

The second I was alone, the night replayed in my head on a loop.

The way he looked at me over dinner.

The way his lips had felt against mine.

The way he’d stopped, even when I didn’t want him to.

I pressed my fingers to my lips, still feeling the ghost of his kiss.

God, I was in trouble.

Because earlier that night, I'd told myself I'd take a risk.

And now?

Now, I knew I was about to fall headfirst into something that could either change my life for the better?—

Or ruin me entirely.

5

CHRISTIAN

Some deals were worth millions. Others were worth billions.

But this one?

This one felt like the most important deal of my life.

Scarlett sat across from me, her arms loosely crossed, her expression thoughtful as she stared at the finalized contract between us.

Her red hair was swept up into a bun, but a few stray strands had slipped free, framing her face in a way that made it impossible not to stare.

She was trying to appear unaffected, like this was just another business decision, but I knew better.

I'd seen the way her fingers had skimmed the edge of the papers moments ago, her nails tapping an absent rhythm as she hesitated.

I'd caught the flicker of excitement in her eyes before she'd schooled her expression into something unreadable.

She wanted this.

And after weeks of discussions, negotiations, and late-night calls that had bled into the early morning, she had finally agreed.

Scarlett Lane was officially my partner.

I finally did it.

I fought the smirk threatening to break across my face.

Instead, I leaned forward, resting my elbows on the polished oak desk between us.

“So, that’s it then?” I asked, pretending to sound casual and failing at it.

Scarlett exhaled slowly, then nodded. “That’s it.”

My grin broke free.

I extended my hand. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

Her lips twitched, but she slid her palm against mine, shaking firmly. Her touch was warm, confident—just like her.

Something electric passed between us.

Her fingers lingered a second longer than necessary before she pulled away, clearing her throat.

“I guess we’ll see if we can actually work together without killing each other,” she said.

I chuckled, tilting my head. “Oh, I don’t know, Scarlett. I think we make a great team.”

She rolled her eyes but didn’t argue.

And just like that, it was done.

The deal was sealed.

Now the real work began.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

As soon as Scarlett left the office, I pulled out my phone and dialed.

It rang once before my older brother's voice came through the line. "Christian."

I didn't even try to hide my excitement. "She agreed."

Cole let out a low hum, the kind that immediately told me he wasn't going to feed into my moment of victory.

"She agreed to a trial partnership," he corrected. "Don't start celebrating just yet."

I rolled my eyes and leaned back in my chair. "Jesus, Cole. Can't you let me have a moment to enjoy this?"

"I'll let you have a moment when you've actually secured the long-term deal," he said dryly. "Right now, this is the easy part."

I frowned. "Easy? You realize how much work it took to get her to agree to this in the first place?"

"I do." There was a pause, then Cole sighed. "Look, I'm happy for you. I am. But don't let your excitement make you sloppy. You and I both know things don't always go as planned."

I didn't miss the warning in his tone.

And unfortunately, he wasn't wrong.

This wasn't my first business deal, and it sure as hell wouldn't be my last. I knew that success wasn't guaranteed.

I knew that despite how much I wanted this to work, there were still a hundred different ways it could go sideways.

But that didn't mean I wasn't going to give it everything I had.

Cole chuckled, sensing my silence. "And don't pretend this is just about business. You're in deep, little brother."

I scowled. "Screw you."

He laughed, then hung up, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

The celebration was short-lived.

The next morning, I was reviewing financial projections when my assistant, Eric, knocked and stepped into my office.

"There's something you should know," he said, setting his tablet down on my desk.

I glanced up. "What is it?"

He hesitated for a beat before speaking. "I've started hearing a few... whispers. About Scarlett."

That got my attention.

I sat up straighter. "What kind of whispers?"

Eric shifted, clearly uncomfortable.

“People are questioning whether she’s ready for this kind of expansion. Some are saying she’s too inexperienced to take Amélie international.” He paused.

I impatiently gestured for Eric to continue.

“And there’s some speculation about whether she really deserves this opportunity—or if she’s only getting it because of you,” Eric said.

My jaw clenched.

I’d been in business long enough to know how quickly rumors could spread, how easily they could poison a reputation.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

And in an industry as ruthless as ours, even a hint of doubt could be damaging.

Scarlett had worked her ass off to build Amélie into one of the most exclusive restaurants in the city. She earned this opportunity.

And I'd be damned if I let someone try to take that away from her.

"Do we know where this is coming from?" I asked, keeping my voice calm.

Eric shook his head. "Not yet. But I can keep an ear out."

I nodded. "Do that. And if you hear anything else, I want to know immediately."

He hesitated again. "Do you want me to put out a statement?"

I exhaled sharply, considering it.

If we addressed it publicly, it could draw even more attention to the rumors, giving them more weight than they deserved.

But if we ignored them entirely, it might look like we had something to hide.

For now, I wanted more information.

"No statement," I decided. "Not yet. Just keep your eyes and ears open."

Eric nodded. "Understood."

As he left, I leaned back in my chair, running a hand over my jaw.

Who the hell was trying to undermine Scarlett?

And more importantly?—

How far were they willing to go?

One thing was clear:

This deal might have been signed, and I wasn't about to let anyone tear Scarlett down.

I sat in the back of my car, my fingers drumming against my thigh as the city lights blurred past the tinted windows.

The bottle of vintage Champagne I'd brought rested in the seat beside me, and I had to stop myself from checking my watch again.

Scarlett had agreed to our partnership, and tonight, I wanted to celebrate. Properly.

I'd arranged another private dinner—not just because I wanted her all to myself.

Okay, maybe that was part of it.

But more than that, I wanted this to mean something. I wasn't interested in just another business dinner.

I wanted her undivided attention. I wanted her to see that this—we—were worth exploring.

Which was why I'd called in a favor.

One of Scarlett's favorite chefs, a notoriously hard-to-book talent, had agreed to cook for us tonight.

A personal meal, something crafted just for her.

I had momentarily debated whether inviting her out again this quickly was too soon.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

But the Valens didn't second-guess themselves.

Scarlett, however, was proving to be the one exception to my usual confidence.

When my car finally pulled up in front of Amélie, she was already outside waiting.

And dang it—she was stunning.

She wasn't dressed up in a designer gown or dripping in diamonds. Scarlett didn't need any of that.

She was in a sleek black dress that hugged her curves just right, her hair pinned up, exposing the delicate slope of her neck.

She slipped into the passenger seat, the scent of vanilla and something distinctly her wrapping around me.

"You're punctual," she noted, fastening her seatbelt.

"I'm motivated."

She arched a brow. "Motivated?"

I smirked. "To make sure you actually enjoy this dinner."

She shook her head but couldn't hide the small smile tugging at her lips.

Yeah. Motivated was an understatement.

The location was intimate—candlelit, private, and far from the noise of the city. Just the two of us.

When Scarlett realized who would be cooking for us tonight, her eyes widened in disbelief. “No way.”

I grinned, enjoying her rare moment of speechlessness. “You like the surprise?”

She turned to me, something warm flickering in her gaze. “You... actually paid attention.”

“I always pay attention.”

That caught her off guard. She looked away, but not before I saw the color rise to her cheeks.

The food was exceptional. Course after course, expertly prepared, paired with the finest wine. But honestly, I barely tasted any of it.

Because every time Scarlett spoke, I found myself completely entranced.

She told me about her first time stepping into a real professional kitchen.

The way it had felt like stepping onto a battlefield and falling in love all at once.

I told her about my father, about the weight of the family empire.

About how I’d learned early on that wanting something and earning it were two very different things.

She listened. Not just politely—but truly listened.

And when she spoke, I found myself wanting to know more.

By the time dessert was served, something had shifted between us.

Something dangerous.

Something inevitable.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

Her glass was nearly empty, her fingers tracing idle patterns against the rim. “You know this is complicated, right?”

I leaned in, resting my forearm on the table. “And?”

She exhaled a quiet laugh. “You don’t do complicated, Christian.”

I studied her. “Maybe I do now.”

Scarlett stilled, her eyes searching mine.

Then, before either of us could think better of it, I reached for her hand.

She let me.

Just like she let me tilt her chin up as I leaned in.

This time, there was no hesitation.

Our second kiss wasn’t tentative—it was claiming.

The taste of wine and something sweeter lingered on her lips, and I deepened the kiss.

I pulled her closer, feeling her sink into me just as much as I was sinking into her.

When we finally broke apart, she was breathing hard, her fingers gripping the edge of the table.

I traced my thumb across her lower lip, my voice rough. “I don’t do complicated, Scarlett, but for you? I’ll make an exception.”

The drive back to her apartment was quiet—but charged.

Scarlett was clearly battling something internally, her fingers tapping against her thigh, her gaze flickering toward me every few minutes.

She wanted me to come inside.

I could see it. Feel it.

But she was holding back.

I parked in front of her building, and instead of letting her walk up alone, I stepped out, escorting her to her door.

She turned to face me, and for the first time since I’d met her, Scarlett Lane looked...uncertain.

“I enjoyed myself,” she said softly, her voice carrying a hint of something unspoken.

I tilted my head, studying her, letting the moment stretch between us. “I’m happy to hear that.”

And I was. More than I probably should be.

She hesitated, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “I wasn’t sure if I should say yes to another date. Adatedate, I mean.”

I leaned in slightly, smirking. “But you did. You just can’t get enough of me.”

Her lips curved, amusement flashing in her eyes. She let out a small, almost reluctant laugh. “Yeah... I guess I can’t.”

Something about the way she said it—like she was only just realizing it herself—sent a thrill through me.

That answer shouldn’t have made me feel as victorious as it did, but this woman was turning me inside out.

I took a step closer, one hand bracing against the wall behind her.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

“I’m not done kissing you yet,” I murmured.

Scarlett exhaled shakily, but she didn’t move away.

She never moved away.

This time, I let her come to me.

And she did.

Her lips met mine in a slow, deliberate kiss, her fingers tangling in my jacket.

I deepened it, letting her taste exactly what she did to me—how badly I wanted her.

By the time we pulled apart, she was flushed, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

Her door was right there.

She could invite me in.

And dang it, I wanted her to.

But then I remembered my conversation with Cole.

Patience.

Let her come to you.

Scarlett hesitated for a fraction of a second—then stepped back.

My jaw tensed, but I covered it with a smirk.

“Goodnight, Scarlett,” I murmured, pressing one last lingering kiss to her lips.

Then I turned and walked away, leaving her standing at her door.

I’d won the business deal.

But this?

This was the real game.

And I had all the time in the world to play it.

6

V

V paced the length of her sleek, ultra-modern kitchen, her heels clicking against the marble floors like gunfire.

The open-concept space—cold steel appliances, pristine white countertops, and a view of the city skyline—usually gave her a sense of satisfaction, a reminder of just how far she’d come.

But tonight, none of it mattered.

Scarlett Lane had won again.

The name alone made her stomach twist in fury. V clenched her fists, trying to swallow the rage clawing up her throat.

How had that nobody managed to land Christian Valen as a business partner?

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

It was absurd. Insulting, even. Scarlett wasn't cutthroat, wasn't ruthless.

She didn't have the fire it took to survive in this industry, not like V did.

And yet, she thought bitterly, she gets everything handed to her.

Christian Valen wasn't just any investor. He was the investor—one of the most powerful men in the industry.

With his backing, Amélie wouldn't just thrive; it would dominate. It would overshadow everything else in the city, including her.

That thought sent a fresh wave of fury through her.

She had spent years building her name, clawing her way to the top in an industry that devoured the weak.

She had played the game ruthlessly, making the right connections, stepping over anyone who got in her way.

She wasn't about to let Scarlett swoop in with her humble charm and oh-so-talented culinary skills and take what should have been hers.

No.

If Scarlett wanted to play in the big leagues, then she needed to learn the hard way that success came with a price.

V reached for her phone, her mind already spinning with ideas.

If Christian Valen wanted to back Amélie, fine. But she'd make sure he regretted it.

She scrolled through her contacts until she found the name she was looking for.

Jordan Meyer, editor-in-chief of Luxe Dining Magazine.

Jordan owed her a favor. Several, actually.

She hit call, tapping her manicured nails against the counter as she waited.

"V, darling," Jordan answered smoothly. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I have a story for you," she said, keeping her voice composed despite the fire burning in her veins. "One you're going to want to print immediately."

Jordan chuckled. "Oh? And what kind of story are we talking about?"

She let a slow, wicked smile curl her lips. "A scandal, of course."

There was a pause on the other end before Jordan's interest sharpened. "I'm listening."

V turned, gazing out the window at the glittering city below. "You know Scarlett Lane, don't you? Owner of Amélie?"

"Of course. Rising star, incredible chef. Word is she just landed a partnership with Valen Enterprises."

The words tasted like acid.

“Exactly,” V said, voice dripping with false sweetness. “But did you know she has a history of... let’s say, questionable business practices?”

Another pause. “Go on.”

V slid into a barstool, enjoying this now. The power. The control.

If Scarlett wanted to play with the big names, she’d learn what real competition looked like.

“There was an incident a while back,” she said, fabricating the details as she spoke. “A former sous chef at Amélie. Talented guy, full of promise. He was forced out under... shady circumstances.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

“She fired him?” Jordan asked, intrigued.

“Oh, not quite.” V let the silence hang before delivering the blow. “She stole from him. Took credit for a dish he developed. Passed it off as her own. When he tried to call her out on it? She ruined him. Blacklisted him from every major restaurant in the city.”

That part wasn’t entirely a lie. There had been a sous chef who left Amélie, but not under scandalous circumstances.

But V knew the power of suggestion.

Jordan whistled. “That’s a bold claim.”

V leaned back in her chair, sipping her wine.

“And yet, you and I both know how dirty this industry is. No one plays fair. The question is, do you want to break this story first or let someone else do it?”

Jordan laughed. “You know I can’t resist a juicy exposé. But I’ll need more than just a story. Got any sources?”

V smirked. “Oh, don’t worry. I’ll make sure you get a few ‘anonymous’ confirmations.”

Jordan hummed in approval. “Then consider it done. This’ll be on every foodie’s radar by the weekend.”

V ended the call, satisfaction curling through her like smoke.

Scarlett Lane wouldn't even know what hit her.

7

SCARLETT/ CHRISTIAN

SCARLETT

The kitchen was a war zone.

The rhythmic clang of pots and pans, the sharp hiss of meat hitting the grill, the barked orders between my chefs—it all blended into a chaotic symphony.

On any other day, would have felt like home. But today? Today, it was fraying the last bit of patience I had left.

I moved between stations, checking plating, adjusting seasoning, and making sure the front of house was keeping up with the influx of reservations.

Ever since the news broke about my partnership with Valen Enterprises, Amélie had been packed.

People who had never set foot in my restaurant before were suddenly eager to “experience” my food, their curiosity likely fueled by the whispers of a billionaire’s involvement.

And with that curiosity came scrutiny. Every dish had to be perfect.

Every detail had to be flawless. There was no room for error.

I wiped my forehead with the back of my wrist, exhaling sharply.

My sous chef, Marc, shot me a look as he plated a delicate salmon dish.

“You need to breathe, boss,” he said, barely looking up.

“I’ll breathe when service is over,” I muttered, grabbing a tasting spoon and sampling the sauce on a beef dish.

It needed more acidity. I nodded toward the station.

“Hit it with a splash of red wine vinegar,” I said.

Marc smirked but followed my order. “You’ve been extra tense since the announcement.”

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

I ignored that. Of course I was tense. The idea of expanding Amélie had always been a dream, but now it was a reality.

Reality was terrifying. Not to mention the fact that Christian Valen was at the center of all of this.

The memory of our last dinner played in the back of my mind, unbidden.

His dark gaze locked onto mine, the way his lips had tasted like champagne when he kissed me goodnight.

I swallowed hard and refocused. I couldn't afford distractions right now.

Then my phone rang.

I almost ignored it, but something about the number made my stomach tighten.

Shit.

I stepped away from the line, pressing the phone to my ear as I wedged myself into a quieter corner of the kitchen.

"Scarlett Lane speaking."

"Miss Lane, this is Madison Graham from Luxe Dining Magazine. I wanted to reach out for a comment on the allegations published this morning."

My blood ran cold.

“...What allegations?”

A pause. “You haven’t seen the article?”

I turned away from my staff, gripping the phone tighter. “No. I’ve been working.”

Madison hesitated. “I... I suggest you read it before we continue this conversation.”

Heart pounding, I pulled my phone away from my ear and quickly searched for Luxe Dining’s latest issue.

It only took seconds before I found it.

The headline hit me like a punch to the stomach.

"Amélie’s Rising Star or Industry Fraud? Former Employees Speak Out on Scarlett Lane’s Shady Business Practices"

I stared, barely breathing, as I skimmed the article.

Words like stolen recipes, credit theft, professional sabotage leaped off the screen.

A fabricated story about a sous chef I supposedly blacklisted.

Accusations that I had stolen dishes from my team and passed them off as my own.

An anonymous source claiming I wasn’t the brilliant chef people believed me to be.

It was a smear campaign.

A deliberate, targeted attack.

My pulse roared in my ears, drowning out the steady hum of the kitchen around me.

My vision tunneled in on the damning words splashed across my phone screen, my breath coming in short, uneven bursts.

Who was behind this?

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

The question buzzed in my head, relentless, refusing to settle.

I paced as I tried to come up with names—anyone who might have a reason to do this.

Other chefs. Competitors. People I'd clashed with over the years. The list wasn't exactly short, but still... this?

This took more than just resentment. It took connections. It took money. Sure, I'd butted heads with people before.

In this industry, egos clashed like knives against cutting boards, sharp and unforgiving.

I'd had my share of arguments, had made decisions that pissed off the wrong people. But would any of them really go this far?

I thought about former colleagues, rival restaurateurs, critics I might have rubbed the wrong way.

Some of them had been ruthless in the past, but this wasn't just a bad review or some gossip floating around the industry.

This was an orchestrated attack.

I swallowed, my throat dry.

Whoever was behind this didn't just want to rattle me. They wanted to bury me.

And the worst part?

I had no idea who it was.

I gripped my phone tighter, my fingers trembling around the smooth edges.

The weight in my chest pressed down harder, squeezing my lungs until it felt impossible to draw in a full breath. Stay calm. Think.

But how the hell was I supposed to stay calm when my reputation—my entire career—was being dragged through the mud in front of the entire industry?

The words blurred together, but they were already seared into my mind. Lies. Every single one of them.

But that wouldn't matter to the people reading. Perception was everything in the culinary world.

A single bad headline could sink a restaurant, and an article like this? It could be a death sentence.

The panic clawing at my ribs tightened its grip. This wasn't just some petty feud—this was sabotage.

And if I didn't act fast, it wouldn't just be my name on the line. Amélie. My staff. Christian's company.

Would he regret working with me now?

The thought hit harder than I expected, sending a sharp pang through my chest.

I had told myself I wouldn't let emotions get tangled in this deal.

However, the idea of Christian seeing this, of him questioning if he'd made a mistake betting on me, made my stomach twist.

No. I forced the panic back with sheer determination.

The voice on the phone broke through my spiraling thoughts. "Miss Lane?"

I inhaled sharply, forcing my voice to stay even. "I'd like to go on record and say that none of these allegations are true. Whoever your sources are, they're lying."

Madison sighed. "I figured you'd say that. But you should know... stories like this have a way of sticking."

"I don't play dirty," I snapped. "If I wanted to succeed in this industry, I'd do it through talent and hard work, not by stepping on other people."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

“Then I hope you have a plan to fight back,” Madison said, her voice almost sympathetic. “Because this article is already gaining traction. It won’t be long before the industry starts talking.”

A sick feeling settled in my stomach.

I ended the call without another word and slowly lowered my phone. My fingers trembled slightly.

Marc walked past me, pausing when he caught sight of my face. “You okay?”

I forced a nod. “Yeah. I just need a minute.”

I stepped into my office and shut the door, gripping the edge of my desk as I tried to steady my breathing.

It’s just an article. People will forget about it in a week.

Except they wouldn’t.

This industry was ruthless. Reputation was everything. One bad headline, one rumor, and it could all crumble.

I squeezed my eyes shut, frustration burning behind them.

I had worked too hard for this.

I wouldn't let one bitter rival take me down.

CHRISTIAN

"We've got a problem," Eric told me, tone clipped.

I'd been in enough high-stakes negotiations to recognize the undercurrent of tension in his voice.

It told me something serious had gone sideways.

I exhaled sharply, setting my drink down on the marble counter of my penthouse. "Tell me."

"There's a hit piece on Scarlett in Luxe Dining—full-page feature."

My grip on the glass tightened.

Luxe Dining was one of the biggest food magazines in the industry, the kind that could make or break a chef's reputation.

I turned toward the massive windows overlooking the city, my jaw flexing as I asked, "How bad?"

Eric hesitated, and that alone told me everything.

"They're calling her a fraud. Accusing her of stealing recipes, taking credit for her staff's work, even blacklisting former employees." He let out a breath. "It's not subtle, Christian. It's a full-on smear campaign."

Heat licked at the edges of my temper.

I'd been in the business world long enough to know how these things worked—someone with a grudge was behind this.

Someone with money and connections.

I grabbed my phone, already pulling up Scarlett's number.

We need to talk. I'll come by after closing.

Three dots appeared, then disappeared. Then appeared again.

Finally, her response came through.

Okay.

I arrived at Amélie just as the last of her staff was leaving.

I could see Scarlett moving behind the bar, wiping down the counter with slow, precise movements.

Too precise. Like she was trying to keep herself from falling apart.

I pushed open the door, and the soft chime echoed in the empty space. She looked up, eyes guarded.

“You saw it,” she said. It wasn’t a question.

I strode toward her, slipping my hands into my pockets to keep from reaching for her. “Yeah.”

Scarlett let out a breath, setting the rag aside. “I knew something like this might happen,” she admitted. “The moment I signed a deal with you, I knew people would have something to say.”

She gave a hollow laugh. “I just didn’t think it would be this vicious.”

I stepped closer, resting my palms against the counter. “We’re going to handle it.”

Her eyes searched mine. “Christian, this isn’t your fight.”

“The hell it isn’t.” The words came out sharper than I intended, but I didn’t take them back.

I continued, “This partnership isn’t just about business, Scarlett. You know that.”

A flicker of something crossed her face—hesitation, maybe. Hope.

I softened my voice. “Whoever’s behind this isn’t just trying to ruin you. They want to destroy everything you’ve built.” My jaw tensed. “And I’m not going to let that happen.”

She swallowed, the mask of composure she’d been clinging to slipping for just a second.

I reached across the bar, brushing my fingers against hers. A subtle touch. An anchor. “Scarlett.”

She inhaled, then let it out slowly. “I don’t know how to fight something like this.”

“Lucky for you, I do.”

A ghost of a smile tugged at her lips. “Of course you do.”

I held her gaze. “I’ll have my legal team handle Luxe Dining. In the meantime, I want you to focus on Amélie. You don’t have to deal with this alone.”

She nodded, but I could see the tension still lingering in her posture, the weight pressing on her.

“There’s more,” she admitted. “Some of my suppliers are pulling out.”

That sent a fresh bolt of anger through me.

“They’re claiming it’s ‘contractual conflicts,’ but we both know that’s bullshit.” She exhaled. “If this keeps up, I won’t have the ingredients I need to keep the restaurant running at full capacity.”

My hand curled into a fist against the counter.

Whoever wanted to smear Scarlett’s reputation wasn’t just playing dirty—they was going for the throat.

Trying to bleed Scarlett out before she had a chance to fight back.

Scarlett chewed on her bottom lip, her fingers gripping the edge of the counter. “Christian, if this gets any worse?—”

“It won’t.” My voice was firm. “I won’t let it.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

She looked at me then, really looked at me, as if she was trying to decide if she could trust me to keep that promise.

I didn't look away.

Finally, she nodded.

"Okay," she whispered.

I exhaled, tension easing ever so slightly from my chest.

Neither of us moved.

The air between us stretched tight, charged with something unspoken.

My gaze dropped to her lips, and for a second, I wondered if she'd let me close the distance.

If she'd let me erase every doubt with a kiss.

But then she straightened, clearing her throat.

"I should lock up," she said softly.

I nodded, stepping back. "I'll be in touch first thing in the morning. If anything else happens, you call me."

Scarlett hesitated. Then, to my surprise, she reached for my hand, squeezing it briefly.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

And then, before I could pull her in, before I could do something reckless like kiss her senseless, she stepped away.

I watched her disappear into the back of the restaurant, knowing this was far from over.

But one thing was clear—whoever was trying to tear her down had just made a mistake.

Because now?

They weren't just fighting Scarlett.

They were fighting me too.

8

CHRISTIAN/ SCARLETT

CHRISTIAN

I leaned back in my chair, staring at the city skyline through the floor-to-ceiling windows of my office.

The Luxe article had been dealt with—at least on the surface.

My PR team had handled it with the precision of a well-oiled machine, pushing out a

carefully crafted narrative that countered the damage.

Calls had been made, favors pulled. The article was losing traction, and Scarlett's reputation wouldn't suffer a lasting hit.

But that didn't change the fact that it had rattled her.

She wasn't the type to let people see when she was shaken, but I'd seen it. In the tightness of her jaw.

The way she avoided my eyes when I told her I'd take care of it.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

She was grateful, but she wasn't used to someone stepping in for her. She'd spent too long fighting her own battles.

And I hated that.

I ran a hand down my face, exhaling hard.

She needed a break. And so did I.

I grabbed my phone and shot her a text.

Me: Come away with me this weekend.

I stared at the screen, waiting for the little dots to appear.

When they didn't, I added:

Me: Somewhere quiet. No press, no bullshit. Just us.

A few seconds later, my phone vibrated.

Scarlett: Christian...

I could already hear her hesitation. Could see the way she'd bite her lip, debating.

Me: Say yes.

A long pause. Then?—

Scarlett:Where?

A smirk pulled at my lips.

Me:Surprise.

She left me on read, but I knew she was thinking about it. And I also knew she'd say yes.

I made the arrangements in record time. A lake house my family owned, a few hours outside the city, secluded and quiet.

A place where no one would bother us. Where she could breathe. Where I could have her all to myself.

Two days.

That was all I wanted.

Two days to show her that what was happening between us was real.

Scarlett met me at a small private airstrip just after sunset.

She stepped out of the car, her bag slung over her shoulder, looking more beautiful than she had any right to.

Casual, simple—ripped jeans, an off-the-shoulder sweater that hinted at smooth skin underneath—but stunning.

I opened the plane door for her, watching as she hesitated at the bottom of the steps.

“You still have time to run,” I teased.

Her lips twitched. “I thought you said it was a surprise.”

“It is.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

“Then why does this feel like an abduction?”

I grinned, placing a hand over my chest. “Scarlett Lane, are you accusing me of kidnapping?”

She rolled her eyes but took the steps, brushing past me as she stepped inside.

I followed, shutting the door behind us.

The flight was short. Scarlett was quiet, looking out the window, her fingers curled around the stem of her champagne glass.

I let her have her space, watching her, the way the dim cabin lights softened her features, the way she tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear absentmindedly.

She was still carrying the weight of everything that had happened this past week. And she was trying to act like she wasn’t.

I intended to change that.

The lake house was tucked away in the mountains, hidden from the world by towering trees and winding roads.

Scarlett stepped out of the car and looked around, the cool night air ruffling her hair. “Wow.”

I came up behind her. “Not bad, right?”

She turned to me, her arms crossing. “You own this?”

“My family does.”

“Of course.” She huffed out a breath, shaking her head. “Must be nice.”

I tilted my head, watching her. “You say that like I didn’t spend the past two weeks in back-to-back meetings dealing with corporate bullshit.”

She smirked. “Poor billionaire. Sounds exhausting.”

I grinned. “It is.”

I reached for her hand before I could think twice about it, my fingers lacing through hers.

She could’ve pulled away.

She didn’t.

Instead, she let me lead her inside.

The fire was already lit when we stepped into the great room, flames crackling, casting long shadows across the hardwood floors.

The place was warm, comfortable—designed to be a retreat from the world.

Scarlett walked over to the floor-to-ceiling windows, looking out at the dark expanse beyond. “It’s so quiet.”

“Too quiet?”

“No. Just... different.”

I came up behind her, close but not touching. “That’s the point.”

She turned to me, her expression unreadable. “And what exactly is the point, Christian?”

Her voice was soft, but there was a challenge in it.

I reached out, brushing my fingers over a stray curl at her shoulder.

Page 33

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

“The point?” I murmured. “To get you out of your head. To remind you that you deserve to take a breath. That not everything has to be a fight.”

She exhaled slowly, like she wanted to believe me but wasn't sure how.

So I did the only thing I could.

I kissed her.

Her breath hitched the second my lips brushed hers.

I felt the tension in her body, the way she hesitated for just a fraction of a second before she melted into me.

I wasn't gentle this time.

This wasn't the careful, restrained kiss I'd given her outside her apartment.

This was hunger, barely leashed. A taste of everything I'd been holding back.

Scarlett made a sound in the back of her throat, her hands gripping my shirt as she pulled me closer.

I slid a hand into her hair, tilting her head to deepen the kiss, feeling the way she pressed against me, the way her body molded perfectly to mine.

It would be so easy to keep going.

To lose myself in her.

To forget every reason why I needed to take this slow.

Instead, I forced myself to pull back.

Scarlett's lips were swollen, her breath uneven. She blinked up at me, dazed. "You're really annoying, you know that?"

I smirked. "So I've been told."

She let out a soft laugh, shaking her head.

I ran my thumb along her jaw. "Come on. Let's eat."

Scarlett arched a brow. "You cooked?"

"God, no. I'd like to keep my dignity."

She laughed again, and I felt something tighten in my chest.

The stress, the exhaustion—it had faded from her face. And that? That was exactly why I'd brought her here.

For this moment.

For her. And for whatever came next.

SCARLETT

I woke to the scent of pine and crisp mountain air, the sound of birds calling over the

lake. It was peaceful here—too peaceful.

I wasn't used to this kind of quiet.

The city was my home, the constant hum of traffic and distant chatter my background noise.

Even Amélie, during its slowest hours, carried the familiar sounds of life—clattering plates, murmured conversations, the sizzle of something cooking.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

Here, surrounded by nature, it was almost unnerving. But it was also... freeing.

I stretched, rolling onto my side, only to find the bed beside me empty.

Christian.

I sat up, tucking my knees to my chest as I glanced at the clock.

He'd mentioned something about an early morning hike last night, but I'd been half-asleep at the time, too comfortable to question it.

I pushed off the covers, slipping into a sweater and leggings before padding barefoot across the hardwood floors.

Downstairs, I found Christian on the deck, already dressed in hiking gear, two cups of coffee in hand.

He turned when he heard me, a slow smirk tugging at his lips. "Good morning."

I rubbed my arms, trying to shake off the morning chill. "We're really doing this, huh?"

He stepped closer, handing me a cup. "You promised."

I scoffed. "I don't remember promising anything."

Christian sipped his coffee, eyes amused. "You were half-asleep, but you definitely

agreed.”

“Lies.”

“Do you really want to argue with me before caffeine?”

I narrowed my eyes, but I took a sip. It was rich, bold—exactly the way I liked it.

“Fine. But if I die halfway up a mountain, I’m haunting you,” I told him.

His lips curved. “Noted.”

The trail wound through thick trees, the scent of earth and pine surrounding us as we climbed higher.

Christian set a steady pace, though he occasionally glanced back to check on me, his expression unreadable.

I focused on the crunch of leaves beneath my boots, the rhythmic motion of moving forward, but my thoughts kept drifting.

To the article.

To the whispers that had followed.

To the way Christian had stepped in so seamlessly, like it was the most natural thing in the world to defend me.

I glanced at him, his sharp profile outlined by the early morning light.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked.

Christian didn't break stride. "Doing what?"

"This." I gestured vaguely around us. "Taking me away from the city. Trying to... I don't know. Fix things."

He was quiet for a long moment before he finally spoke. "Because I can."

I frowned. "That's not an answer."

He slowed his pace, turning to face me. "I know you, Scarlett. You'll try to fight this on your own. You'll act like it doesn't bother you, like you don't care. But you do."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

I swallowed hard. “I don’t need saving.”

“I know.” His gaze was steady. “But that doesn’t mean you have to do everything alone.”

Something in my chest tightened.

I didn’t know how to respond to that.

So I didn’t.

Instead, I walked past him, continuing up the trail.

If he noticed my silence, he didn’t push.

But I felt his presence beside me the whole way up.

The view from the top was breathtaking.

The lake stretched out below us, shimmering under the sun, framed by towering evergreens.

It was the kind of view people wrote about, painted, dreamed of. I crossed my arms, inhaling deeply.

“It’s beautiful,” I murmured.

Christian stepped beside me, his hands in his pockets. “Yeah. It is.”

Something about the way he said it made me glance at him, my stomach flipping when I realized he wasn’t looking at the view—he was looking at me.

My pulse skipped.

I swallowed. “You’re really insufferable, you know that?”

His lips twitched. “I’ve heard that before.”

I rolled my eyes, turning back toward the lake.

I didn’t realize he’d moved closer until I felt the heat of him at my back.

Slow. Deliberate.

His fingers brushed my wrist, barely a touch, but I felt it everywhere.

“Scarlett,” he murmured.

I turned my head just as he leaned in, his breath warm against my skin.

This time, I didn’t stop him.

I kissed him first.

Dinner was simple—grilled fish, roasted vegetables, a bottle of wine we barely touched.

The tension between us had been simmering all day, a slow burn I wasn’t sure how to

handle.

I wasn't used to wanting someone like this.

Not just the physical part—the weight of his gaze, the way my body responded to him—but the way he made me feel seen.

And that scared me.

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

Because I wanted more.

We cleared the dishes in silence, the air thick with unspoken words.

When I turned to face him, he was already watching me, his expression unreadable.

My heart pounded.

I stepped closer.

So did he.

Neither of us spoke as he reached for me, his fingers trailing down my arm, slow, deliberate.

I shivered.

His lips brushed my temple, my cheekbone, the corner of my mouth—everywhere but where I wanted them.

“Christian,” I whispered.

A low sound rumbled in his chest.

Then he kissed me.

Hard.

His hands slid into my hair, tilting my head back as he pressed me against the counter, his body flush against mine.

I gasped, my fingers fisting in his shirt.

He deepened the kiss, his tongue sweeping against mine, sending heat rushing through me.

I was unraveling, piece by piece.

And I wanted to unravel.

I tugged at his shirt, impatient, desperate for more, but he caught my wrists, pulling back just enough to meet my eyes.

“Are you sure?” Christian asked.

God, how was he still this controlled?

I exhaled shakily. “Yes.”

9

SCARLETT

Christian lifted me onto the counter, his mouth reclaiming mine, all hesitation gone.

Heat.

Need.

The desperate, aching want of him.

I arched into him as he trailed kisses down my throat, his hands skimming my waist, my hips, every inch of me on fire.

Clothes disappeared.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

Hands roamed.

“You taste so damn good, Scarlett,” he whispered against my ear.

I moaned as he left a trail of burning kisses down my neck, the column of my throat.

He paid particular attention to each of my breasts. Christian closed his mouth over my left nipple and sucked.

I nearly lost it then and when he bit down to leave his bite mark, I groaned. Excitement hummed through my veins.

My pussy felt incredibly wet. He moved to the right nipple, lavishing it with the same attention.

I willingly parted my legs for him, eating to feel him inside me, claiming me in the most intimate way possible.

“Wait a moment,” he murmured, planting a soft kiss on my mouth.

Christian parted from me and grabbed a condom from the pocket of his pants.

I was so turned on, words left me and I could only nod but I liked that he came prepared, that he anticipated this.

He tore the packaging, slipped the condom on and resumed position, planting himself between my spread thighs.

I gripped his shoulders as he kissed me again and for a moment, it was just the two of us. Nothing mattered. Not the article or the frustrations I left behind in the city.

Christian guided his cock, thick and beautiful, into my waiting entrance. I gasped as he pushed into me, slowly and steadily until he was full sheathed inside me.

“You okay?” Christian asked.

“Yeah,” I whispered, voice a little harsh. “Move, Christian.”

He complied, knowing glint in his eyes, grin on his mouth. I leaned in close, capturing his lips with mine.

Christian pushed his tongue down my throat and I willingly sucked down on it. He moved to a steady rhythm, one that suited us both.

Soon enough, I found myself moving together with him.

Each time he entered me, it felt like a piece of my soul floated to his. A perfect fit.

He reduced us both to panting and needy animals, our bodies slicked with sweat. The next time he pushed inside me, I gasped.

Christian had found my sweet spot. He went for it over and over again, making sure to brush against my clit each time.

The pressure building inside me threatening to burst open and it finally did, when he pushed inside me one more time.

I cried out his name and saw stars. The room fell away from my line of sight. I desperately clung to him, catching my breath.

In a few strokes, Christian climaxed, fingers in my hair, his lips pressed against my throat. He pulled his dick away, resting his forehead against mine for a few moments.

“Wow,” I whispered.

I wasn't a virgin and had been on a few dates but none of the men I'd been with had made my body sing like this.

“Yeah,” he said.

Eventually, we made our way upstairs, to the bedroom.

The soft glow of the bedside lamp cast warm shadows across the room, flickering against the wooden beams overhead.

Outside, the lake was still, the night air crisp and quiet, but inside, warmth cocooned me—his warmth.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

I lay curled against Christian, my head resting on his bare chest, my fingers tracing lazy patterns over his skin.

His heartbeat was steady beneath my palm, grounding me in a way I hadn't realized I needed.

We hadn't spoken much after. We hadn't needed to.

But now, in the slow, sleepy haze of the aftermath, I found myself wishing time would stretch, that we could stay wrapped in this moment, untouched by the outside world.

I sighed, shifting just enough to press my cheek against his chest. "I wish we could stay here forever," I told him.

Christian chuckled, his hand running up and down my spine, a slow, soothing motion. "Then we will."

I smiled, letting my eyes drift shut. "You say that like you have no responsibilities. Like you're not the Christian Valen."

"Being Christian Valen has its perks," he murmured, his lips brushing the top of my head. "And right now, one of them is keeping you here as long as you want."

For a moment, I let myself imagine it.

Waking up to the sound of the lake, spending days hiking or doing absolutely nothing

at all, cooking dinner together, falling asleep wrapped in his arms.

No press. No rumors. No people whispering about me in the industry, questioning if I was worthy.

But I wasn't the type to hide.

I let out a small breath, curling my fingers against his chest.

"I don't run, Christian," I said softly. "Eventually, I'll have to face the music."

His hand stilled against my back.

"I know," he said after a moment. His voice was quiet, but firm, like he had no doubt.

"That's one of the things I love about you."

I swallowed hard.

He said it so easily. I lifted my head, meeting his gaze.

The way he was looking at me made my heart ache—like he saw right through me, like none of my defenses had ever really worked on him in the first place.

I didn't say anything. I just held his gaze, taking in every sharp line and softened edge of his face.

Once everything settled—once the rumors stopped, once the industry found something else to talk about—where would that leave us?

I traced my fingers over his collarbone, biting my lip. "When this is all over... could you bring me here again?"

The question slipped out before I could stop it.

And immediately, doubt crept in.

Was I being too presumptuous?

Assuming that when the dust settled, we'd still be here, like this? That we would still be us?

Christian's eyes darkened, his grip tightening around me.

In the next second, he rolled us, pinning me beneath him, his body pressing me into the mattress.

His lips crushed against mine, stealing the breath from my lungs, kissing me like he was trying to erase the doubt before it could take root.

Heat sparked, curling in my belly as I arched against him, my fingers threading through his hair.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

When he finally pulled back, his lips were inches from mine, his voice low and rough.

"Sure," he murmured. "No problem."

A laugh caught in my throat, but it died the moment he kissed me again.

This time, it was slower.

The hum of the jet engines had faded into the background hours ago, but the warmth of Christian's presence beside me lingered.

Our weekend at the lake had felt like something out of a dream—one I wasn't ready to wake up from.

But as the city skyline came into view through the plane's window, reality pressed in.

I stole a glance at Christian, who was reclined in his seat, scrolling through his phone.

His tie was loose, the top button of his crisp white shirt undone, and for a moment, I let myself get lost in the sight of him.

Relaxed. Effortlessly confident.

He must've felt my stare because he looked up, catching me in the act. A slow smirk curved his lips.

“Miss me already?”

I scoffed, rolling my eyes even as warmth crept up my neck. “You wish.”

He chuckled, reaching for my hand and bringing it to his lips. The simple gesture sent a ripple of heat through me.

Maybe I would miss him.

As the plane touched down, my phone buzzed.

A string of work emails, a missed call from my sous-chef, another from my supplier. The real world was waiting.

We disembarked in silence, his driver already waiting for us. He insisted on taking me home, and I let him.

The drive was quiet, comfortable, the city lights flickering past the tinted windows.

When we arrived at my building, Christian stepped out with me, walking me to the door of my apartment.

“I had a great time,” I admitted, biting my lip.

His eyes softened, fingers brushing my jaw. “Me too.”

I hesitated, part of me wanting to invite him in.

But then he kissed me, slow and lingering, and I knew if I let him through the door, I’d never let him leave.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” he promised, pulling back just enough to meet my gaze.

I nodded, suddenly unable to find words.

With one last look, he turned and left, disappearing into the waiting car.

I let out a breath, stepping inside my apartment. The silence was almost jarring after the weekend we’d spent together.

I leaned against the door, pressing my fingers to my lips, savoring the ghost of his kiss.

I could take my time unpacking, maybe take a long bath, and ease back into normal life?—

My phone rang, shrill and urgent.

I frowned, pulling it from my bag. A call from Amélie.

I answered immediately. “Hello?”

“Scarlett, thank God,” my manager, Renée, breathed into the phone. She sounded panicked. Really panicked.

My stomach dropped.

“What happened?” I demanded, already moving toward my bedroom to change.

“The shipment. It didn’t arrive.”

Cold dread tightened around my chest. “What do you mean it didn’t arrive? It was scheduled for this afternoon.”

“I know,” she said quickly. “But when I called the supplier, they said the order was canceled.”

I stopped dead. “That’s impossible.”

“That’s what I said! But they were adamant. They claimed they received an official notice to cancel from us.”

My mind reeled. That wasn’t a mistake. That was sabotage.

And I had a damn good guess it was the same person who smeared my reputation on Luxe Dining.

“Shit,” I hissed, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Okay. We can fix this. We have backups in storage, right?”

“Not nearly enough for the event tomorrow,” Renée admitted. “I’ve been calling around, but—Scarlett, what do we do?”

I glanced at the clock. It was late, but not too late.

I could fix this.

I had to fix this.

Grabbing my keys, I headed for the door. “I’m on my way.”

I barely heard Renée’s relieved sigh before I hung up.

I stood there for a moment, pulse racing.

I had two choices.

I could handle this myself—prove that I could manage my own damn business without anyone’s help.

Or I could call Christian.

The thought of involving him made something tight coil in my chest.

This was my fight. My reputation on the line.

But Christian had power. Influence. If anyone could fix this with a single phone call, it was him.

I exhaled sharply, gripping my phone.

Outside, a car honked.

I had a decision to make.

10

CHRISTIAN/ V

CHRISTIAN

I leaned against the balcony of my penthouse, a mug of hot coffee in hand, the golden liquid catching the ambient glow of the skyline.

My mind was still at the lake house—Scarlett’s laugh, the way she felt curled against me, the whispered promise in her eyes.

I told myself I’d give her space, let her settle back into her world before pulling her into mine again.

But then my phone rang.

Her name flashed on the screen, and instantly, my chest tightened.

Scarlett wasn’t the type to call without a reason.

I answered immediately. “Scarlett?”

There was a sharp inhale on the other end, like she wasn’t sure if she should’ve called at all.

“Christian... I—” She exhaled. “I need your help.”

I straightened, every nerve in my body on alert. “What happened?”

“My shipment. It was canceled.” Her voice was tight, controlled, but I could hear the frustration, the exhaustion. “We have a major event tomorrow, and without it?”

I didn’t need her to finish. I already knew what was at stake.

Whoever cancelled her shipment, was that same person also responsible for that Luxe Dining article?

A slow, dangerous burn ignited in my chest. I clenched my jaw, forcing my voice to stay even. “Where are you now?”

“At Amélie. I just got here. I’m trying to figure out if I can source the ingredients elsewhere, but it’s—” She hesitated. “I don’t know if it’ll be enough.”

“Stay there. I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

“Christian, you don’t have to?—”

“I’ll be there.” I ended the call before she could argue.

I barely remembered grabbing my keys or getting into my car, only that I was furious.

Not just at whoever had pulled this stunt, but at the fact that Scarlett had to deal with it alone.

When I arrived at Amélie, the place was nearly empty, save for Scarlett and her manager, Renée, who looked equally frazzled.

Scarlett had her arms crossed, her phone clutched tightly in her hand.

The moment she saw me, something in her expression softened, like she hadn't realized how much she needed me until now.

I went straight to her. "Tell me everything," I said.

She exhaled. "The supplier swears they got a notice from us to cancel the shipment. I didn't send it. No one from my team did."

Of course, they didn't. This wasn't just bad luck. It was sabotage.

I turned to Renée. "How much do we need?"

“Enough to feed three hundred guests,” she said.

I didn’t even blink. “Done.”

Scarlett’s brows furrowed. “Christian?—”

“I’ll make a call. We’ll get the shipment here before morning.” I pulled out my phone and walked a few steps away, dialing a contact who owed me a favor.

Scarlett followed, lowering her voice. “I appreciate the help, I do, but this is my problem?—”

I turned to face her, my patience thinning. “It was your problem. Now it’s ours.”

She stared at me, lips parted slightly. “Ours?”

I stepped closer, my voice dropping. “Scarlett, I didn’t get into this partnership just to stand on the sidelines while someone tries to take you down. You’re not in this alone.”

Her throat bobbed, her defenses wavering.

I brushed my knuckles against her cheek, voice softening. “Let me help you.”

She swallowed hard, then finally—finally—nodded.

I made the call. Within minutes, the problem was solved.

The shipment would be rushed in by morning, courtesy of a vendor I had on speed dial.

When I hung up, Scarlett let out a shaky breath.

“Just like that?” she asked.

I nodded. “Just like that.”

We ended up in her office after that, exhaustion catching up with both of us.

She leaned against her desk, arms wrapped around herself, and for the first time all night, she looked small and tired.

I crossed the room, placing my hands on her arms, running slow circles with my thumbs. “It’s handled.”

Her lips parted, her breath hitching slightly.

And then, as if something in her finally snapped, she reached for me.

Her hands fisted in my shirt, pulling me down into a kiss that stole my breath.

I didn’t hesitate. I deepened the kiss, sliding my arms around her waist, lifting her onto the desk.

She gasped against my lips, legs parting just enough for me to step between them.

Her fingers tangled in my hair, pulling, demanding.

I obliged, kissing her deeper, sliding my hands down her back, memorizing the

curves of her body.

She made a sound low in her throat, a desperate little noise that sent a shudder through me.

I broke away just enough to meet her gaze.

Her lips were swollen, her eyes dark with want.

“I don’t know what this is between us,” she whispered. “But I want it.”

Page 43

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

I brushed my fingers along her jaw. “Then have it.”

For once, she didn’t argue.

She just kissed me again.

It was hours later when I finally carried her to my car, exhaustion weighing on both of us. She curled into my side as I drove, her fingers tracing lazy patterns on my palm.

When I pulled up to her building, I expected her to say goodnight.

Instead, she looked at me with an expression that made my blood heat all over again.

“Come upstairs,” she said softly.

I didn’t need to be asked twice.

The second the door closed behind us, she was in my arms again.

We barely made it to the bedroom before clothes were shed, before hands and lips replaced words.

And when it was over, when she lay tangled in my sheets, bare and beautiful, I knew?—

This wasn’t just business anymore.

It never had been.

V

The headline made her stomach turn.

AMÉLIE STUNS AT EXCLUSIVE EVENT—A NIGHT OF CULINARY PERFECTION.

V clenched her jaw as she scrolled through the article, each glowing paragraph only adding to the fury simmering beneath her skin.

Scarlett Lane delivers yet another flawless evening, proving why Amélie remains one of the most sought-after dining experiences in the city.

She didn't just recover. She thrived.

V pressed a manicured nail against the desk, tapping in irritation.

She hadn't thought Scarlett would be able to bounce back from the shipment cancellation so easily.

She had timed it perfectly—just close enough to the event to send Amélie into a downward spiral.

Yet, somehow, Scarlett had won.

No, not somehow.

Christian.

V's lips curled in disgust. That was the only explanation.

He had stepped in and saved Scarlett like some knight in shining armor, reinforcing her delusions that she could play in the same league.

She inhaled slowly, exhaling through her nose. This wasn't over.

Scarlett might have escaped this round, but V wasn't finished with her.

She picked up her phone and dialed.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

The voice on the other end answered immediately. “Ma’am?”

“I want Amélie shut down,” she said, her tone cool, controlled. “Temporarily, at least. Enough to cause damage.”

A pause. “You want an inspection?”

“No. I want a violation.”

Another hesitation. “That could get tricky.”

V smiled. “Then I suggest you find someone willing to get their hands dirty.”

11

SCARLETT

The letter trembled in my hands.

NOTICE OF HEALTH INSPECTION – IMMEDIATE REVIEW REQUIRED

The words blurred together as I read them over and over, willing them to change. But they didn’t.

I sucked in a slow, steady breath, my fingers tightening around the paper. My restaurant, my life’s work, was under threat. Again.

It didn't make sense. I ran Amélie with precision, prided myself on the highest standards. How the hell did this happen?

My stomach twisted, and for the first time that day, I couldn't tell if it was stress or something more.

I'd been feeling... off lately. Dizzy spells. A few waves of nausea. Fatigue that hit me harder than usual.

I closed my eyes.

No. I couldn't think about that right now.

There was too much at stake.

I took another breath and shoved the letter into my bag. I had to focus.

I needed to get ahead of this inspection before it turned into something worse.

But as I turned to head back into the kitchen, I nearly crashed into Christian.

He caught me before I could stumble, his strong hands firm on my arms.

"Easy," he murmured, his sharp eyes scanning my face.

Damn it. I didn't have the energy to fake calm.

"You okay?" he asked, his voice softer now.

I forced a nod. "Fine. Just... busy."

Christian frowned, not buying it for a second. He never did.

“I got a call from Eric,” he said, watching me closely. “He said there are rumors spreading about a possible health code violation.”

I swallowed hard, my pulse kicking up. “So it’s already out there.”

Christian’s jaw ticked. “Looks that way.”

Page 45

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

He didn't ask if it was true—he knew better. Instead, he took a step closer, lowering his voice. “What’s going on, Scarlett?”

I hesitated. My first instinct was to downplay it. To handle it on my own.

But that wasn't working, was it?

I sighed and pulled out the letter, handing it to him. He unfolded it and scanned the contents, his expression darkening with every word.

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered. His fingers flexed around the paper before he forced himself to relax.

“I'll deal with it,” I said quickly. “I have nothing to hide. Amélie runs a tight kitchen.”

Christian didn't look convinced. “You shouldn't have to deal with this alone.”

I bristled. “I can handle my own damn restaurant, Christian.”

His gaze flicked to mine, something unreadable in his expression. “I know you can.” He exhaled. “But that doesn't mean you have to.”

I bit my lip, my chest tightening at his words.

It would be so easy to lean into him, to let him take some of the weight off my shoulders.

But then what? I was already dangerously close to falling for him.

And if I really was... pregnant...?

I swallowed against the lump in my throat.

I couldn't tell him. Not now. Not when everything was falling apart.

Christian tilted his head. "Scarlett."

I blinked up at him, realizing I'd drifted off in my thoughts. "What?"

His frown deepened. "You've been off all night. Are you feeling okay?"

I forced a smile. "Just tired."

Lies.

Christian studied me for another second before sighing. "Come on."

"Where?"

"To sit down. Eat something. Breathe." His tone softened. "Let me take care of you for five minutes, and then you can go back to running yourself into the ground."

I almost told him no. Almost reminded him that I could take care of myself.

But my stomach chose that moment to twist again, sending another wave of unease through me.

I sighed. "Fine. Five minutes."

Christian gave me a knowing look but didn't push it.

As we sat in the private corner of the restaurant, I watched him quietly. He was always so steady, so in control.

And for the first time, I wondered—what if I told him?

Would he panic? Would he run?

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

Or would he do what he was doing now?

Stay.

Be exactly the kind of man I was afraid I could fall for.

The health inspector arrived just as the dinner rush started, wearing a crisp, no-nonsense expression that made my stomach drop.

I had expected the inspection, but not so soon. Not with this level of scrutiny.

"Ms. Lane?" His voice was sharp, professional.

I wiped my hands on my apron and forced a steady breath. "That's me."

"I'm Inspector Reynolds. We received a report that Amélie may not be meeting health and safety standards."

I narrowed my eyes. "A report?"

He barely reacted, flipping open his clipboard. "We'll be conducting a thorough review."

Something about the way he said thorough made my skin prickle.

I swallowed hard, nodding. "Of course. Follow me."

The kitchen was running like a well-oiled machine, my chefs moving in a practiced rhythm.

The air was thick with the scent of butter, seared meat, and fresh herbs. Everything was pristine—as it always was.

But as Inspector Reynolds moved through each station, his eyes seemed too sharp, his questions too specific, as if he already knew what he was looking for.

My pulse quickened. Someone had tipped him off.

I clenched my jaw, watching as he ran a gloved finger over surfaces, checked temperatures, examined every corner as if expecting to find something damning.

And then he stopped at the dry storage.

I moved to follow, but before I could take a step, one of my chefs, Leah, grabbed my arm.

"Scarlett," she whispered urgently. "You need to see this."

I turned, my stomach knotting as she led me toward one of the lower shelves.

My blood ran cold.

There, tucked behind the neatly organized containers of flour and sugar, was a small, unlabeled bag of something.

My hands shook as I reached for it, unzipping the seal. A bitter, chemical scent filled my nose.

What the hell is this?

Heart pounding, I turned just as the inspector walked in.

"What do we have here?" he asked, eyes narrowing at the bag in my hand.

I forced my expression to remain calm. "I have no idea."

His brow arched. "You're saying this isn't yours?"

I set my jaw. "I run a tight kitchen, Inspector. This wasn't here before today."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

He studied me, then the bag, before sealing it in a plastic evidence pouch. "We'll be testing this. If it's anything that violates food safety regulations, Amélie could face temporary closure."

Ice flooded my veins. "You can't be serious."

His expression didn't change. "We'll see."

He left, and I stood frozen, my heart racing.

Then I turned to Leah. "Get Christian on the phone."

Fifteen minutes later, Christian stormed into the kitchen.

His presence alone seemed to quiet the chaotic energy buzzing through my veins.

"What happened?" he asked, voice sharp.

I exhaled shakily. "Someone planted something in my storage, Christian. Planted it."

His jaw clenched. "Let me guess—right before the inspection?"

I nodded. "Whoever did this wanted me to fail."

Christian's expression darkened. "This was a setup."

His phone buzzed, and he glanced at it before cursing under his breath. "Eric's

looking into the inspector's report. But if this goes public?—"

I cut him off. "I won't let that happen."

His gaze flicked to mine. "Then let me help you."

I wanted to argue. Wanted to tell him I could fix this myself.

But I was so damn tired.

And scared.

Not just for the restaurant.

For the other secret I was keeping.

I hadn't taken a test yet, but I knew. Iknew.

I swallowed against the lump in my throat. "What do we do?"

Christian's eyes softened just a fraction. "We prove that you run this place cleaner than any Michelin-starred restaurant in the country. We counter their claims before they even gain traction."

I nodded, forcing a breath. "Then let's get to work."

For the next few hours, we went over everything—the inspector's notes, the ingredient logs, even the security footage.

Christian had his team working behind the scenes, pulling strings, making calls, ensuring that this fabricated scandal didn't ruin me.

By the time we finished, exhaustion weighed heavy on me. But the panic had started to ease.

And it was because of Christian.

He watched me across the table, his expression unreadable. "You should get some rest."

I huffed out a laugh. "You sound like you actually think I'll sleep after all this."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

Christian smirked. "Stubborn as always."

His smirk faded as he studied me closer. "Are you okay?"

I hesitated. My fingers curled against my lap. Do I tell him?

Not yet.

I managed a small smile. "I will be."

Something flickered in his eyes, but he didn't push. Instead, he reached across the table, taking my hand.

The warmth of his skin sent a shiver up my spine.

"We'll get through this," he murmured.

I held his gaze. "I know."

His thumb brushed over my knuckles, and for a moment, the chaos of the night faded into the background.

I wasn't just fighting for my restaurant.

I was fighting for us.

Later that night, after Christian had gone, I sat in my office, staring at the unopened

pregnancy test in front of me.

I already knew the answer.

But seeing it in writing would make it real.

I took a shaky breath, then picked it up.

A few minutes later, the result appeared.

Positive.

Tears burned my eyes, a swirl of emotions crashing through me. Fear. Joy. Panic.

I placed a hand over my stomach, exhaling slowly.

Not yet, Christian. But soon.

Just as I was about to turn off the light, my phone buzzed.

An unknown number.

I frowned, swiping to read the message.

Step back, Scarlett. Or you'll lose more than your restaurant.

My blood turned to ice.

I stared at the words, dread curling in my gut.

Whoever wanted me to fail wasn't done with me.

And this time, they were making it personal.

CHRISTIAN

I never liked being kept in the dark.

And I hated playing defense.

Scarlett was strong. Resilient. She wasn't the kind of woman who needed someone to save her.

But after the last few days—after watching her fight battle after battle—I knew she couldn't keep doing this alone.

And I wouldn't let her.

So I called in a favor.

"You're sure?" I asked, my grip tightening around my phone.

Eric exhaled sharply on the other end. "Yes. I've already made contact with the investigator. He's the best. If anyone can find out who's behind this, it's him."

"Good."

The restaurant had barely survived the health inspection.

Whoever was behind this wasn't just trying to tarnish Scarlett's name—they were trying to bury her.

And if they thought I'd sit back and let that happen, they didn't know who the hell they were messing with.

I hung up and ran a hand through my hair, staring out over the city from my office.

Scarlett had been different lately. Tired more often. Distracted.

At first, I thought it was just the stress of everything.

The restaurant, the sabotage, the fact that she had to constantly be on guard.

But something in my gut told me there was more to it.

I needed to keep her safe.

And I needed answers.

The investigator I hired, Ralph Langley, met me the next afternoon at a private lounge I often used for discreet business dealings.

He was a man in his fifties, a no-nonsense ex-cop who told me he'd seen the worst of people and didn't give a damn about it anymore.

He didn't waste time.

"You were right to call me," Langley said, sliding a manila folder across the table. "This isn't just some competitor playing dirty. Someone has been pulling strings to make sure every setback hurts."

I flipped open the file. My jaw tightened.

Paperwork. Names. Timelines.

And then?—

A photo.

My blood ran cold as I read the name of the woman on the picture.

Victoria Snow.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

I looked up. "You're certain?"

Langley nodded. "She's careful. Everything's indirect. She doesn't leave a paper trail, but I've connected enough dots to say with confidence—she's orchestrating this."

A muscle in my jaw ticked.

Who was this woman? The more I read on her, the more I grew furious. This wasn't the first time Victoria Snow had sabotaged a fellow chef.

But this? Targeting Scarlett's suppliers, tipping off health inspectors, trying to destroy everything she'd built?

It was personal.

And I needed to know why.

"Where is she now?" I asked, my voice calm. Controlled.

Langley sighed. "That's the problem. She's slippery. Knows how to cover her tracks. But I'll find her."

"Make it fast."

He nodded and stood, slipping a business card onto the table before walking out.

I sat there, staring at the picture, anger burning beneath my skin.

This wasn't over. Not by a long shot.

By the time I reached Amélie that evening, the dinner rush was in full swing.

Scarlett was in the kitchen, moving through her staff like she was born to do it—giving orders, checking plates, making sure everything was perfect.

But I saw it.

The exhaustion in her shoulders. The way she rubbed at her temples when she thought no one was looking.

I stepped inside, and the second her eyes landed on me, some of the tension melted from her face.

"Hey," she said, wiping her hands on a towel. "You here to inspect my work?"

I smirked, leaning against the counter. "Always."

Her lips curved, but her exhaustion was undeniable.

"Come with me," I said.

She blinked. "Christian, I?—"

"Five minutes. That's all I need."

She exhaled but nodded, following me to her office.

I closed the door behind us and turned to her.

"Something's wrong," I said.

Scarlett stiffened. "What do you mean?"

I crossed my arms. "You're exhausted. And don't tell me it's just the restaurant. You're pushing yourself too hard."

Her eyes flickered, and for a split second, I thought she was going to tell me.

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

But then she shook her head. "I just need to get through this, Christian. Once this blows over, I'll be fine."

I stepped closer, cupping her face gently. "You don't have to do this alone."

She swallowed. "I know."

I searched her eyes, looking for something she wasn't ready to say.

So I let it go. For now.

Instead, I said, "I know who's behind this. You remember me texting you that I hired a private investigator?"

Scarlett reluctantly nodded.

"Langley got me a name."

Scarlett froze. "Who?"

I took a deep breath. "Her name's Victoria Snow."

Her expression darkened. "That bitch. I know her. She has a negative reputation in the industry. We've clashed a few times but...to go to this extent?"

I brushed my thumb along her jaw. "She's been careful. But I'm not letting her get away with this."

Scarlett clenched her fists. "I should have known. I should have seen this coming."

"None of this is your fault," I said firmly.

Her shoulders sagged slightly, the fight bleeding out of her.

Then she looked up at me. "What now?"

I exhaled slowly. "Now, we wait for Langley to find her."

Scarlett nodded, but I could see the fire in her eyes.

She wasn't just going to wait.

Neither was I.

I wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her close. "We'll take her down, Scarlett."

She rested her forehead against my chest, letting out a slow breath.

And I knew, no matter what came next, I'd make sure she'll pull through this mess.

Scarlett was keeping something from me.

I'd felt it for days.

At first, I'd assumed it was stress.

Between the health inspection, the shipment crisis, and every other stunt Victoria Snow had pulled, Scarlett had barely had time to breathe.

But this was different.

She was different.

More tired than usual. Distracted, even when we were together.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

And no matter how much I tried to carry some of the weight for her, she kept pulling away.

I wasn't having it.

I found her in her office at Amélie, staring at a stack of invoices, but I could tell she wasn't actually reading them.

She was lost in thought, her fingers gripping the edge of the desk like it was the only thing grounding her.

I knocked on the doorframe. "Scarlett."

She startled, looking up, and for the briefest second, something flickered in her eyes—guilt? Worry?

Then it was gone.

"Christian," she said, straightening. "What are you doing here?"

I closed the door behind me and leaned against it. "I could ask you the same thing."

She frowned. "I work here."

I studied her. "And when was the last time you actually took a break?"

Her lips pressed together. "I don't have time for a break."

I pushed off the door and walked toward her. "Scarlett, talk to me. You've been different lately."

She shook her head. "It's just everything happening all at once. I need to stay focused."

I didn't buy it.

I took her hands in mine, forcing her to look at me. "Is it me?"

Her eyes widened. "What? No!"

"Then what is it?" My voice was low, steady, but there was an edge of frustration I couldn't hide. "You're shutting me out."

Scarlett exhaled, squeezing her eyes shut for a moment. When she opened them, there was something raw in her gaze.

"I just... I don't know how to?—"

Her phone buzzed.

Scarlett tensed, glancing at it like it was a viper ready to strike.

I sighed. "Ignore it."

She looked at the screen, her expression tightening. "I can't."

Something in my gut twisted.

"What happened?" I asked, bracing myself.

She swallowed hard. "There's a problem with the event."

I didn't need to ask which event.

Tonight was a big deal—one of the most high-profile charity galas in the city, with Scarlett and Amélie in charge of catering.

A flawless service would reinforce her reputation, solidifying her place among the top chefs in the industry.

A disaster?

That would be catastrophic.

Scarlett grabbed her coat, already moving. I followed her out the door.

The venue was chaos when we arrived.

Guests were murmuring, staff members were scrambling, and I caught sight of one of Scarlett's sous chefs arguing with a manager near the kitchen entrance.

Scarlett stormed inside, and I was right behind her.

"What the hell happened?" she demanded.

Her sous chef looked pale. "Someone tampered with the main course."

Scarlett's entire body went rigid. "What do you mean tampered?"

The man swallowed. "The ingredients were switched out. The sauce—there was something off. We only caught it because one of the servers noticed a strange smell."

My jaw clenched.

Scarlett rushed to the plating station, lifting a ladle of the sauce and bringing it to her nose.

The second she caught the scent, she recoiled.

"Son of a bitch," she muttered.

I stepped beside her. "What is it?"

Scarlett's hands curled into fists. "Someone sabotaged our dish."

I didn't need to ask who.

Victoria Snow.

This wasn't just about making things difficult for Scarlett anymore. This was a public, calculated humiliation.

"How bad is it?" I asked quietly.

Scarlett exhaled sharply. "Bad. If we don't have a replacement, we'll have to tell the guests their meals aren't coming."

I glanced at the dining hall. A room full of the city's elite, waiting to be impressed.

The press was already here, cameras flashing. This was exactly what Victoria wanted.

Not on my watch.

I turned to Scarlett. "What do you need?"

Her shoulders were tense. "We have backup ingredients, but it'll take time. And we're already behind schedule."

"How much time?"

"At least forty-five minutes."

I nodded. "Then we stall."

Scarlett looked up at me, uncertainty in her eyes.

Page 54

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

I cupped her face, my thumb brushing over her cheek. "I won't let them do this to you."

She sucked in a shaky breath and nodded.

Then she turned back to her team.

"Listen up!" Her voice rang through the kitchen, commanding. "We're making adjustments. I need everyone to move fast. We don't have time for mistakes."

The kitchen erupted into motion.

I walked out into the dining hall, scanning the crowd.

I spotted the host of the event, a prominent businessman, and made my way to him.

"Everything all right?" he asked, noticing my approach.

I gave him my best charm them into submissions smile.

"Absolutely. Just a slight delay in the plating. In the meantime, how about some additional wine service? On me," I said.

His eyebrows lifted slightly, but he nodded.

The waitstaff was quick to move, filling glasses, distracting guests, keeping things light.

And forty-five minutes later, the first plates were served.

Scarlett's team had pulled it off.

Barely.

But I saw the way she kept looking at the entrance, her expression tight.

She knew Victoria Snow wouldn't stop.

And for the first time, I saw something else in Scarlett's eyes.

Doubt.

After the last dish went out, she stepped into the back, pressing her hands against the counter, her breathing uneven.

I followed her.

"You did it," I said.

She shook her head. "Did I?"

I stepped closer. "Scarlett?—"

Her hands clenched. "I'm so tired, Christian. Every time I fix something, something else happens. I can't?—"

She cut herself off, inhaling sharply.

I waited.

She turned to me, her eyes shining with something dangerously close to defeat.

"I don't know if I can keep doing this," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

My chest tightened.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

I knew Scarlett. I knew how much she'd bled for this restaurant, how much she'd sacrificed.

Hearing her say she might walk away—that was Victoria's true goal.

I couldn't let her win.

I reached for Scarlett, my hands firm on her waist, grounding her. "Listen to me," I said, my voice low. Steady. "You are not giving up."

She swallowed hard. "Christian..."

"You've worked too damn hard to let someone like Victoria Snow take this from you."

Scarlett shuddered, leaning into me.

I held her tighter.

Whatever it took, I'd destroy Victoria before I let her break Scarlett.

Then Scarlett's phone buzzed again.

She stiffened in my arms, then pulled it out.

Her expression darkened.

"What is it?" I asked.

She turned the screen toward me.

A message.

"Step back, or you'll lose everything."

My blood went ice cold.

Scarlett looked up at me. "This isn't just sabotage anymore."

She was right.

This was war.

13

SCARLETT/ CHRISTIAN

SCARLETT

I hated this.

Hated the doubt clawing at my chest. Hated the exhaustion weighing me down.

Hated that, no matter how hard I fought, it felt like I was always one step behind.

And most of all?

I hated that I was about to do the one thing I swore I wouldn't.

Push Christian away.

But I had to.

Page 56

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

The text message—the threat—still lingered in my mind, a sharp, insidious whisper reminding me that I wasn't just fighting for my restaurant anymore.

Whoever was behind this wanted to destroy me. And if I wasn't careful, they'd take Christian down with me.

I couldn't let that happen.

I straightened my spine and walked into Amélie's kitchen, pushing past the nervous glances from my staff.

They all felt it—the uncertainty, the weight of the sabotage, the lingering doubt over whether we'd still be standing a month from now.

I needed to be strong for them.

For myself.

For the restaurant I built with my own two hands.

And if that meant making sacrifices?

So be it.

When Christian showed up that evening, I was ready.

He strode into my office, looking like a storm brewing just beneath the

surface—controlled, but barely.

His jaw was tight, his dark eyes scanning me like he already knew something was wrong.

He always knew.

"Talk to me," he said, his voice steady but firm.

I exhaled, gripping the edge of my desk. "I need to focus on Amélie."

His expression didn't change, but I saw the way his shoulders tensed. "You are focused on Amélie. That doesn't mean you have to do this alone."

I shook my head. "Christian, this isn't just about me anymore. Whoever's behind this is serious. They're threatening me now. And if I don't stop this, I'll lose everything."

His eyes darkened. "Then let me help you."

"You have helped," I said, my voice quieter. "More than I ever expected. But I need to stand on my own two feet. I need to fix this myself."

Silence stretched between us.

Christian didn't speak right away. He studied me, his gaze sharp and assessing, as if searching for the cracks beneath my words.

Finally, he exhaled, running a hand through his hair. "So that's it? You just want me to step back?"

My chest ached, but I nodded. "For now."

His jaw flexed. "Scarlett?—"

"Please," I whispered.

His entire body tensed.

Then, after what felt like an eternity, he nodded. Just once.

"Okay," he said, his voice low, almost unreadable. "If space is what you need, I'll give it to you."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "Thank you."

He didn't move right away.

Instead, he reached out, gently tracing his thumb along my cheek, his touch achingly tender.

"Just don't expect me to stop caring about you," he murmured. "No matter how far you push me away."

Then he was gone.

And the moment the door clicked shut, I let out a shaky breath, wrapping my arms around myself to keep from breaking.

I had to do this.

Even if it hurt.

The next morning, I walked into Amélie to find a stranger waiting in my office.

He was tall, well-dressed, exuding the kind of confidence that came with money. The kind of man who had never heard no a day in his life.

"Scarlett Lane," he said, standing when I entered. "A pleasure to finally meet you."

I hesitated. "And you are?"

He smiled. "Nathaniel Cole. I represent The Kingsley Group."

The name sent a prickle of unease down my spine.

Kingsley was a powerhouse in the hospitality world. They owned luxury hotels, fine-dining establishments, and high-end brands.

If they were here, it wasn't out of the goodness of their hearts.

"What do you want?" I asked, crossing my arms.

Nathaniel's smile didn't waver. "We want you."

I frowned. "Excuse me?"

He gestured for me to sit, and after a moment, I did—mostly because I wanted to hear him out.

"We've been following the rise of Amélie for quite some time," Nathaniel continued. "You have something special here, Scarlett. A brand. A name. Something that can be bigger than just one restaurant."

I inhaled slowly. "Go on."

He leaned forward slightly. "Kingsley is offering you a partnership. We'll invest in Amélie, expand its reach, and ensure that no one—no rival, no competitor—can ever bring it down again."

I stiffened. "And what's the catch?"

Nathaniel's smile turned knowing. "You'd have to separate your personal and professional life. Kingsley has strict policies about public entanglements, especially with powerful corporate figures."

My stomach twisted.

I knew exactly what he meant.

Christian.

He didn't say his name, but he didn't have to.

Nathaniel sat back. "Think about it. With Kingsley behind you, no one—not even your most persistent enemy—can touch you."

I felt lightheaded.

Page 58

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

This was everything I wanted. Security. A future. A win.

But at what cost?

Christian had been my anchor through this storm, the one person who stood by me no matter how hard things got.

And I had already pushed him away once.

Could I do it again?

Nathaniel stood, sliding a business card across my desk.

"When you're ready," he said, "call me."

Then he walked out, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

And for the first time since this nightmare started, I had no idea what to do.

Much later, when I finally returned home, exhaustion weighed heavy on my shoulders.

The day had been long, filled with too many emotions, too many decisions pressing in from all sides.

And yet, despite the late hour, despite the quiet stillness of my apartment, my mind refused to settle.

I didn't even know why I did it.

Maybe it was denial. Maybe it was the irrational hope that, somehow, the result would change, as if taking another test would rewrite the truth.

I stood in the dimly lit bathroom, the soft hum of the city beyond my window barely audible over the pounding of my heart. I had already done this before.

The first test had been clear—there had been no faint lines, no uncertainty. And yet, I found myself staring at another one now, watching as the unmistakable confirmation appeared once again.

Pregnant.

Of course, it was the same.

I let out a slow breath, gripping the edge of the sink as I tried to process it again. As if it would somehow feel different the second time.

But it didn't.

It still terrified me.

And yet, beneath the fear, there was something else—something quieter, something warmer.

I ran a hand over my stomach, still flat, still unchanged, but undeniably harboring a life. Christian's child. Our child.

I thought of my meeting with Nathaniel earlier that day. His offer had been generous, strategic—an opportunity that could have given me security, stability, and a powerful

partnership.

And for a brief moment, I had considered it.

Not because I didn't believe in myself. Not because I didn't think I could rebuild everything I'd nearly lost.

But because for the first time, my choices weren't just about me anymore.

But I wasn't going to take it.

I already had a partner.

Christian.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

We had fought together, struggled together, survived together. He had been there for me through every crisis, every setback, refusing to let me fall alone.

And despite everything—the chaos, the sabotage, the uncertainty—he was the one person I trusted completely.

And now, there was this baby. Our baby.

I hadn't even told him yet.

A pang of guilt twisted in my chest. He deserved to know. This wasn't something I could—or should—keep from him much longer.

Soon, I thought, inhaling deeply.

Because no matter how much fear lingered at the edges of my mind, one thing was certain.

This wasn't just my future anymore.

It was ours.

CHRISTIAN

I had her.

The evidence was airtight. Emails. Phone records. Financial transactions.

Victoria had covered her tracks well, but not well enough.

My investigator had connected the dots, proving beyond a doubt that she had been the one sabotaging Scarlett's business from the start.

And now?

Now, she was about to pay.

I clenched my fists as I stepped into the private lounge of an upscale hotel, where Victoria had agreed to meet me.

She was already seated, sipping a glass of red wine like she didn't have a single care in the world.

She glanced up as I approached, a slow, knowing smile spreading across her lips.

"Christian Valen," she purred. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

I sat across from her, barely keeping my anger in check.

"Cut the bullshit, Victoria." I tossed a thick manila folder onto the table between us. "I know everything."

Her expression barely flickered, but I caught the slight tightening around her eyes.

She set her wine glass down carefully, then leaned back, crossing her legs. "Everything, hmm?"

"Emails ordering the placement of the contaminated ingredient in Amélie's kitchen," I said, my voice ice-cold. "Records of you paying off the health inspector. And my

personal favorite—bank transfers to the supplier who conveniently 'lost' Scarlett's shipment before her biggest event."

I watched her face closely, waiting for the cracks to show.

But instead of fear, Victoria just laughed.

A soft, mocking sound.

"That's impressive," she admitted, tilting her head. "You really went all out, didn't you?"

I leaned forward, my jaw tightening.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:13 am

"You tried to ruin her, Victoria. You came after Scarlett like she was nothing more than an obstacle in your way. And for what? Jealousy? Spite?" I demanded.

Victoria's gaze darkened, her smile fading.

"She doesn't deserve what she has," she hissed. "Scarlett Lane is a nobody. She built that restaurant off luck and charm, not real skill. And then you?—"

Her lips curled. "You handed her everything on a silver platter. You think she loves you? She loves what you can do for her."

I slammed my fist against the table, making her jump.

"Scarlett worked for every damn thing she has," I growled. "And the only reason she's still standing after everything you threw at her is because she's stronger than you ever gave her credit for."

Victoria's nostrils flared. "And what do you plan to do, Christian? Take me to court? Ruin my reputation? Be careful, darling. You have just as much to lose as I do."

I smiled, slow and sharp. "Oh, I plan to do worse than ruin your reputation. I have enough evidence to bury you under so many lawsuits, you won't see the inside of another boardroom for the next decade. And I can assure you, Victoria—you will pay for what you did."

For the first time, true fear flickered across her face.

Good.

I stood, my pulse pounding, satisfied that I'd won this round.

"Stay away from Scarlett," I warned. "Because the next time you cross her, I won't just settle for legal action."

Then I walked out, leaving Victoria alone with her impending downfall.

Scarlett stormed into my office like a force of nature, her heels clicking against the hardwood floor.

Her eyes, burning with barely restrained fury, locked onto mine the moment she stepped inside, and I braced myself.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she demanded, her voice sharp enough to cut.

I already knew what she was talking about.

I leaned back in my chair, keeping my expression calm. "I assume you mean Victoria."

Scarlett threw her hands up. "Of course I mean Victoria! You went after her, you confronted her, and you didn't think I deserved a say in how this was handled?"

I exhaled, rubbing a hand over my jaw. "I thought we were on a break."

Her lips parted slightly, like she hadn't expected that answer. "I know I said that but?—"

I stood, closing the distance between us.

“You pushed me away, Scarlett,” I said, my voice low but firm. “I wanted to respect your space. But that didn’t mean I was going to sit back and let Victoria destroy you.”

Scarlett let out a shaky breath, her fists clenched at her sides.

“I still should’ve known, Christian. It’s my business, my reputation. I don’t need you fighting my battles without telling me,” she pointed out.

“I wasn’t trying to take over,” I told her, my voice gentler now. “I was trying to protect you.”

Scarlett pressed her lips together, clearly still irritated, but I could see some of the tension leaving her shoulders.

“Just... tell me what happened,” she said at last, folding her arms.

I motioned to the chair across from my desk. “Sit.”

She hesitated, then sat, crossing her legs. I took my seat as well, clasping my hands together before speaking.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:14 am

“I confronted Victoria with solid evidence linking her to everything,” I told her. “The sabotage, the health inspection setup, the supplier bribes. She tried to play it cool, but she knows she’s in trouble. I made it clear that if she comes at you again, she’ll face legal action, and she won’t be able to talk her way out of it.”

Scarlett watched me closely, searching my face.

“And you think that’s enough? You think she’s just going to slink away and lick her wounds?” Scarlett asked.

I exhaled. “No. But I do think she won’t make any rash moves. She knows she’s under scrutiny now.”

Scarlett leaned back in the chair, pressing her fingers to her temples.

She was exhausted—I could see it in the way her shoulders slumped slightly, in the way she let her guard down just a little.

She sighed. “I need a minute. Can I use your bathroom?”

“Of course.” I gestured to the private door in the corner of my office.

She stood, smoothing her dress before disappearing inside.

I ran a hand down my face, releasing a slow breath. That could have gone worse.

At least she wasn’t storming out, still fuming. That was something.

Scarlett took her time in there, which I didn't mind. If she needed space to think, I'd give it to her.

Eventually, the door opened, and she stepped out, looking... different. Softer.

She met my eyes. "I appreciate what you did."

I nodded, waiting.

Scarlett inhaled, hesitating before saying, "After I pushed you away, I thought... I thought you'd given up on me."

I stood and closed the space between us, tilting her chin up gently.

"Scarlett," I said, voice rough with emotion, "I don't give up on the people I love."

Her breath caught, and for a second, I thought she might say something—might say the words back.

But then her phone rang.

She startled, glancing down at the screen. "It's the restaurant," she murmured.

I nodded. "Go."

She hesitated, her eyes lingering on mine for a beat longer before she turned and walked out.

I let out a breath, rubbing the back of my neck.

That woman was going to be the death of me.

I turned back to my desk, but out of the corner of my eye, I caught something small sitting on the side table near the bathroom door.

Scarlett's purse.

She must've left it in there.

Shaking my head, I picked it up, intending to call her and let her know.

Hell, maybe I'd just bring it to her. It was an excuse to see her again, even if only for a few minutes.

Page 62

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:14 am

But then something slipped out and landed on the floor with a soft clink.

I frowned and crouched down, picking it up.

It was a small box.

I turned it over.

And froze.

Pregnancytest kit.

A rush of adrenaline shot through me as I stared at it, my mind blanking for a solid five seconds before logic kicked in.

Maybe it wasn't hers. Maybe she had bought it for a friend.

But deep down, I knew.

Scarlett was pregnant.

And I had no damn idea how to feel about it.

14

CHRISTIAN

Scarlett's purse sat on my desk like a silent accusation. The pregnancy test box I'd found inside felt heavier than it should, like the weight of an entire future compressed into a small, plastic-wrapped reality.

My pulse pounded in my ears as I sat there, staring at it, trying to process what this meant—what we meant now.

She was pregnant.

Scarlett was carrying my child.

And she hadn't told me.

I clenched my jaw and exhaled slowly, forcing myself to think. This wasn't something I could shove to the side, not something I could handle later. I needed to see her. Now.

I grabbed my phone, called her number. It rang. And rang.

Voicemail.

That only made my chest tighten further.

I wasn't going to do this over the phone anyway.

Grabbing my keys, I stormed out of my office, heading straight for my car.

Scarlett had spent so long fighting for her business, for her reputation. She had pushed me away to protect all of it. But this? This wasn't just about the restaurant anymore.

This was us.

And I wasn't going to let her shut me out.

The moment she opened her apartment door, her brows furrowed in confusion.

“Christian? What are you?—”

I didn't wait.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:14 am

I held up the pregnancy test box.

Her breath caught, and she paled, her fingers tightening around the edge of the door.

“Are you going to tell me?” I asked, my voice low, rough.

She swallowed hard. “Christian, I?—”

“You were going to keep this from me?” I stepped inside, closing the door behind me, my heart hammering in my chest. “Scarlett, this baby is mine—ours. You don’t get to hide this from me.”

She turned away, running a hand through her hair, her shoulders tense. “I just needed time to figure things out. I—I didn’t know how to tell you.”

I exhaled sharply. “That’s bullshit.”

She flinched. I immediately regretted my tone, but damn it, I was hurt.

“Scarlett,” I said, softer now, stepping closer. “Why? Why didn’t you trust me enough to tell me?”

She turned back to me then, her eyes flashing with emotion. “Because I’m terrified, Christian! Terrified that I’m going to lose everything I’ve worked for. That I’ll lose you!”

Her voice cracked, and that was when I saw it—the sheer weight of her fears pressing

down on her.

I let out a breath, closing the space between us. “Scarlett...”

She shook her head. “I was barely keeping my head above water. Victoria has been attacking me from every direction, and just when I thought I had a grip on things, this—” She gestured helplessly at herself. “I didn’t want to be one more thing you had to deal with.”

My heart twisted. “Is that really what you think?” I asked, reaching for her hand.

She hesitated, but let me take it.

“You are not a burden to me,” I said firmly, squeezing her fingers. “You never were. And this—” I touched her stomach, just lightly. “This isn’t something you should be handling on your own.”

Tears welled in her eyes, but she blinked them away. “Christian, I don’t want to drag you into a mess. If you want to walk away?—”

I cut her off with a fierce, heated kiss, pouring all my frustration, all my devotion, into the press of my lips against hers.

She gasped but melted into me, her hands gripping my shirt like she needed something to hold onto.

When I pulled back, I cupped her face. “I’m not going anywhere, Scarlett.”

She searched my face, and I could see the battle in her eyes—the fear of trusting this, of trusting me.

But then, finally, she nodded.

I pulled her into my arms, holding her tightly against me.

“We’ll figure this out together,” I murmured into her hair. “You’re not alone in this. Not anymore.”

She let out a shuddering breath, clutching the fabric of my shirt.

I felt something shift between us—something real and unshakable.

For the first time, Scarlett wasn’t carrying everything on her own.

And I wasn’t going to let her ever again.

Later that night, after I’d gone back to my place, my phone buzzed on the nightstand.

I carefully slipped out of bed and picked it up. A text.

Page 64

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:14 am

Unknown Number: You don't belong in her life. Walk away before it's too late.

My blood went cold.

Victoria. She wasn't going to heed my warning wasn't she?

Scarlett had barely been gone for a few hours before I found myself wanting her back in my arms.

Now that I knew the truth, now that I knew she was carrying my child, I wasn't going to let another night pass with her thinking she had to face this alone.

I grabbed my phone and shot her a text.

Christian: Come over. We need to talk.

She didn't reply immediately, and I paced my apartment, checking my phone every five seconds like a man who'd never been ghosted before.

Finally, my phone vibrated.

Scarlett: On my way.

I let out a breath. Good.

When she arrived, she barely had time to say hello before I pulled her into my arms.

She let out a soft sound of surprise, but she didn't pull away. If anything, she held on tighter.

It hit me then, just how exhausted she must be. How much weight she'd been carrying alone.

No more.

I wasn't just going to stand beside her in this fight. I was going to make damn sure she never had to fight alone again.

I eased back, my hands framing her face as I searched her eyes.

"From now on, we're honest with each other. No more holding back, no more protecting me by shutting me out," I told her.

She swallowed, but she nodded.

"Good," I murmured. I reached for my phone and pulled up my messages. "Because I need to show you something."

Her brows knit as she took the device from my hands, her eyes scanning the screen.

She sucked in a sharp breath.

You don't belong in her life. Walk away before it's too late.

Her fingers clenched around the phone, knuckles white. "Victoria."

I nodded. "I figured as much."

Scarlett exhaled, running a hand through her hair. “I got a text too,” she admitted.

My jaw tightened. “What did it say?”

Her lips parted like she wasn’t sure if she wanted to tell me, but she stopped herself.

No more secrets.

She pulled out her phone and handed it to me.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:14 am

Give up. You won't survive me.

I stared at the message, something dark and protective rising inside me.

"She's trying to scare you," I said, voice tight with controlled anger. "Trying to push you over the edge, hoping you'll crumble."

Scarlett's eyes burned with defiance. "She doesn't know me very well, then."

My lips quirked slightly, pride swelling in my chest. That's my girl.

I reached out and cupped the back of her neck, my thumb brushing over her pulse. "We end this, Scarlett. Together."

She let out a breath, leaning into my touch. "How?"

I hesitated, knowing what I was about to say might scare her. But she deserved the truth.

"I have a plan," I said slowly. "A way to expose Victoria. Publicly. But I need your cooperation."

Scarlett lifted her chin. "Tell me everything."

Her determination sent a rush of heat through me, and in that moment, I wanted her more than I ever had before.

Not just because she was beautiful. Not just because she was carrying my child.

Because she was strong. Because she stood her ground. Because she was mine.

I closed the space between us in an instant, claiming her lips in a kiss that left no room for hesitation.

She gasped against my mouth, but her arms wrapped around my neck, pulling me deeper into her.

I walked her backward, our bodies pressing together as heat flared between us.

I needed her. Needed her in every possible way.

I broke the kiss just long enough to whisper against her lips, “I love you.”

Scarlett stilled, her breath catching.

Then, slowly, she smiled.

“I love you too.”

I groaned, kissing her harder, deeper.

I would fight for her. For our child.

And together, we would end Victoria’s reign of sabotage once and for all.

As Scarlett caught her breath, she looked up at me, eyes searching. “What’s the plan?”

I exhaled, my hands framing her face. “We expose Victoria. We take this fight public.”

Her eyes widened slightly, but she didn’t pull away.

Instead, she nodded. “Let’s do it.”

15

SCARLETT

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:14 am

The room buzzed with anticipation. Chandeliers cast a golden glow over the lavish ballroom, the air thick with the scent of champagne and money.

This was the kind of event where reputations were made—or ruined. Tonight, Christian and I were making damn sure it would be Victoria's turn to fall.

I took a slow, steadying breath, smoothing my hand over the sleek black gown I wore.

On the surface, I looked every bit the composed, successful chef, mingling with some of the city's most powerful elites. But underneath, tension coiled tight in my stomach.

Beside me, Christian stood tall, exuding effortless confidence in a tailored suit. He reached for my hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze before murmuring, "You ready?"

I nodded, forcing a small smile. "More than ready."

Victoria was here somewhere. The woman who had spent months sabotaging me, who had tried to destroy everything I'd worked for, everything I cared about—including Christian.

Not tonight.

Tonight, we turned the tables.

Christian's investigator had uncovered everything—Victoria's bribes, her anonymous tips to health inspectors, and most importantly, her latest scheme.

She was planning to plant fake evidence of unsanitary conditions tied to my restaurant in order to discredit me in front of future investors.

Only, she had no idea we were waiting for her to make a move.

We had tipped off a few trusted reporters, ensuring that when Victoria tried to execute her plan, the media would be watching.

Christian leaned in again, his lips grazing the shell of my ear. “She’s here.”

I stiffened slightly but nodded. “Where?”

He tilted his head toward the catering station at the far end of the room. Victoria stood near the servers, speaking to a man in a dark suit.

A man I recognized—the food inspector who had given me hell during my last surprise visit. Reynolds.

A surge of anger pulsed through me. I turned to Christian. “She’s making her move.”

Christian’s expression darkened, his jaw tightening. “Then let’s make ours.”

We mingled and spoke to other guests a little longer.

Then after some time, I excused myself from the small circle of guests I’d been speaking with, moving toward the catering station as if I were merely checking on the evening’s menu.

From the corner of my eye, I watched Victoria discreetly hand off a small, unlabeled container to the inspector.

My heart pounded. Got you.

I stepped forward just as the man was about to disappear into the kitchen. “Excuse me.”

Both Victoria and the inspector turned, surprise flashing across their faces.

“Scarlett,” Victoria said smoothly, recovering quickly. “Lovely event. I was just telling Mr. Reynolds here how much I admire your work.”

I smiled, but there was no warmth behind it.

“How kind of you.” Then I glanced at the container in Reynolds’ hands. “What’s that?”

Langston hesitated, but Victoria—always quick on her feet—tilted her head innocently.

“Oh, just a small sample I wanted him to try. I’d hate for an unfortunate oversight to affect the reputation of your lovely restaurant,” Victoria said quickly.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:14 am

I narrowed my eyes. “A sample of what, exactly?”

Before she could answer, Christian appeared at my side, his presence as commanding as ever.

“That’s a great question,” he said, his voice deceptively casual. “And one I’m sure the press would love to hear the answer to.”

Victoria’s mask slipped, her eyes flicking to the journalists scattered around the room.

One of them, a sharp-looking woman from Food Weekly, had her camera pointed directly at us.

Reynolds swallowed hard. “I?—”

“I’d be careful with what you say next,” Christian cut in smoothly. “Wouldn’t want to incriminate yourself.”

Panic flickered across Victoria’s face. “This is absurd,” she snapped. “Are we really making a scene over a harmless sample?”

I held out my hand. “Then you won’t mind if I take a look.”

She hesitated, but under the weight of Christian’s glare and the press’s growing attention, she had no choice.

She passed me the container.

I flipped the lid open, my stomach churning at the sight of what was inside. Mold. Rotten food. An obvious setup meant to make it look like it had come from my kitchen.

I lifted my gaze, letting the weight of my fury show.

“You really thought this would work?” I demanded.

Victoria’s lips parted, but before she could say a word, Christian turned to the nearest reporter. “I think we’ve seen enough, don’t you?” Christian asked.

The reporter stepped forward, her camera flashing. “Miss Snow, do you have a comment on this?”

Victoria’s face paled. “I—I had no idea?—”

Christian chuckled darkly. “That’s interesting, considering we have evidence linking you to multiple attempts to sabotage Amélie. Would you like to explain those, too?”

She was trapped. There was no smooth way out of this one.

And she knew it.

Victoria turned on her heel and stormed toward the exit, her heels clicking furiously against the marble floor.

Cameras followed her, reporters whispering amongst themselves. The damage was done.

She had lost.

I exhaled slowly, my hands still clenched into fists.

Christian turned to me, his expression softer now. “It’s over.”

I nodded, and the tension in my chest finally eased. Victoria was humiliated, her reputation in shambles.

“Thank you,” I told Christian.

His hand came to rest on the small of my back. “You don’t have to thank me. We did this together.”

I let out a small, shaky laugh. “Yeah, we did.”

But as I looked out across the ballroom, watching the way people whispered, some glancing at me with a mixture of admiration and wariness, a new fear crept in.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:14 am

Had I won this battle only to lose something bigger?

Would Amélie recover from all of this?

I glanced at Christian, his steady presence grounding me. He squeezed my waist gently, as if sensing my turmoil.

“It’ll all work out,” he murmured. “I promise.”

The sun was barely up when my phone started buzzing.

At first, I ignored it, savoring the warmth of the sheets wrapped around me, the quiet hum of Christian’s steady breathing beside me.

After everything we’d been through, waking up in his arms felt like a small victory—one I wasn’t ready to give up just yet.

But my phone wouldn’t stop.

With a groan, I reached for it, blinking at the screen.

12 missed calls. Text after text flooded my notifications.

My stomach clenched. Had something else happened? Had Victoria found a way to strike back already?

Heart pounding, I sat up, scrolling through the messages.

And then I saw it.

BREAKING NEWS: Business Mogul Christian Valen Stands By Girlfriend Scarlett Lane—Rival Victoria Snow Caught in Career-Ending Scandal.

Another headline:

Scarlett Lane Vindicated—Amélie's Success Stands Strong Despite Attempted Sabotage.

One after another, articles and posts flooded my screen. Social media was ablaze with my name—and for once, it wasn't attached to whispers of scandal or failure.

People believed in me again.

I exhaled sharply, pressing a hand to my chest as relief flooded me.

“Scarlett?”

Christian's deep, sleep-rough voice pulled me from my thoughts. I turned to find him watching me, his dark eyes laced with concern.

“Everything okay?” he asked, his fingers brushing against my thigh.

I looked at him, my heart swelling. This man—he had stood by me through everything. Even when I pushed him away, even when I let my fears cloud my judgment, he never wavered.

Instead of answering, I leaned down, pressing my lips against his in a slow, grateful kiss.

He smiled against my mouth before pulling back slightly. “Not that I’m complaining, but what was that for?”

I held up my phone so he could see the headlines. “We did it,” I whispered. “It’s finally over.”

Christian sat up, taking the phone from my hand and scrolling through the articles. His expression remained unreadable for a moment, then he smirked. “Took them long enough.”

I let out a breathy laugh, shaking my head. “I still can’t believe it.”

He cupped my cheek, his thumb brushing lightly against my skin. “Believe it, baby. You won. Victoria’s finished. Amélie’s reputation is stronger than ever.”

I swallowed hard, emotions swelling inside me. “I couldn’t have done this without you.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:14 am

Christian's gaze darkened with something deeper, more intense. "You could have," he murmured. "But I wasn't about to let you."

My throat tightened.

He always said things like that—effortless declarations of loyalty, of love. He never asked for anything in return.

And I knew, now more than ever, that I didn't want to face anything without him by my side.

I curled into him, letting my head rest against his chest as he wrapped his arms around me. His heartbeat was steady, strong. A silent promise.

For the first time in what felt like forever, I felt safe.

Later that day, Christian and I arrived at Amélie together.

I should have expected the swarm of reporters waiting outside, but the sheer size of the crowd still caught me off guard.

Cameras flashed, microphones were shoved in my direction, voices overlapping as questions were thrown my way.

"Scarlett, how do you feel about Victoria's downfall?"

"What does this mean for Amélie's future?"

“Mr. Valen, is it true you threatened legal action on Scarlett’s behalf?”

Christian tightened his grip on my waist, a silent reminder that he was right there with me. I took a steady breath, then stepped forward.

“I won’t lie—these past few months have been some of the hardest of my life,” I began, my voice steady despite the nerves coursing through me. “But the truth always comes to light. Amélie was built on passion, dedication, and love for this industry. No amount of sabotage or lies could ever change that.”

A few reporters scribbled notes. Some nodded in approval.

I glanced up at Christian, and he gave me the smallest, encouraging nod.

I turned back to the cameras. “And I’d be lying if I said I did this alone. I owe so much to the people who stood by me—my staff, my friends, and most of all...” I looked at Christian again, my voice softening. “To the man who never once let me fall.”

There was a ripple of murmurs, camera flashes intensifying.

Christian smirked, but there was something proud in his eyes as he pulled me closer, speaking for the first time.

“Scarlett Lane is a force to be reckoned with,” he said smoothly. “I never doubted for a second that she’d come out on top.”

The reporters ate it up.

That night, Christian and I returned to his penthouse.

The adrenaline of the day had worn off, leaving exhaustion in its place. But more than that, there was something else—something lingering in the way Christian kept watching me.

I curled up on the couch with a glass of water, stretching my sore legs. “You’ve been quiet,” I noted.

Christian smirked. “Thinking.”

I arched a brow. “Dangerous.”

That earned me a chuckle, but then his expression shifted into something more serious. “You trust me, right?”

I frowned slightly. “Of course.”

He exhaled slowly, then reached for my hand. “Then trust me when I say I have something planned. A surprise.”

I narrowed my eyes playfully. “Christian, if this is some kind of business deal, I swear?—”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:14 am

His laughter rumbled through him, but there was something unreadable in his gaze. “It’s not business,” he promised. “It’s personal.”

A shiver ran down my spine.

Something about the way he said it, the way his thumb traced slow circles against my palm, sent my heart racing.

I swallowed hard. “You know I hate surprises.”

“I know,” he murmured, lifting my hand to his lips and pressing a lingering kiss to my knuckles. “But you’re going to love this one.”

I stared at him, trying to read between the lines.

Was this about the baby? About our future?

Hope fluttered in my chest, unsteady but real.

For the first time in a long time, the future didn’t feel terrifying.

It felt full—of possibilities, of us.

And whatever Christian had planned...I was ready.

“I’m looking forward to it,” I told him.

CHRISTIAN

I had never been a man who doubted myself. Confidence was ingrained in me, something I had sharpened through years of helping run the family business.

But as I stood in my penthouse, waiting for Scarlett to arrive, I felt something foreign—an unshakable anticipation mixed with the sharp edge of nervousness.

It was a rare feeling, one that only she could stir in me.

The velvet box in my pocket felt heavier than it should have, like it carried the weight of everything we had been through, every battle we had fought side by side. And in a way, it did.

Scarlett was my equal in every way. She was fierce, unbreakable, and the strongest person I knew. But I also knew she carried her own doubts, her own fears.

Tonight, I wanted to erase those doubts. I wanted to give her something undeniable.

A future—together.

The sound of the elevator chiming pulled me from my thoughts.

I turned just as the doors slid open, and there she was.

Scarlett stepped inside, her auburn hair loose around her shoulders, wearing a sleek dark red dress that hugged her in all the right ways.

But it wasn't the dress that held me captive—it was the way her eyes softened when

she saw me, the way her lips curved into that small, tired smile, like she was home.

“Hey,” she murmured.

“Hey,” I echoed, my voice rougher than I intended.

She glanced around the room, eyes flicking to the dining table set for two—soft candlelight flickering, wine already poured. She arched a brow.

“This looks suspiciously like a date.”

I smirked. “You saying I can’t take my girlfriend out on a date?” I asked.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:14 am

Scarlett froze, her breath catching. “Christian...”

“Sit with me.”

For a moment, she hesitated, but then she crossed the room, sinking into the chair I pulled out for her. I poured more wine into her glass, watching as she studied me carefully.

“What’s going on?” she finally asked.

I exhaled slowly, rolling my sleeves up before resting my forearms on the table.

“We’ve been through hell and back,” I started. “Victoria tried to destroy you. People doubted you. You doubted yourself.”

Scarlett’s lips parted slightly, but she didn’t interrupt.

I reached for her hand, threading my fingers through hers. “But you won. And not just against her—you won against every damn thing life threw at you.”

A breath shuddered through her.

I squeezed her hand. “And I want to keep winning—with you.”

Her throat bobbed. “Christian...”

“I love you,” I said, my voice steady. “I have from the moment you stormed into my

life and turned everything upside down.”

A small smirk tugged at her lips, but I wasn’t done, I continued, “You are my future, Scarlett. You and our baby.”

Her eyes glistened, emotions warring on her face.

I let go of her hand and reached into my pocket, pulling out the small velvet box. The moment I flipped it open, her breath hitched.

Inside was a diamond ring—timeless, elegant, undeniable. Just like her.

Scarlett stared at it, wide-eyed. “Christian...”

I stood, pulling her up with me.

“I don’t want to wait,” I admitted. “I don’t want to waste another second pretending I could ever be without you.” I took a slow breath, my heart pounding harder than it should have. “Marry me.”

Scarlett’s lips parted, and for a split second, I saw the hesitation flicker in her eyes. But then?—

Her expression changed.

Her shoulders straightened, her chin lifted, and she looked at me like she knew—without a doubt—that this was exactly where she was meant to be.

“Yes,” she whispered.

The word was barely out of her mouth before I was kissing her, cupping her face as

she melted into me.

It was different this time—more than passion, more than desire. It was certainty.

Her hands fisted in my shirt, her lips urgent against mine. I felt the tremble in her fingers, the way she clung to me like she was holding onto something bigger than both of us.

When we finally broke apart, I pressed my forehead against hers. “Say it again.”

She let out a shaky laugh. “Yes.”

I slid the ring onto her finger, watching as it settled in place. Perfect.

Scarlett looked up at me, her smile soft but sure. “You really think we can do this?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:14 am

I brushed my thumb over her jaw. “I know we can.”

Later that night, we curled up on the couch, Scarlett nestled against my chest as I traced slow circles along her back.

“So,” she murmured. “Are we telling people, or keeping it to ourselves for a while?”

I smirked. “I already told my family.”

Scarlett gasped, shoving me lightly. “You did not.”

I laughed, catching her wrist and pulling her back into me. “I did. And my sister’s already planning a celebration.”

Scarlett groaned. “Christian...”

“You love my family,” I reminded her.

“I do,” she admitted. “But they’re going to make this a thing.”

I kissed the top of her head. “That’s the point.”

Scarlett sighed, but I felt the way she relaxed against me, the way her fingers absentmindedly traced the buttons of my shirt.

“Okay,” she murmured. “A small celebration.”

My grin widened. “I’ll let them know.”

Scarlett rolled her eyes, but there was warmth there.

I carried Scarlett over the threshold of our new home, and she huffed, smacking my shoulder. “I can walk, you know.”

I smirked, holding her tighter. “Where’s the romance in that?”

She rolled her eyes but let out a soft laugh, the sound easing something deep in my chest. After everything we’d been through—the sabotage, the fights, the distance—we were here. Together. Stronger.

I set her down gently in the foyer, watching as she took in the space. The open floor plan, the warm lighting, the carefully chosen touches that made this house feel like us.

Scarlett turned, her eyes shining. “It’s perfect.”

I reached for her, my hands settling on her waist. “We made it perfect.”

She smiled, leaning into me, and for the first time in a long time, I felt something close to peace.

Moving in together should have felt like a big adjustment, but with Scarlett, it was seamless.

Mornings started with the scent of coffee and the warmth of her body curled into mine.

Evenings ended with her in my arms, both of us exhausted but content, discussing

work, the baby, the life we were building.

Amélie was thriving again. Scarlett had thrown herself into it, reclaiming what was hers with a fire I hadn't seen in months.

And I was right there beside her, making sure no one ever threatened her business—or her—again.

One night, as we sat on the couch, she curled against me, I brought up an idea that had been simmering in the back of my mind.

“We should open another Amélie.”

She looked up, brow furrowed. “We are opening another one.”

“I mean international.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:14 am

Scarlett sat up, staring at me. “You’re serious.”

I nodded. “Paris. London. Tokyo. You could take your vision global.”

She exhaled, shaking her head. “That’s... huge.”

I took her hand, rubbing my thumb along her knuckles. “You’ve built something incredible. It’s time the world sees it.”

Her lips parted slightly, her mind already turning over possibilities. And then, after a long pause, she whispered, “Okay.”

I grinned. “Okay?”

Scarlett let out a breathless laugh. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

I pulled her into a slow, lingering kiss, feeling her relax against me. This was what I wanted—Scarlett by my side, fearless, ambitious, unstoppable.

The future had never looked brighter.

17

SCARLETT

Pain.Pressure. The overwhelming sensation of my body stretching, working, fighting to bring life into the world.

I gritted my teeth, squeezing Christian's hand like it was the only thing keeping me tethered. Maybe it was.

"You're doing amazing, Scar." His voice was calm, steady, but I could hear the tension beneath it, the helplessness of watching me struggle.

I panted through another contraction, my body drenched in sweat, every nerve on fire. "Liar," I gasped, barely able to manage a smirk.

Christian leaned down, pressing a kiss to my forehead, his grip firm, unwavering. "You're the strongest person I know. I'd never lie about that."

Tears stung my eyes, but I didn't have time to respond before another contraction ripped through me. The doctor's voice was somewhere in the background, telling me to push, that I was so close.

I clenched my jaw and bore down, putting every ounce of strength I had into this final moment?—

And then, suddenly, a new sound filled the room.

A cry. Sharp. Piercing. Alive.

I slumped back against the pillows, exhausted, barely able to comprehend what had just happened. My body trembled as I forced my eyes open, searching?—

And then I saw Christian.

Holding our baby.

His hands, normally so controlled, so confident, were almost trembling. His

expression was unlike anything I'd ever seen—raw, emotional, completely undone.

A lump formed in my throat as he turned toward me, his blue eyes shining. “Scarlett,” he breathed, stepping closer.

The nurse helped adjust me so I could take our child into my arms, and the moment I did, everything inside me shattered.

Tiny fingers. Soft skin. The rise and fall of small breaths.

I let out a shaky exhale, my chest tightening with something too big to name. Love. Relief. Wonder.

Christian sat beside me, his arm wrapping around my shoulders, his lips pressing to my temple. “She’s perfect,” he whispered.

I nodded, unable to form words, just staring at the life we’d created together.

Page 74

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:14 am

For the first time in what felt like forever, I wasn't thinking about work, or stress, or the battles we'd fought.

I was just here.

With Christian.

With our daughter.

With family.

The weeks that followed were a blur of sleepless nights, early mornings, and a kind of love I never knew was possible.

Christian was by my side for all of it. Rocking our baby to sleep at night, pressing soft kisses to her forehead, whispering promises to protect her, to love her.

He had always been my strength, my protector—but now, watching him as a father, I realized he was so much more.

One afternoon, I was curled up in the nursery, rocking our daughter when Christian walked in, his expression unreadable.

I frowned. "What?"

He smirked, pulling something from behind his back and handing it to me.

An envelope.

I arched a brow but took it, carefully pulling out the thick, expensive cardstock inside.

And then I froze.

The logo. The address. The name.

My name.

I blinked, my heart racing. “Christian... what is this?”

He knelt beside me, his eyes filled with something warm, something sure. “It’s yours.”

I shook my head, staring down at the papers in disbelief. “A new restaurant?”

“In your name. Your vision. Your legacy.”

My lips parted, emotions crashing into me all at once. I had fought so hard to hold on to what I’d built. Had almost lost everything.

And yet here he was, giving me more than I’d ever dreamed.

Tears blurred my vision as I looked at him. “You didn’t have to do this.”

“I wanted to do this.” He reached up, brushing his thumb along my cheek. “For you. For us. For everything we’ve built together.”

I let out a breathless laugh, shaking my head. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Say yes,” he murmured, his lips brushing mine.

I melted into the kiss, my heart overflowing.

I had spent so much of my life fighting—fighting for my dreams, my success, my place in the world.

But with Christian, I didn’t have to fight alone.

I had him.

I had our family.

And for the first time, I wasn’t afraid of the future.

I was ready for it.

THE END